



VISTA SOCIAL NETWORKS TOOLKIT

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ACTION LEARNING
CHALLENGE

**BY: ROSALYN VALDEZ
BEN BECKLEY
LUCAS MARTIN**

Coached By: Janis Glenn

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NOTES FROM THE AUTHORS



Ben Beckley

VISTA Leader at OneStar Foundation

This project has been a tremendous opportunity, and it has been my pleasure to work on it with these fine people. While the material in here might seem dense, we truly believe it will help shape the dialogue VISTAs have with their communities. Don't feel like you need to read it all in one sitting. And remember, kids: only you can prevent florist friars.



Rosalyn Valdez

VISTA Leader at NYC Service

I would like to thank NYC Service, my supervisor Aaron Miner, our VISTA Coordinator Kenisha White, and my Co-VISTA Leader Natasha Mills, for encouraging me to participate in this Action Learning Challenge. I would also like to thank my Action Learning Challenge team for being so supportive, it was an honor to work with you and to strengthen our small social network.



Lucas Martin

VISTA Leader at Texas Association of Regional Councils (TARC) and the US Economic Development Administration (EDA)

I appreciate the incredible support from my VISTA supervisors who have helped mold me into the leader that I am today.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important undertakings that VISTA members and Leaders encounter during their year of service relates to building relationships and partnerships with community stakeholders (individuals, non-profit organizations, community based organizations, governmental entities and businesses). Understanding how social networks work will more effectively channel the VISTAs' ability to empower communities and spread new ideas and innovations. Based on conducted surveys and testimonials, VISTAs around the country lack a uniform methodology while working with communities. This may not be surprising considering the vastness of the nation and the diversity from community to community. However, we would like to create a resource that VISTAs can use to better understand how social networks drive the spread of information and behavior adoption.

The Mission of the Action Learning Challenge Team is to provide a user-friendly toolkit for VISTA members to utilize during their year of service. This concrete and effective guide will highlight both academic and ethnographic research, provide useful definitions, case studies, and outline steps towards identifying and engaging networks within a VISTA member's term of service. This toolkit will include the ways in which information is disseminated among social groups and influential members of the community to help spread messages and innovations that help propel the mission and vision of said communities.

We believe this information will be invaluable not only to the VISTA, but to the organization at which they serve. Providing host sites with information regarding the composition of and ties between different members of social networks will assist the organization in building sustainable relationships and projects in tandem with relevant stakeholders. After the VISTAs have left a site, the knowledge gained from studying the community's networks should increase the capacity of the host site to more effectively engage members of the community.

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Social Network

The entire culmination of connections between individual nodes that comprise groups or clusters of strong ties, weak ties, and bridging ties.

[Network] Group/Cluster

A collection of nodes that interact frequently or are otherwise closely tied to each other. Ex: social media groups, affinity/hobby groups, academic groups, AmeriCorps VISTA, nuclear family, close friends, etc.

Node/Actor

The unit in social network maps that represents an individual

Strong Tie

A connection between two nodes that indicates a close relationship. Represented as a solid line between the nodes on social network maps.

Weak Tie

A connection between two nodes that indicates a tenuous relationship. Represented as a dotted line between the nodes on social network maps.

Bridging Tie

A connection that serves as the only connection between two otherwise separated groups or clusters. Bridging ties can be strong or weak.

Innovation

Any behavior, information, or good that is new to a network cluster.

Collective Action

A self-generating, citizen-centered way to promote greater community, connections, cash, and control. This allows community members to have a sense of ownership and accountability over their community problems.

Community Action

Any activity that increases the understanding, engagement and empowerment of communities.

Community Engagement

Process of working collaboratively with community members towards a common goal.

Egocentric Network

A network that is solely connected to one individual or organization. Ex: Volunteer Coordinator connected to all the volunteers in an organization.

Sociocentric Network

A network that is bound and connected by their participation in a specific social group. Ex: 2017-2018 VISTA cohort

Open System Network

A network where the boundaries are not defined nor strictly limited to one's participation in a specific social network. Ex: social media influencers

Social Network Theory

Study of how various individuals, groups and organizations interact with others who are outside of their network.

Social Media

The collective of online communication channels dedicated to community based input, interaction, content sharing, and collaboration.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks play a large role in our society. In fact, they are the very fabric of how members in society interact with each other, whether it be in how a nonprofit interacts with stakeholders or the web of people who we talk to and work with every day. It is important to know how to effectively address our audiences and how to spread an intended message as a VISTA.

Naturally, humans are all social beings. Our individual networks can comprise hundreds and thousands of people, but for the sake of ease, we'll be focusing on more closely connected networks, such as those you would find in a community. Understanding these connections, their variable strength and influence, and how groups or clusters interact with each other can give us insight into how to most effectively target community members and stakeholders to spread a message, project, or breakthrough innovation.

