

# HOW TO MANAGE YOUR POLICY NETWORK<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper poses four questions. What are policy networks? When do policy networks succeed? When do policy networks fail? How do we manage networks? It discusses the defining characteristics of networks: trust, diplomacy and reciprocity. It sets out Ten Lessons on when to build a network and Ten Commandments for running a network. It pays particular attention to the sour laws of network governance: that is, to managing the mix, the problem of many hands, the holy grail of coordination, and local ownership. Finally, it offers five' plausible conjectures' for successful network management. Networks are not tools of government to be managed to achieve central objectives. Their strength lies in independence from government. The role of any central agency is to manage their network portfolio, and to provide collaborative leadership with the technical help supporting that role. The goal is to develop organizational glue through an agreed narrative about the network and from quick wins that ensure the network's future. The means are the arts of diplomacy and storytelling.

“Now, if I were in the place of this Prince, wielding his power, subject to his passions and prejudices, what effect would my mission and my arguments have on me? The more often he puts himself in the position of others, the more subtle and effective will his arguments be” (François de Callierès 1716).

## **Introduction**

There is a massive literature on policy networks and its academic standing has been extensively and often reviewed (see for example Rhodes 2006a and Klijn 2008 for surveys and citations). There is also a growing literature on how to manage your network, although much is not accessible to a general reader (see for example: Agranoff 2007; Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan 1997; Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004). This paper does not seek to add the already over lengthy list of theoretical articles nor is it yet another case study of a network ‘in action’. Rather, it seeks to translate and distil the existing literature into useful lessons for practitioners. I seek to answer four questions. What are policy networks? When do policy networks succeed? When do policy networks fail? How do central agencies manage networks? I end with five plausible conjectures on how to build and keep a network.

## **What are policy networks?**

Network analysis comes in many guises. It is common to all the social science disciplines. This paper focuses on that species of network analysis most common in political science and public administration - policy network analysis. Few social science disciplines can ever agree on the meaning of an idea. So, a policy network is one of a cluster of concepts focusing

on government links with, and dependence on, other state and societal actors. These notions include issue networks: iron triangles, policy sub-systems, policy communities, and epistemic communities. Commonly, they differ in their degree of integration, with issue networks being loosely integrated and policy communities tightly integrated. Whatever the terminology, all remain varieties of networks. Here I focus on ‘policy networks’ and define them as:

The sets of formal institutional and informal linkages between governmental and other societal actors structured around shared, if endlessly negotiated, beliefs and interests in public policymaking and implementation.

Behaviour in policy networks is game-like, grounded in trust and regulated by rules of the game negotiated and agreed by network participants. Variations in the distribution of resources and in the bargaining skills of actors explain both the differences in outcomes in a network and variations between networks. These actors are interdependent and policy emerges from the interactions between them. Such networks have a significant degree of autonomy from government.

Networks can and do develop from the bottom-up. They are also initiated by central agencies. Both often operate in the shadow of hierarchy because they depend on central agencies for resources. Yet networks have distinctive characteristics of their own and Figure 1 provides a brief comparison of the three main ways of delivering services.

#### INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

**FIGURE 1: Characteristics of Networks\***

	BUREAUCRACY	MARKETS	NETWORKS
<b>Basis of relationships</b>	<b>Employment relationship</b>	<b>Contract</b>	<b>Resource exchange</b>
<b>Degree of dependence</b>	<b>Dependent</b>	<b>Independent</b>	<b>Interdependent</b>
<b>Medium of exchange</b>	<b>Authority</b>	<b>Prices</b>	<b>Trust</b>
<b>Means of conflict resolution and coordination</b>	<b>Rules and commands</b>	<b>Haggling and the courts</b>	<b>Diplomacy</b>
<b>Culture</b>	<b>Subordination</b>	<b>Competition</b>	<b>Reciprocity</b>

\*Source: Adapted from Powell 1991. See Rhodes 1998 and citations.

Networks are a distinctive coordinating mechanism and, therefore, a separate governing structure from markets and hierarchies, because trust is their central coordinating mechanism in the same way that commands and price competition are the key mechanisms for bureaucracies and markets respectively. Trust is essential for cooperative behaviour and, therefore, the existence of the network. It is the defining attribute. Networks are also characterised by diplomacy and reciprocity. I discuss each in turn.

