

Summary

Facilitating co-creative meetings using a network model

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Why this matters

Nature thrives on intelligent networks - forests, termite mounds, the human brain. Humans do the same: we build relationships, communities, systems, and technologies like the internet.

So why not design meetings to work like networks?

Our paper explores this question in the field of complex public health challenges.

What's the opportunity?

Meetings (events, workshops, conferences) are often structured around a one-way flow of information. Participants have little opportunity to shape the agenda, content, or outcomes.

Happily, there's a growing body of design and facilitation practices that support "intelligent networks" in meetings - approaches that enable co-creation and emergent collaboration

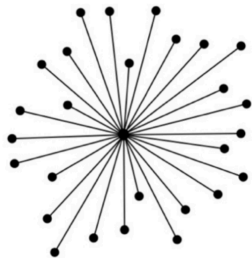
These networks are distributed. They mirror how people connect in real life - through relationships rather than hierarchies - and they provide the essential conditions for rich dialogue and collective action.

In nature, crises are not met with commands from the top. Effective responses emerge from the whole, and the same can be true in human systems.

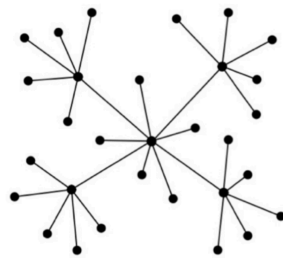
You can find a draft version of the paper [here](#) and related facilitation processes on the [resources](#) page of my website.

Three models of meeting

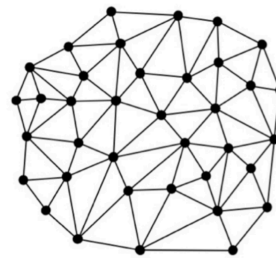
Meetings follow a structure that is either centralised (A), decentralised (B) or in some cases distributed (C).



Centralised (A)



Decentralised (B)



Distributed (C)

Centralised (A)

One person speaks, everyone else listens. Information flows in one direction. Think presentations, panels, or status updates.

Decentralised (B)

Small groups have discussions, but the process is coordinated from a central point (meeting leader). Outputs are brought back and summarised centrally.

Distributed ©

Anyone can connect with anyone, shaping the agenda, content, and outcomes as they go. Energy and attention flow where they are most needed, and ideas, insights, and actions emerge from the group — not just the top.

When to use a distributed approach

This style of meeting feels different. It can be energising, surprising, even a little messy – but that's where its power lies. Facilitating meetings using a 'network model' is ideal for:

- Cross-sector collaboration
- Complex, multi stakeholders issues
- Strengthening networks of relationship
- Building ownership of shared challenges
- Tapping into embodied intelligence

What's covered in the paper

We share our experiences of running 'Challenge Lab' workshops at the University of Suffolk using a distributed network model to address public health challenges.

We identify five key characteristics of this approach: increased agency, accountability, agility, adaptability, and alignment. We also give examples of facilitation processes such as Open Space, Full Circle, and World Café.

Finally, we outline four principles for making this approach work in multi-stakeholder settings:

- 1. Identify a common challenge**

Frame the session around a powerful, open-ended question that matters to everyone in the room.

- 2. Invite diverse viewpoints**

Bring together people with different roles, experiences, and perspectives - especially those who don't usually meet.

- 3. Interact as an intelligent network**

Use participatory processes that let people move, connect, decide, and contribute with as much freedom as possible.

- 4. Seek co-creative solutions**

Encourage real-time improvisation so ideas, solutions, and plans are built and shaped together.

Find out more

If you'd like to explore this approach to meeting design and facilitation, just get in touch to arrange a conversation.

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