Beyond messaging, understanding how social networks develop and work can be helpful when trying to bring community members together to accomplish a goal. For instance, using Granovetter's tried and tested theory of the strength of weak ties (SWT), we know that weak ties are conduits through which information passes from one social network to another (Granovetter, 1973; Granovetter, 1983; de Zuniga & Valenzuela, 2011; Aral & Walker, 2012; Liu et al., 2017). Using these weak ties strategically can allow for a much higher rate of innovation diffusion across social networks, which can increase the rate at which VISTA projects take root within a community.

We believe that with this knowledge, VISTAs can propagate more influential and topical conversations within communities, and connect more deeply with the community to bring together a project, funding, or a learning goal.

TYPES OF NETWORKS

First and foremost, there are two main divisions of social networks: interpersonal networks and online networks. The way these two types of networks interact can take different forms, but many times lead to the same overall ending.

Beyond the main two types of networks, this section has a general list of subtypes of network clusters that you might think about when looking at the connections in social networks. When creating a map of an individual's network, these can be used as a starting point in terms of finding weak ties and influential actors among one's separate groups.

Please note that these groups are not mutually exclusive. For instance, one's network may have an activity-based group that includes members from any or all of one's other network clusters. Networks can also transcend the boundaries between interpersonal and online networks. We call these Hybrid Networks - those that exist both in interpersonal communications and in an online format.

ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Online social networks have become an important force in community and economic engagement in the 21st Century. It has been shown that online social networking can enhance the leadership capacity of community members and groups through power sharing important resources and information in a quick and timely manner, in a "hyper-responsive" manner. For example, information can easily be disseminated through online channels to achieve greater organizational transparency that will lead to increased public trust or awareness of organizational missions.

Through social media channels, like Facebook or Twitter, real-time content can be easily transmitted and distributed in ways that make it easy to connect and interact with stakeholders. The identified three fundamental uses of online social networking are:

1. As a means for personal communication
2. To link social groups or circles
3. To promote an idea, event, or concept

Online social networks make it seamless to find others interested in a specific topic. Because if online social networking, finding a crowd of followers and supporters is no longer rooted in traditional relationships, such as geographic proximity, but can grow out of similar interests, favorite activities, or mutual connections. As a result, online social networks can also play an important role in the “diffusion of innovation”, due to the fact that information and resources can be shared a larger global audience. While not all online networks start with a mainstream social media site (such as Facebook or Twitter), they can still be classified as a social media network.

FOUR PRACTICES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ONLINE CONSTITUENCY

1. Know the community you are looking to engage

- Before joining on online group or discuss board, be sure to know the audience that you are engaging with. Online communities may have certain cultural norms and may have a learning curve towards the appropriate means of engagement.
- Be aware that the items that you post online will often permanently remain on the internet.
- Be sure to research groups and key members before joining them, and develop a strategy on how to engage and interact with key online community contributors. A basic Google or LinkedIn search on the individual or organization are a powerful first steps towards understanding your community.

2. Establish Strategies

- Before engaging with online communities, develop a way to talk with them based on their own style of communication.
- Make sure you understand how you will respond to questions, comments, and “trolls” - people who intentionally start arguments online with the intent to upset people on the Internet.
- Do not be afraid to utilize online calendars or other contact tracking methods to ensure that you have an establish plan for engaging your audience both consistently and periodically.

3. Build Networks

- Connect people that might otherwise not have met.
- Create weak ties that will facilitate growth among all involved parties. As a VISTA Member, you are a leader in your community and may have access to resources that others do not.

4. Mobilize

- Use your newly formed constituency to engage in community activities.
- Start small and work your way to a larger project.
- Keep in mind that relationships have a “give-and-take” element to them. Always ask how you can return a favor.

INTERPERSONAL NETWORKS

Acquaintance Network

An acquaintance network is a network made up of a set of nodes and ties that are influenced by the interaction of connections between the connections. The strength of the connections are impacted by the interchanging interactions between the actors that are both positive or negative. Future interactions may be more or less likely to happen between the connections depending on the strength of acquaintance ties. For example, if you meet someone who works for a partner nonprofit, you are more likely to come in-contact with that organization’s executive director.

Activity-based Network

An activity based network is made up of individuals who are connected based on an affiliation to different social activities that in turn foster a sense of community. Such activity based networks may be affiliated with sports, music, traveling and other social activities. The more connected an individual or group feels about said activities, the more connected they will be to said network, furthering their ability to connect and advocate for said network. For example, if you are a fan of specific sport and are serving at a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote and improve the education system through said sport, you will feel more compelled and accountable for the success of your work at the organization.

Familial Network

A familial network is a network where the connections are defined either through their biological ties, their housing situation or shared family experiences; examples of this are the immediate family, extended family, roommates, and residents at a hospital. Although they may not all have a biological connection, they are connected based on the shared living experience, emotion or life experiences. For example, if you grew up in a Native American reservation, you are more likely to connect with members of that community because you will be considered as part of their family due to shared customs and ideas, which will facilitate your communication of information to them.