### *Trust*

At the heart of networks and management by diplomacy is the notion of trust; it is 'the most important attribute of network operations', the central coordinating mechanism (see, Kramer and Tyler 1996). Shared values and norms are the glue which holds the complex set of relationships together; trust is essential for cooperative behaviour and, therefore, the existence of the network. Moreover, trust is non-calculative. As Powell (1996: 63) points out,

trust is: 'neither chosen nor embedded but is instead learned and reinforced, hence a product of on-going interaction and discussion'. Preserving trust is, therefore, a reciprocal and endless task. Fox's (1974: 362) conclusions about trust in industrial relations are equally apt for networks. Thus, in networks with high trust relationships, participants:

share certain ends or value; bear towards each other a diffuse sense of long-term obligations; offer each other spontaneous support without narrowly calculating the cost or expecting any equivalent short-term reciprocation; communicate freely and honestly; are ready to repose their fortunes in each other's hands; and give each other the benefit of any doubt that may arise with respect to goodwill or motivation.

### *Reciprocity*

Networks involve friendship, loyalty, even altruism (Thompson 1993: 54-8) but above all network culture is characterised by reciprocity. As Powell (1991: 272-3) comments, reciprocity is rooted in 'the normative standards that sustain exchange', especially indebtedness, obligation and a long-term perspective. So, a lack of equivalence creates a moral sanction, bonds that keep the parties in touch with one another; the books are balanced only in the long term. However, as Thompson (1993: 58) points out, reciprocity is also a symbolic relationship and 'in the constant ritual of exchange, deep obligations and duties are established, symbolic statuses confirmed, metaphorical social references invoked'. In this way, network coordination becomes stabilised.

### *Diplomacy*

Diplomacy refers to management by negotiation. The diplomat must persuade 'another government to accept and perhaps actually help to promote the policies which it is the ambassador's function to advocate'. The main technique is 'the maintenance by continual persuasion of order in the midst of change' (Watson 1982: 125 and 223). Nicholson (1950:

15) defines diplomacy as 'the management of international affairs by negotiation'. For all its slightly old-fashioned, even quaint air Nicholson signals an important shift in style to a language which stresses sitting where the other person sits and helping other people to realise their objectives. We relearn old lessons (de Callierès 1963 [1716]). The emphasis lies not in imposing one's objectives on another but on finding out about the other.

Diplomacy may be an old-fashioned word but the arts of negotiation and persuasion are not confined to it. As Sir Douglas Wass, former Head of the British Civil Service, said, 'finesse and diplomacy are an essential ingredient in public service' (Hennessy, 1989: 150). Such skills lie at the heart of steering networks. Public servants have been managing networks for years but either chose not to talk about it or like Moliere's Monsieur Jourdin, did not know they had been speaking prose all their life. The idea is not new, although it can seem novel; it was just temporarily misplaced. Words like diplomacy, trust and reciprocity are central to managing networks.

### **When do networks succeed?**

Networks thrive where markets and hierarchies fail, where trust and reciprocity characterise the relationships between organisations, and where management is by negotiation, not command. This much is obvious from Table 1. Also, as with any other form of public sector management, success depends on the relevant information, skills and resources. When actors hoard information and resources, when in effect they refuse to share, then the cooperation that defines networks is unlikely to be forthcoming. The existing literature also identifies several other more specific conditions under which networks will thrive; see Figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 2: When to Build a Network: Ten Lessons\*

## TEN LESSONS

### Conditions favour network building when:

- Multi-agency cooperation spanning the public, private and voluntary sectors is required.
- Professional discretion and expertise are core values.
- Quality cannot be specified or is difficult to define and measure.
- Actors need reliable, 'thicker' information, or local knowledge.
- Commodities are difficult to price.
- The policy arena is insulated from party politics.
- Service delivery is localised.
- Central monitoring and evaluation incur high political and administrative costs.
- Implementation involves chains of organization and there is the prospect of many ownership disputes.
- There is a shared narrative or overlapping narratives of what we are doing and why.

\*Source: Updated from Rhodes 1998 and citations.

In other words, networks succeed when service delivery is cooperative, depoliticised, professionalised, localised, and customised.

## **When do networks fail?**

Networks, like all other resource allocation mechanisms, are not cost free. Managing the institutional void is difficult. Networks are hard to steer – it has been likened to herding cats, or pulling rubber levers. It is a time-consuming and slow process complicated by the sour laws of network governance: that is, managing the mix, the problem of many hands, the holy grail of coordination, and local ownership.

