

Summary: Academic Paper

Facilitating co-creative intelligent networks

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Networks in nature

Nature thrives on intelligent networks - think of forests, mycelium, termite mounds, the internet, the human brain.

Humans do the same: we build relationships, communities, and systems in a globally connected network.

So why not design meetings to work like networks?

Meetings as networks

In meetings, we often find one person speaking and everyone else listening.

It's not a very effective way to share information, and because it limits the possibilities for interaction, it limits the potential for creativity, collaboration, leadership and learning.

We've been born and bred on meetings like this ever since we first took our seat in a school classroom, and were told to face the front. But there are other ways...

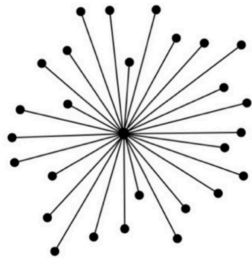
As our paper sets out to show, we aren't just limited to presentations, status reports and breakout groups. There's a whole alphabet of meeting processes that enable people to participate more fully, to connect with each other and the topic, and to achieve more together.

In short, there are facilitation processes that support the creation of intelligent, living networks in meetings - where people come together with more flexibility and intentionality, in ways that mirror how we connect, work, learn and grow in real life.

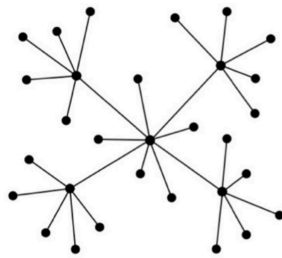
So why not design meetings to work like networks?

Three models of meeting

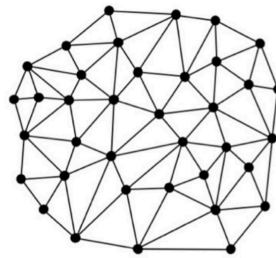
At any time, a meeting (event, gathering, workshop etc) will be structured as either Centralised (A), Decentralised (B), or Distributed (C).



Centralised (A)



Decentralised (B)



Distributed (C)

The possibilities for interaction, and therefore communication, collaboration, and co-ordination are shaped by the structure being used at any time.

Centralised (A) - One-to-many

One person speaks, everyone else listens. Information flows in one direction - it's effective but the volume of information can be high.

The downside: People often trance out, or check their phones. The energy in the room is lower than in the breaks.

Decentralised (B) - Many-to-many

Small groups have discussions in processes that are controlled from a central point (the meeting leader). This enables peer-to-peer interaction and learning.

The downside: Conversations can feel stage-managed, or disconnected from the interests of the group (the group's interests may not surface). Discussions are usually reported back in share-backs that have limited value and accuracy.

Distributed (C) - Any-to-any

Free flowing connections are enabled and people learn and contribute however they wish. Individual and collective intelligence emerges to guide the agenda, and shape outcomes. The meeting leader centre adapts their role to serve the whole.

The downside: people have to adapt to working with systems intelligence, but no major downsides if well held, and centralised and decentralised processes are used to support sense-making, alignment, and decisions.

Using all three models

As detailed above, each of these structures has advantages and limitations.

In the paper we recommend that they are best used in combination, with the intention of using distributed processes wherever possible.

The main finding in our paper is that when meetings make use of (C) distributed processes, they widen the scope and potential of what the group can achieve - often in quite surprising ways.

When to use distributed processes

These processes look and feel different. They can be a little messy at times but they have huge potential for creating surprising outcomes. That's where their power lies: it's human and the apparent messiness is people engaging with complexity and uncertainty with their highest social-emotional intelligence.

Facilitating meetings using a network model is ideal for:

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

This approach works well for larger groups (15+) and can also be applied at smaller scales - as any gathering is a network - a living system of relationships.

The critical decision on whether to incorporate distributed processes is whether emergent responses from the whole group are desired.

What's covered in the paper

We share our experiences of running *Challenge Lab* workshops at the University of Suffolk to find creative solutions to public health challenges.

We identify five key characteristics that arise from using a network model of meeting: **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 that help make a network model effective 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.

You can find the draft version of the paper [here](#) (in peer review) and some relevant facilitation processes on the [resources](#) page of my website.

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