Friend Network

A friend network is a network of people who provide social and emotional support for each other based on their bond of mutual affection. Friend networks vary based on how well the individuals who are part of the network know each other. There are friend networks where mostly everyone in the network know each other fairly well, such as a college student's friends from high school, college and his/her neighborhood all being friends. Other friend networks know each other in smaller groups but rarely know individuals across other groups within said network; an example of this is having close college friends who do not know the new friends you made while serving as a VISTA member. Another type of friend network is when an individual acquires friends from various places, like school, volunteering, traveling or through work.

SOCIAL NETWORK THEORY

Social Network Theory is the study of how people, organizations, or groups interact with others (Claywell 2018). This section comprises a lot of information from experiments and research in the fields of sociology, media effects, civic engagement, and more. Some of the oldest theories and models are from the 1940s. While you may not need to know everything at once within this section, the information here can be used to help more accurately depict a social network map. It will also provide insights into how connections within networks actually affect the flow of goods and information.

Networks can be thought of as relationships, comprised of actors, referred to as nodes, and the connections between them. These nodes can be individuals, or organizations depending on your scope. In other words, the node is the smallest unit inside a network. Example: If all AmeriCorps service sites constitute a social network, your service site would be a node inside the network.

According to an article reviewing the decades of research into social networks, “Social Network Theory” by Liu et al. show that there are three key factors to consider when working with social networks: centrality, cohesion, and structural equivalence (2017).

NETWORK CENTRALITY

When we talk about network centrality, we mean “the measure of how central an individual or organization is in a particular network” (Borgatti 2005; Liu et al. 2017). Take, for instance, the red node in Figure 2 above. Not only is it in the center of the network itself, that node also has the most direct links to other members of the network. This position within the cluster provides more varied types of input, which means these individuals are more likely to be a focal point for thoughts and input from the rest of the cluster.

Overall, though, “the value of centrality varies on different characteristics in a social network that relate to how information is passed along in a system of communications.” If you want to dive deeper into centrality, you can look at the three factors that should be considered when measuring or assigning an individual’s centrality in a network cluster (Liu et al., 2017):

1. Degree Centrality
2. Closeness Centrality
3. Betweenness Centrality

DEGREE OF CENTRALITY

Individuals with high degree centrality are more likely to become thought leaders because of their multiple focal role among the various social ties. Someone with a high degree of centrality is able to receive and transmit information across the breadth of that particular cluster.

CLOSENESS OF CENTRALITY

This refers to the distance between an individual node and all other nodes in the network. Individuals with higher closeness centrality need relatively fewer steps to reach all other individuals in their network and thus can potentially move information faster (Liu et al. 2017).

BETWEENNESS OF CENTRALITY

The betweenness of centrality in your network measures the frequency at which an individual connects with other nodes in their network. Individuals high in betweenness centrality are more likely to serve as a bridge in the network. These individuals are gatekeepers in a network and help ensure that information flows from one area to another in their network, or that it does not flow (Liu et al. 2017).

NETWORK COHESION

Network cohesion measures the “degree of interconnections among a group of nodes” (Liu et al. 2017). What this allows us to do is detect subgroups within the larger network cluster. Network cohesion is directly proportional to the measured personal influence within a group or subgroup. This means that the higher rating of cohesion within the group or subgroup, the more personal influence will have an impact on network member’s opinions and behaviors. In other words, targeting these influential individuals can help relay a message more positively and robustly.

STRUCTURAL EQUIVALENCE

Structural equivalence “indicates two or more network positions that share a similar pattern of connections with the rest of the network” (Liu et al. 2017). Take for instance, the simple network cluster below. The blue nodes share five direct connections to other nodes within that network.

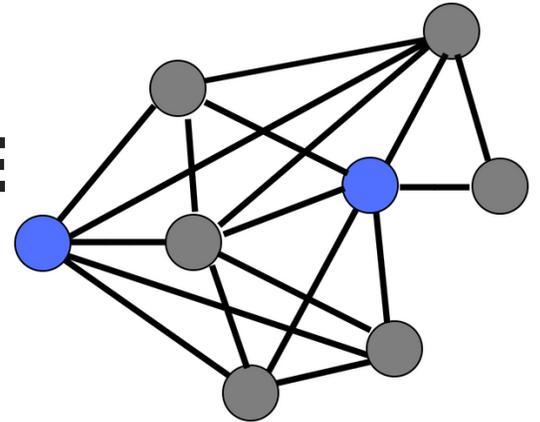


Fig. 1 showing structural equivalence between the two blue nodes, who share five different connections.

In that same article on Social Network Theory, the authors discuss how nodes that are “structurally equivalent tend to have similar characteristics, such as social status” (Liu et al. 2017). In fact, in a 1987 study of diffusion by Ronald S. Burt, he noted that between the models of cohesion and structural equivalence, “...two factors drove the diffusion process: personal predispositions and contagion by structural equivalence” (Burt 1987). In fact, cohesion barely had an impact on the process. While this is only one study, it shows that those in similar situations are more likely to take a cue from each other. This similar plane of influence may give actors in the network a sense of comfort due to familiarity. This leads nicely into a discussion about homophily.