### *Managing the mix (or competition versus cooperation)*

Networks are difficult to combine with other means for delivering services. One clear effect of marketization is that it undermines the effectiveness of the networks it spreads. Contracts undermine trust, reciprocity, informality and cooperation. I am not arguing that networks are unworkable. All governing structures fail. Governments have to find the right mix because the several mechanisms can mix like oil and water. Competition and cooperation are uneasy bedfellows. The government promoted competition and contracting-out. The result was to 'corrode ... common values and commitments' and 'to create an atmosphere of mistrust'. Market relations had 'corrosive effects' on 'professional networks which depend on cooperation reciprocity and interdependence' (Flynn, Williams et al. 1996: 115 and 136-7). In short, contracts undermine trust, reciprocity, informality and cooperation.

Individuals cope with the clash between cooperative and competitive styles by drawing on folk theories; on their inherited stories of how things work around here (see below). They can live in this mixed world. They calculate which service delivery mechanism will work in which context. But the dilemma is pervasive. They miscalculate which message to send to other actors or which setting is appropriate for their message. Their frustrations can be heard in exasperated yet heartfelt pleas for other agencies 'to be more like us'.

*The problem of many hands (or accountability versus efficiency)*

Bovens (1998, 46) identifies the ‘problem of many hands’ where responsibility for policy in complex organizations is shared and it is correspondingly difficult to find out who is responsible. He also notes that fragmentation, marketization and the resulting networks create ‘new forms of the problem of many hands’ (Bovens 1998, 229). In a network, the constituent organizations may hold the relevant officials and politicians to account but to whom is the set of organizations accountable. Performance indicators may enhance efficiency but, in a multi-agency context, buck-passing is much more likely because responsibility is divided and the reach of central agencies is much reduced (Mulgan 2003, 211-14). All too often, networks are closed to public scrutiny; they are a species of private government. The brute fact is that multiple accountabilities fuel fears of duplication, overlap and inefficiency as they weaken central control and foster a ‘not me guv’ response from network members (Mulgan 2003, 225).

*The holy grail of coordination (or control versus mutual adjustment)*

The search for coordination has a centralising thrust. Its advocates seek to coordinate departments and other agencies - whether central agencies, the states or local governments, whether public or private - by imposing a new style of management on other agencies. A command operating code, no matter how well disguised, runs the ever-present risk of recalcitrance from key actors and a loss of flexibility in dealing with localised problems. Gentle pressure relentlessly applied is still a command operating code in a velvet glove. When you are sitting at the top of a pyramid and you cannot see the bottom, control deficits are an ever-present unintended consequence.

What we see here is an age-old problem dressed up in fashionable phrases. That problem is coordination. We know that, despite strong pressures for more and proactive coordination

throughout Western Europe, the coordination activities of central governments remain modest. According to Wright and Hayward (2000: 33), coordination is largely negative, based on persistent silos, mutual avoidance and reducing friction between ministries. It is anchored at the lower levels of the state; organised by specific settled networks; rarely strategic; intermittent and selective; improvised late in the policy process, politicised, issue-oriented and reactive. In sum, coordination is the ‘philosopher’s stone’ of modern government, ever sought, but always just beyond reach, all too often because it assumes both agreement on goals and a coordinator (Seidman 1975: 190). Network members complain that ‘you can’t shake hands with a clenched fist’.

But coordination is not confined to central coordination by rules. There are alternatives. The all-too often ignored but classic book on informal coordination is Lindblom’s (1965) analysis of partisan mutual adjustment. A partisan makes decisions that serve his or her own goals. Mutual adjustment occurs when a decision maker either simply adapts to decisions around him or seeks to induce changes in other decision makers. There is no central authoritative decision maker. Rather, each decision maker seeks to induce others to adjust using such methods as bargaining, reciprocity, manipulation, and compensation (see also, Chisholm 1989). The overlap with the idea of diplomacy is both obvious and inescapable.

#### *Ownership (or strategic guidance versus local flexibility)*

This conflict comes in various forms, notably: individual versus organizational commitments; local versus national public expectations; local flexibility versus national rules; and network goals versus national regulators. Local networks finish being local networks when centrally manipulated or directed. In effect, when networks are managed centrally, horizontal relationships are transformed into vertical relationships. Central agencies have to calculate whether the costs of agreement are greater than the costs of imposition and all too often it finds for the latter. Such

relationships are exercises in official consultation; at least this phrase does not imply any local discretion. The dilemma is between hands-on versus hands-off styles of intervention; between strategic guidance and local flexibility. Central actors can adopt a decentralized negotiating style that trades a measure of control for agreement. This style of hands-off management involves setting the framework in which networks work but then keeping an arm's length relationship. Central actors find self-denial even harder to keep than New Year's Resolutions. As network members caustically observe, 'they can talk the talk but they can't walk the walk'.

### **How do central agencies manage networks?**

This question assumes a top-down view of network management; that central agencies will have a hands-on approach to network management. Central agencies confront two broad tasks; managing its portfolio of networks, and managing individual networks.

Central agencies are in everyday language the nodal points of networks. Commonly, the term refers to one or other of central government in a unitary state, a federal government, state governments, and local authorities. Each of these 'central agencies' belongs to, and seeks to manage, a group of networks; its 'multi network portfolio' (Ysa and Esteve 2013; see Wassmer 2010 for a review of the literature). Managing the network portfolio has its own distinct challenges. The most obvious challenge is to find out which networks the agency is trying to manage. All too often, an agency has no map of its own networks let alone the networks of other central agencies. There will be no mechanisms for coordinating the responses of a central agency to either the portfolio or individual networks (see Heimericks et al 2009 for a review of the tools for managing portfolios).

If central agencies treat networks as tools, then the means for managing individual networks fall into three broad groups. Instrumental tools include rewards, sanctions and micro-management of the network. Interaction tools encompass negotiation and diplomacy. The phrase ‘institutional tools’ refers to the central agency changing the rules of the game; that is, resetting the boundaries to network behaviour (see, Kickert et al 1997). My list of Ten Commandments combines these different types of tools (see Figure 3). As Perri 6 et al (2002: 130) point out network management ‘is not rocket science’. My list gives credence to their claim.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 3: How To Manage Your Network: Ten Commandments.\*

**TEN COMMANDMENTS\***

- **Build a shared narrative. Share, adjust continuously, and locally negotiate the network's objectives.**
- **Be a diplomat; represent your agency and the network.**
- **Constant nurturing; be patient and facilitate interactions by working with and through people.**
- **Integrate agendas and understandings of what the agenda is for.**
- **Set 'rules of the game' for the broad operating context but leave action on local problems to network members.**
- **Know your limitations, develop clear roles, expectations and responsibilities for all players and stay within the boundaries of your network.**
- **Recognise each other's expertise and shared working culture.**
- **Share agreed and delegated decision making and service delivery arrangements.**
- **Provide incentives for agreeing criteria on what constitutes success.**
- **Take your share of the joint administrative burden.**

\*Synthesised and modified from: Agranoff 2007; Ansell and Gash 2008; Goldsmith and Eggers 2004, Goss 2001; McGuire 2002; and Rhodes 1997a and 2006b.

As important as the specific lessons and commandments of Figures 2 and 3 are the ideas embedded in them; top-down versus bottom-up, organizational glue, rules of the game, collaborative leadership, and storytelling.

*Top-down versus bottom-up*

We know from studies of implementation and of street level bureaucrats that top-down initiatives are often confounded. Top-down models of implementation take the government's

stated policy objectives as the starting point and examine why they do not succeed (see for example: Pressman and Wildavsky 1984). Failure is attributed to a diffusion of intent as multiple agencies become involved, lack of compliance, understanding or both. Oversight, monitoring and stronger direction from central agencies are common palliatives often with little effect. The view from the bottom-up is different; it highlights that implementation is mediated through the actions of front-line workers whose perspectives reflect local conditions, local knowledge and professional expertise. For example, Lipsky (1979: xii) argued that ‘the decisions of street level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with the uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out’. My account of networks takes it as self-evident that they are messy and amorphous and that central agencies may intervene but cannot control.

### *Organizational glue*

The notion of organizational glue overlaps with many other notions; for example occupational culture, institutional memory, and administrative culture. All have in common the idea that the inherited beliefs and practices of members of an organization are the social glue that binds an organization together. Networks are no exception, with the obvious qualification that an incipient network will have little or no inheritance and so little in the way of organizational glue. There are at least two ways to develop such glue. First, the network leaders can construct a narrative that frames the experience of other network members (see below). Second, the workings of the network can create shared experience. In rising order of difficulty, network members can share information, agree to limited working together, undertake strategic planning, provide integrated service delivery, and pool resources. What is feasible is best because ‘quick wins’ – for example, successful joint ventures - will meet members’ expectations, build trust, and reinforce network behaviour.