HOMOPHILY

Homophily refers to the tendency for people to create social networks with those who are most similar to them. This obviously is not universally true, but in observations, humans are seen to more often associate closely with people who

share character traits, education, income, and social status, among others (Marques et al. 2008; Kossinets and Watts 2009; Liu et al. 2017). Whether this is due primarily to choice or situation is still to be determined, and that debate can propagate never-ending discussion. What we want to focus on is how homophily can impact the well-being of those in poverty.

One of the biggest consistent findings of Mark Granovetter's SWT theory is that people find jobs more easily when they have weak ties from large social networks. This may seem intuitive considering the possibility of finding a job through social networks will increase substantially with a larger network. However, socioeconomic status is a big indicator in how useful weak ties can be. Two researchers setting out to test the SWT, Erickson and Yancey, found that:

"Weak ties actually lead to a reduction in income among the poorly educated, but . . . this reduction grows smaller with increasing levels of education such that there is a small increase among high school graduates . . . and this increase grows larger with further increases in education. Thus, for that group of well-educated respondents where weak ties are most likely to be used we see that the effects of using the weak ties are most positive." (Granovetter 1983)

This finding seems to be consistent with other studies done. For instance, let's take a look at the study done by Marques et al. (2008) in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Of the four large social networks the researchers assessed, they found that the two lowest-income groups, though they had a very large network with centralized ties, had more homophily within their groups of other impoverished people. They also had lower education levels, were more heavily inundated with people of the same gender and race, and beliefs (such as religious beliefs). The two networks with higher income and education levels also had more heterogeneous makeups in their social networks.

In other words, homophily could cause people experiencing poverty to remain in the cycle of poverty. Introducing people from different social strata to existing social networks in impoverished communities could be a way to create bridging ties to help those in poverty rise out of it.

DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS

First, remember that “innovation” refers to anything that can be passed along a social network, from tangible goods, to ideas, to money. Second, when thinking about how innovations are diffused across social networks, it is critical to think of all the ways in which one usually acquires information or goods.

According to the current state of the research, there are four main elements to the diffusion model: rate of adoption, rate of adoption over time, stages during the adoption process, and modification of the innovation (Liu et al. 2017).

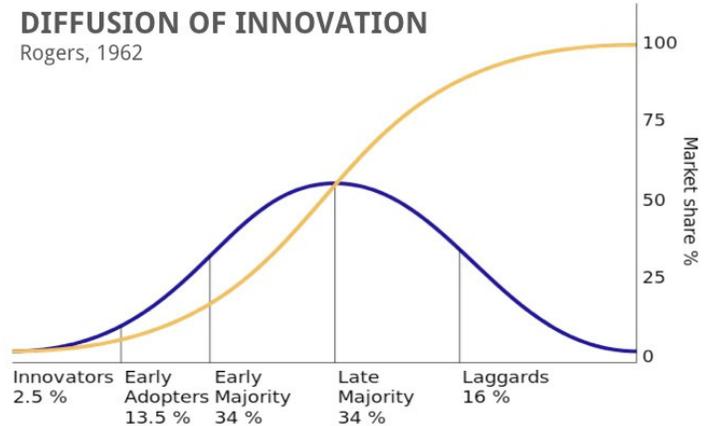


Fig. 2 showing the diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1962)

RATE OF ADOPTION

The rate of adoption measures individual adoption of innovations as it relates to a social network as a whole. Because of this, there are many variables that can affect the rate of adoption. First and foremost is the individual’s perception of the innovation. If they have a negative first view, they will be less likely to adopt that innovation then and will have a higher threshold toward influence (Valente 1996; Rogers 2010; Liu et al. 2017). Beyond perception, however, there are four more factors, as stated by Rogers:

“In addition to the perceived attributes of an innovation, such other variables affect its rate of adoption as (1) the type of innovation-decision, (2) the nature of communication channels diffusing the innovation at various stages in the innovation-decision process, (3) the nature of the social system; and (4) the extent of change agents' efforts in diffusing the innovation” (2010).

This is merely a scrape off the vast body of research dedicated to innovation diffusion and adoption. Everett Rogers, responsible for the graph above, also dives into the variables that affect the rate of innovation adoption, such as: the relative advantage of the innovation, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability (Hoffmann, Christinck, and Probst, 2007). However, that is beyond the scope of our project at the moment.

RATE OF ADOPTION OVER TIME

As you can see from the yellow-orange line in Fig. 4, the rate of adoption over time yields a cumulative S-shaped curve. This coincides with the bell curve, as momentum picks up until the early and late majority adopters surge in and boost diffusion.

STAGES DURING THE ADOPTION PROCESS

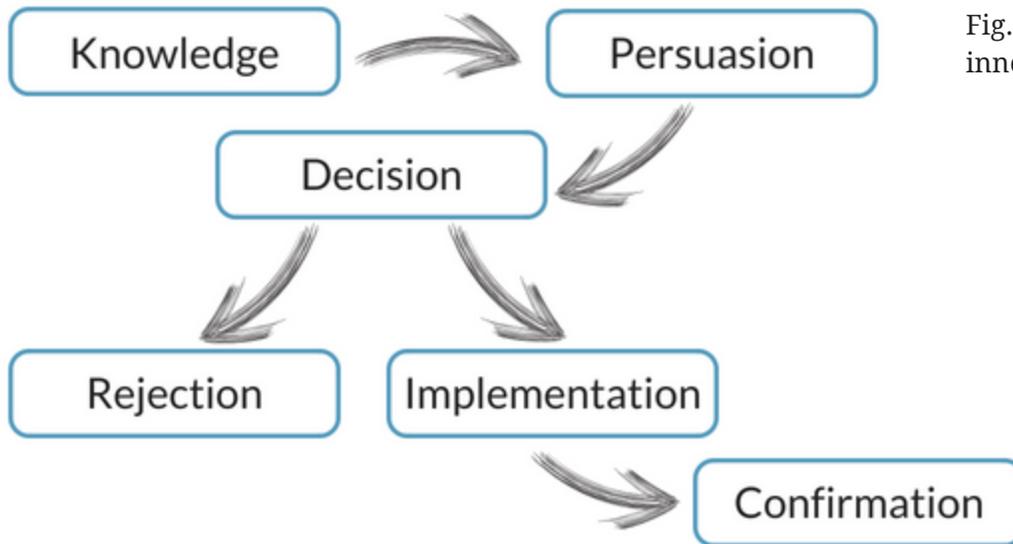


Fig. 3 showing the stages of the innovation adoption process

According to Liu et al., the stages of the adoption process can be noted as (2017):

1. Knowledge

- You have heard about the innovation
- You are perhaps seeking more information

2. Persuasion

- Either media connections or interpersonal relations have begun adopting the innovation
- Some may be trying to persuade you to adopt the innovation actively, but their reviews and overall experience act as a “trial” for other members

3. Decision

- You either adopt the innovation or not

4. Implementation

- If you adopt the innovation, you put it into practice
- This is your hands-on trial experience

5. Confirmation

- Are you still using this innovation after a dedicated period of time?
- Is it functional or useful in its intended purpose?

MODIFICATION OF THE INNOVATION

Not all innovations are modified, and innovations that are modified are not always modified every time they are diffused or replicated. However, it is not uncommon for actors within a network to put their own spin on an innovation. Take, for example, a used book that is being passed around a group of friends. Each person writes notes in the margins of the book, which gives the next person a modified version of the original innovation, complete with thoughts or ideas they may otherwise not have had themselves.

If you are looking at how verbal information passes through and is modified in social groupings, then you can think about the game Telephone. As information is passed along, each person infers something from it and adds that inference onto the information - whether consciously or subconsciously - that changes what the information is to the next person.

THEORY OF INFLUENTIAL USERS

All of this plays into a model for diffusion regarding influential users. This theory states, basically, that there are users in social network clusters that drive adoption of behaviors or innovations (Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010).

Big players in information diffusion are the mass media. By seeding influential actors with information, news shows and articles can begin to get the word out about the happenings of the day or week. After learning of new events, an influential actor, or opinion leader, will disseminate that information to other members of their network clusters. This is called the two-step communication hypothesis.

TWO-STEP COMMUNICATION HYPOTHESIS

This hypothesis was first set forth in 1944. Some findings over the years, as noted by Liu and company (2017):

1. While it is not certain, and it probably varies between networks, the “magnitude of personal influence could be greater than that of mass media.”
2. Opinion leaders - influential actors - are not necessarily concentrated at a particular spot in the network. That is to say, they can be of lower social strata or higher. Another observation is that there are “many cases of local leadership or issue-specific leadership.”
3. Personal influence and mass media do not necessarily work apart from each other. In fact, many influential actors are those who are “more exposed to the mass media. And, depending on the specific context, personal influence can either reinforce or attenuate the effect of traditional mass media”.

STRENGTH OF WEAK TIES

Mass media is not the only method for seeding a social network cluster with new information or ideas. First proposed by Mark Granovetter in 1973, the strength of weak ties theory (SWT) posits that information disseminates and becomes a cultural idea through weak ties (Granovetter, 1973; Granovetter, 1983; de Zuniga & Valenzuela, 2011; Aral & Walker, 2012; Liu et al., 2017). Granovetter’s support for this is that weak ties are more likely to bring in new information to a strong-tie cluster. While there is almost always an influential member within a cluster that is the main originator of innovation adoption, sometimes radical ideas form in or pass through nearby networks that can be incorporated into groups through weak ties.

Certainly, as we see VISTAs working with communities to increase employment rates, education, and community empowerment, having weak ties can sometimes be a huge help in finding jobs, learning of new opportunities, and coming together to improve some feature or aspect of the community. As noted previously, weak ties are a major resource in the realm of employment

(Granovetter 1973; Granovetter 1983; Marques et al. 2008; Harris et al. 2014; Liu et al. 2017). If impoverished communities with socioeconomically homophilous networks are introduced to weak ties from a higher social strata or from outside their neighbors and family, it could open up opportunities for self-advancement. Even if employment is not the main concern, introduction to new ideas and perspectives through weak ties helps networks to spread or adopt those ideas and grow individually and as a group. Otherwise, many of these networks recirculate the same innovations.