### *Rules of the game*

Many networks work in the shadow of hierarchy; that is they are dependent on central agencies for legal authority and financial resources but are at arm's length for implementation. In turn, because they include the private and voluntary sectors, the networks provide more resources for central agencies. Networks are a bridge to civil society. The role of central agencies is to set the boundaries to networks actions by, for example, strategic planning. The problem with strategic planning is that it can become a millstone around the network, daunting in its length, detailed prescriptions, and wealth of performance indicators - and that is before it is overtaken by events. It need not be so; for example, one senior British government Minister brought in his department's strategic plan scribbled on one sheet of A4 paper. His strategic plan was a signpost for the department, not an A-Z street map.

### *Collaborative Leadership*

Ansell and Gash (2008, 544) define collaborative governance as a collective decision-making process "where one or more public agencies directly engages non-state stakeholders" in the "formal, consensus oriented, and deliberative" implementation of public policy or management of public programmes. The key question is whether opposing stakeholders can work together in a collaborative way. The answer is a 'cautious yes'" and a key part of that answer is leadership, which is 'crucial for setting and maintaining clear ground rules, building trust, facilitating dialogue, and exploring mutual gains' (Ansell and Gash 2008, 12–13). Such leadership is variously described as, hands-off, soft, integrative, facilitative or diplomatic. This leader as local entrepreneur is about building networks. For Stoker (2004: 139), the task is 'to facilitate voice in diverse communities, and reconcile differences,

develop shared visions and build partnerships to ensure their achievement'. Leadership is not about control but about supporting people as they find their own solutions.

### *Storytelling*

The 'art' of collaborative leadership lies in storytelling, which is increasingly recognized as a tool for managers. Thus, the business studies literature sees leadership as being about 'the management of meaning' and a way of leaders 'exerting their influence on followers'; they 'educate, inspire, indoctrinate and convince' (Shamir et al 2005: 14 and 15). It is 'socially constructed through interaction' and effective leadership 'rests heavily on the framing of the experience of others' in which 'language, ritual, drama, stories, myths and symbolic construction ... play an important role' (Smircich and Morgan 1982: 258 and 262). Such insights are translated into practical lessons throughout the organization in the stories told by senior management (see for example, Denning 2004; Rhodes 2011). So, the key facilitative role of the collaborative leader in building and managing a network is framing the shared story about what we are doing and why we are doing it.

### **Conclusions: some plausible conjectures**

Political scientists have a poor track record of prediction but we can aspire to 'plausible conjectures'; that is, to making general statements which are plausible because they rest on good reasons and the reasons are good because they are inferred from relevant information (paraphrased from Boudon 1993). The relevant information underpinning my conjectures are summarised in Figure 4, which summarises the preceding sections of this paper.

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

**FIGURE 4: The Sour Law of Network Governance**

DILEMMAS	UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES	REACTION of NETWORK MEMBERS
<b>Cooperation versus competition</b>	<b>It's the mix that matters</b>	<b>'Why can't they be more like us'</b>
<b>Accountability versus efficiency</b>	<b>The problem of many hands</b>	<b>'Not me guv'</b>
<b>Control versus mutual adjustment</b>	<b>The holy grail of coordination</b>	<b>'You can't shake hands with a clenched fist'</b>
<b>Strategic direction versus flexibility</b>	<b>Disputed ownership</b>	<b>'They talk the talk but they can't walk the walk'</b>

What specific conjectures follow from the analysis in this paper? Five seem obvious.

1. Networks are not tools of central agencies to be managed to achieve central objectives. Their strength lies in independence from central agencies.
2. Central agencies can help to build and manage networks by limiting their interventions to managing the network portfolio, training collaborative leaders, and providing the technical assistance.
3. The central agency can provide strategic signposting that sets the broad boundaries for local network action to ensure networks work in the shadow of hierarchy.
4. Collaborative leadership needs diplomatic skills and the art of storytelling.
5. The goal is to develop organizational glue from information sharing, working together, integrated service delivery, and pooled resources, thus ensuring the network's future.

But networks are messy. There are no guarantees of successful results only the relentless pressure from the sour laws of network governance and the imperatives of constant nurturing. To update François de Callierès, network leaders, whether drawn from the central agency or from network members, need to stand in the other person's shoes or (if you prefer) sit where the other person sits. According to Clifford Geertz (1973: 9), cultural anthropology is about telling 'our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to'. The would-be network manager is a budding anthropologist. This strategic storyteller must understand and share other people's stories to create the glue that holds the network together.



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