In the section on homophily, we discussed how large networks can be more advantageous than small networks in acquiring new information. This relates to job-seeking as well. However, we also mentioned that some large networks among the chronically impoverished go against this trend. Another study, composed in 2005, backs this up with observations of African-American communities in urban districts. Though the populations normally had large social networks, they still faced “challenges mobilizing social ties for the purposes of employment” (Harris et al. 2014). What this means is that it not only matters how large the network is, but how varied it is in its social ties.

STRENGTHENING SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Based on our internal and external research we came up with some best practices and guiding questions that can help you build or strengthen social networks within the communities you are serving. Below are some guiding questions and resources you can use.

THE FIVE C'S

A major aspect of strategically strengthening a community's social networks in order to be a catalyst for social change and community action is influence. There are five major factors that play a major role in building a community and providing strong social networks that are known as "The Five C's: Community, Connections, Control, Cash, and Collective Action" (VISTA Campus). In the pages to follow, you will find brief descriptions of each factor as well as questions you should ask yourself as you are working towards the empowerment and advancement of the community you are serving.

COMMUNITY

Community refers to a group of people who live in the same location or share common characteristics. In order to build and strengthen the social networks within the community there must be a sense of membership and emotional connection among the members of the community. In order to influence the communities, the members of said communities must feel that there are shared values among the group and that their collective needs are met.

As you are working towards strengthening existing social networks or building new tools that will ease how the social networks communicate you should think of the following questions:

- 1. What shared values do the community members have?**
- 2. What are their collective needs?**
- 3. What is their preferred method of communication?**
- 4. How can I/we create opportunities for them to connect?**

Once you are able to answer these questions you'll be able to better assess which communication and social networking tools best fit the community needs. Knowing your community well will allow you to better influence positive change in the community you are serving.

CONNECTIONS

This refers to the connections and relationships between different communities and entities. These connections are very important for the community members because they can gain resources by leveraging the relationships they have with other communities and entities. Such resources can be in-kind donations and intellectual services. Furthermore, having strong relationships with entities outside of the community can help the influence the community has on the positive change in the community in a macro-level; for example if the community where you are serving has a strong relationship with their local congressman they will have the direct opportunity to showcase their needs and influence social change.

Below are some questions you may ask that will help you determine which connections will help you strengthen and build your social networks:

- 1. Which communities, organizations, and governmental entities is the community connected to?**
- 2. What resources can we leverage from our existing partners?**
- 3. Are there other communities, organizations, or governmental entities that believe in our mission who we are not connected to?**
- 4. What is the best way to build new relationships and partnerships?**

CONTROL

Control refers to the community members' sense of ownership over their collective needs and goals. If the members of the community feel like they have control over the success of their group they will be more susceptible to new ideas and tools that will strengthen their social network. They will also have a stronger sense of urgency and accountability to form strong sustainable connections and bonds within the community.

Some questions to keep in mind as you palpate the community's sense of control are:

- 1. What do the community members have control over?**
- 2. Is there room for community members to take a more active role in their success?**
- 3. How is my work promoting the community's sense of control?**
- 4. How can the community use their sense of control to influence other stakeholders and partners to help them with their goals?**

CASH

Cash is the available financial resources the community members have to accomplish their collective goals. As VISTA members and VISTA Leaders our goal is to alleviate poverty and help empower the communities so that they can advance economically. Having financial mobility is imperative for the accomplishment of the community's collective goals. By creating and fostering strong sustainable social networks the community will be able to bring in more financial resources that will ease the process of reaching their collective and individual goals.

Below are some questions to think about as you are determining financial resources available to the community you are serving:

- 1. Is there a budget to accomplish the communities goals?**
- 2. How does my work increase the community's cash resources so that they can manage and sustain their economic growth?**
- 3. What connections can we reach out to for financial resources?**
- 4. What intellectual and in-kind resources can we use that will substitute the need of financial resources?**

COLLECTIVE ACTION

Collective Action refers to the community's desire and ability to work together towards a common goal; in the case of all the communities you are serving the goals will be aligned with the advancement of their equity in one way or another. Collective Action is the ultimate compilation of community, connections, control and cash. In order for collective action to be possible all four of the aforementioned factors should be working together. This will help individuals feel as though they are part of something larger than themselves and as valuable members of their social network.

The members must also feel like they are working towards a goal that they all desire, instead of one that was imposed on them by society; for example the community members will be more enticed to work on a community garden where they can plant and harvest their own fruits and vegetables than a community garden that was created from people who do not live nor understand their community.

As you think about how the community you are serving can act collectively to accomplish their goals you should ask the following questions:

- 1. How is my work promoting the community's ability to work together towards reaching their collective goals?**
- 2. What is the most effective way to organize the community?**
- 3. Is this collective action coming from the needs and desires of the community or are we imposing our ideas on them?**

ENGAGING MEMBERS BY GENERATION

Something to keep in mind as you work towards your goal of strengthening the social networks that exist in your communities is that you will encounter people of different generations. Today there are six living generations: the G.I. Generation, Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Each generation will have different preferences in terms of how they communicate and engage with each other. Below you will find brief descriptions of each generation and tips on how you can strengthen and build strong social networks that will not only foster a sense of community with members of the same generation, but will also help improve cross generational social networks.

G.I. GENERATION

Refers to people born between 1900 and 1920. Members of this generation lived through the great depression and fought in World War II. These experiences shaped their sense of patriotism, frugality, and sense of familial connections. Although you may rarely interact with members of this generation you should be aware that they appreciate face-to-face communication. They are more likely to be part of interpersonal networks. The best way to communicate with them is in person.

SILENT GENERATION

Refers to people who were born between 1920 and 1945. Members of this generation were born during the Great Depression, which caused many of them to have difficult lives. They were not ones to rebel against the life they had to live, which is why they are known as the silent generation. Most members of this generation are traditionalist and are more likely to be part of interpersonal networks. However, with the widespread use of social media and the internet, many of them are giving new ways of connecting with others a try. The best way to communicate with them is in person, or through newsletters and letters.

BABY BOOMERS

Refers to people who were born between 1945 and 1960. Up until the Millennials came along, they were considered the largest living generation. These individuals grew up in a time of prosperity after the wars and the Great Depression. They are a hardworking generation that strive for excellence. This generation is part of both interpersonal and internet networks, though many of them prefer to connect through interpersonal means. The best ways to communicate with members of this generation are in person, through newsletters, letters and even Facebook (which is more user friendly than other forms of social media and the social media of choice for this generation).

GENERATION X

Refers to people born between 1961 and 1980. Members of this generation were the first to experience the highest level of education in the United States. They value familial and friend networks more than coworker networks. They prefer interpersonal networks to internet networks. The best way to connect with them is by providing spaces for them to socialize in person. Using social media as a means to get their networks to interact in person is also a great way to engage with them.

MILLENNIALS

Refers to people born between 1981 and 1996. They are now the largest generation. They lived through the 9/11 tragedy and war in Iraq. They value flexibility, are multitaskers, tech-savvy and are open minded. They are the most connected generation because they grew up during the creation of the internet. They value collaboration, experiences, and transparency among their relationships. They value both interpersonal and internet networks and use their social media networks to maintain their interpersonal networks. The best way to engage members of this generation is through social media or in person social events.

GENERATION Z

Refers to people born between 1997 and 2015. They are the first generation to be born with the internet and social media. As technology natives they do everything online. However, they are more likely to use mobile devices than computers. This generation has a strong sense of civic engagement and volunteerism as well as work ethic, due to being born during a time of recession. They are constantly looking for opportunities to grow professionally. The best way to connect with them is through mobile-friendly apps and social media.

CONCLUSION

Although all these generations vary in how they connect, there is always a way to engage all of them to accomplish a common goal. Whether it's setting up a meeting to discuss action plans, or creating a virtual interest group to get the opinions and ideas of the community members in one place, knowing their communication preferences will help you build the capacity for strong sustainable networks in the community you are serving.

SCENARIOS & EXAMPLES

Example 1

A VISTA works with an organization related to HIV/AIDS. The VISTA's organization would go out and talk to other organizations about their work and the services they provide. This way when the VISTA works with a client, they can share the right contact information for appropriate service providers. Another VISTA was working on health resources but did not have a lot of resources related to HIV AIDS. The VISTAs were able to connect and hosted a dual presentation. This is an example of connecting the right dots and pulling the right people together to figure out how to support one another within a community.

Example 2

Working with 2-1-1/United Way, the VISTA groups utilized social media like Twitter and LinkedIn. These social media channels increased the public's knowledge regarding resources listed through these sorts of websites. Not sure how to distribute as effectively without social media. Was able to connect others with a lot more information. Benefits of utilizing social media was that it is easier to access, information is easier to digest/remember compared to large papers, information was easy to distribute in real time. And it was easier to engage our audience.

EXAMPLES IN EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Establishing a mix of social media tools that work well together and do not overwhelm resources to sustain emergency response. Engaging with the community in advance using social media and influencing hashtags to improve the interface with digital communities. (Colorado Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Fairfax County, and Red Cross) & A Whole Community Approach to Emergency Management: Principles, Themes, and Pathways for Action. FEMA.gov;

Using social media management tools to track, analyze, and document messages, while influencing and testing new technologies. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office and Red Cross);

NETWORKING TIPS & TRICKS

The following tips were shared by interviewed VISTA members and VISTA Leaders. While some of these may not seem to flow with the rest of this document, keep in mind that when you are engaging communities, it is important to be professional and respectful so that you can work more closely more quickly with these stakeholders.

- Double-check spelling and grammar before you send an email.
- If you come across a email that you find rude, wait a few hours before sending a reply. It is easy to misinterpret tone through text.
- Don't be afraid to reach out to someone to proofread your email. It is totally appropriate to ask for feedback before sending out mass communications.
- In emails, give openings for other forms of communication like a phone call or in-person meeting
- Try not to come off too harsh in an email, especially if need something completed by deadline.
- Don't be afraid to try different approaches in ways that you communicate. If something is not getting through, switch up your approach.
- Be consistent and persistent with communication and networking methods.
- At times a personalized invite is better than just putting something out to the public, especially on social media.
- As a VISTA member, remember that you do not always have to start from scratch when building resources or a network. What is most powerful is being able to find others with the same goals and to be able to connect the with existing connections.
- Keep track of the last time you spoke to someone. Set up an appropriate time to follow-up (ex. one week to follow up with potential partners)
- If you are asking for someone to do something, make it as easy as possible for them, and ensure all expectations known. Follow up and maintain open communication.
- Send thank you cards, thank you emails, then connect later on to see how their experience was and to see if they are interested in working on future opportunities.

APPENDIX

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

As a result of exploring different concepts related to “Social Network Theory” our Action Learning Challenge team decided to survey members of our own AmeriCorps network. While it is easy to examine social networking concepts in theory, our team wanted to explore actual insights related to methodologies that VISTA Leaders and VISTA Members alike are building networks, strengthening relationships, and other challenges that might be faced in the field. Our Action Learning Challenge team collaborated to explore topics related to social networks between VISTA members nationwide. We created a 10-question survey where we were looking to learn more about **(1)** What networks exist within communities of service and how they operate, and **(2)** the networks that VISTA Members engage with and how they relate to their service year.

FINDINGS

In the survey conducted, 48 VISTAs were surveyed, 14 VISTA Leaders and 34 VISTA Members. Service related to the following fields: Economic Opportunity (42%); Education (25%); Healthy Futures (25%); Environmental Services (5%); and Disaster Services (3%). Period of length of service includes: 10-12 months (44%); 7-9 months (25%); 4-6 months (15%); 0-3 months (8%); and 12+ months (8%).

Key highlights from the survey indicate that the majority of VISTA members surveyed utilize: In-person meetings (83%); Online channels (81%); and Phone calls (75%) when engaging their networks. Even further, the main methods of contact that surveyed VISTA members utilize are: Email (69%), In-person communications (52%); Phone calls (46%); and Social media (23%) to communicate with their VISTA project stakeholders.

When surveyed on the purpose of communication, surveyed VISTA members indicated the primary reasons were to create or share community resource (71%), to alleviate poverty (69%), and to educate community members or stakeholders (54%). Secondary focuses of surveyed VISTA members can be attributed to collecting quantitative/qualitative research (44%) and recruiting volunteer members (42%).

INSIGHTS

Based on our survey results, the majority of VISTAs use in-person meetings, phone calls, and online channels (specifically email) to create & share community resources, alleviate poverty, and educate community members/stakeholders, with a secondary focus on data collection and volunteer recruitment. As a result, our team followed-up with select VISTA members to conduct four group discussions on challenges and methodologies utilized.

In our focus groups, VISTA members stressed how important it is as a VISTA, to access the wealth of networks available in a community in-order to reach intended objectives of a volunteer assignment. As a VISTA, being a part of the AmeriCorps network makes it easier to connect with many groups that they would not normally connect to. Building a personalized social network is not just important for the VISTA project, but also to develop a path towards becoming a high functioning professional. As a VISTA, networking opened new career options to those who were surveyed.

CHALLENGES

VISTA members addressed how it can be difficult to engage project stakeholders, especially when moving to a new community or when stakeholders are widespread and not centralized. With larger groups of stakeholders in a network, in-person communication and consensus can become more difficult. Miscommunication can occur with participants and stakeholders, especially with E-mail. It may be difficult for everyone to understand the information that a VISTA member, VISTA Leader or organization is trying to get across.

In some communities, a VISTA member pointed out that the social network infrastructure had to be built and repaired. Interpersonal relationships and politics played a big role in the networking building that this VISTA member had to deal with. It gets even more challenging when there are big divisions between stakeholders and organizations. The VISTA member pointed out that certain nonprofits might not work with you because of your associations, or visa versa. Overall networking should lead to relationships that are built to last.

VISTA STRATEGIES

In our focus groups, VISTA members indicated certain strategies and methods that they utilize to overcome certain networking challenges.

- Email was indicated as one of the easiest forms of communication to utilize, especially in terms on managing projects. Follow up emails were indicated as very important after meeting a new connection or just to say “thank you”. Emails have the power to keep stakeholders informed on the results of an event or fundraising campaign. Even if not the impact of an email is not immediate, emails give reference to events or communication channels.
- Outreach events helped surveyed VISTA members to directly speak to constituents on the ground. Establishing direct lines of personal interaction would slowly “move the needle” in certain communities.
- Face-to-face communications worked particularly well in communities where there may be a lack of access to consistent internet connections. It is important to realize that different networking approaches may be needed with different stakeholders. However, meaningful relationships can be forged when taking the time to meet with people in a community. Face-to-face communications can be more open and honest answers.
- Online postings worked particularly well for interviewed VISTA members interacting with a broad, general audience. Online discussions and postings are powerful tools towards spreading awareness and finding resources.

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