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LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

Insights from network practitioners on managing in and after the pandemic

Networks have all had to adapt.

From shifting strategies to leadership challenges to new means of member engagement, networks and network managers have juggled a lot during the pandemic. Across regions, sectors, and issue areas, network managers have persevered to support members, keep networks afloat, and gain hard-earned wisdom and wins. Through it all, the resilience, value, and adaptability of networks has shone through.

Important lessons have emerged.

The upheaval of the pandemic became a mirror and a microscope for networks, revealing their strengths and weaknesses as well as new opportunities. Navigating an evolving landscape with competing demands required that networks embrace uncertainty, be open to change, and lean into community. Network managers have gleaned nuanced lessons from this experience, showcasing the interconnectedness and complexity of networks writ large. As the anchors for coordinating and facilitating the network, managers have worn more hats than usual to support members through this time and to help steward networks into new ways of working.

Reflecting on shared experiences helped to breed collective wisdom.

Collective Mind brought together network practitioners from around the world to share their experiences, struggles, and insights related to managing their networks during and after the pandemic to co-create guidance and solutions together. Applying a solutions-based lens to the challenges and stressors of the pandemic allowed practitioners to connect across shared experiences and inspire new, proactive ideas.

The co-creation process began in March 2021, building on community conversations from November 2020. Participants from across five continents joined in these activities to learn and lend their perspectives, brainstorm with peers, and contribute to our wider learning community. Informed by surveys and open working sessions with practitioners, this product reflects their common experiences and lessons on adapting to and managing during and after the pandemic. All of our contributors are acknowledged at the end of this document.

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REFLECTIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

for network management

Networks are devoted to service and collective good by design. The pandemic therefore became a valuable learning moment for networks, compelling them to evaluate their ways of working and reflect on how to be of most service to their field and their members. Through the co-creation process, practitioners explored how the pandemic amplified their strengths, revealed critical gaps, and created opportunities to grow, innovate, and embed new ideas into practice.

FOSTERING LEADERSHIP AT ALL LEVELS

Networks began to rethink their understanding of leadership in the pandemic, and members started thinking differently about what leadership looks like to them and who they are as leaders. The experience helped to highlight networks' fragility and interconnectedness and emphasized the need to explore and invest in new modes of leadership centered on equity, relationships, trust-building, visioning, and effective coordination and collaboration. Some people in formal network leadership roles experienced difficulty in connecting and showing support among themselves. For some, it became necessary to step back or leave the network. Networks fostered space for those who felt motivated to step up and become network weavers and leaders, working together to learn by doing. In the best circumstances, members began to emerge as leaders, lending their expertise and starting subgroups to address pandemic challenges within the network, while allowing others to step back.

EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY

Network managers felt unsure about the long-term impact of the pandemic on their networks. Many networks and their members had to go into crisis mode as their sectors became stressed by the pandemic, requiring double-duty of network managers to respond to external demands and community needs. Networks had to react to rapidly shifting priorities, changing funder strategies and funding availability, evolving network realities, and new issues in their fields. Many questioned whether social distancing, virtual engagement, and remote work would become the new normal and struggled to conceive of what it would look like to offer hybrid virtual and in-person activities. In many ways, managers felt comforted in knowing they were not alone in these questions and tried to accept and work around that which was beyond their control. By pondering how to bring the lessons gained from the pandemic forward into future network management, practitioners were already exercising the necessary flexibility and preparing to adapt.

BEING INTENTIONAL ABOUT CRAFTING ONLINE SPACES

Networks and members felt unprepared for the transition to working and living almost exclusively online. After rapidly adopting virtual tools and platforms and scrambling to onboard members and staff, networks found that they had to be more intentional about creating online spaces and the conversations in and around them. A perennial question for network managers became how to get people to pay attention when they are over-saturated and experiencing virtual fatigue, exacerbated by the stress of the pandemic. Events had to be engaging and worthwhile, and facilitating online group dynamics and spaces became a central responsibility and need. Network managers had to make space in agendas to provide more support, foster more informal, unstructured spaces, and also offer more curated, participatory activities.

REFLECTIONS AND ADAPTATIONS
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DEEPENING AND LEVERAGING THE NETWORK MINDSET

Network mindset is both a belief and a practice, centered on prioritizing and fostering the relationships between members through which action and collaboration take place. It anchors how networks operate differently than the traditional organizational model. In the pandemic, the community and culture of networks became focal points of virtual engagement and network strategy. Doubling-down on network mindset and investing time and intention to listen and foster relationships allowed networks to realign, pulse-check, and identify the way forward together to remain fit-for-purpose. This often meant network managers were curating connections, experiences, and learning environments instead of meetings. Taking a less directive approach and centering peer-to-peer collaboration as the goal of activities helped to reconstitute the spirit of networks. This approach also became mirrored in building partnerships. A relationship-driven mindset informs partnerships that are intentional and mutually beneficial.

MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY'RE AT

The personal toll and unique impacts of the pandemic on individuals have dramatically reshaped people's ability to find balance. Members feeling a lack of motivation, having limited time and bandwidth, and dealing with extra responsibilities meant that networks had to shift expectations for shared work and adapt activities and timelines. At different times, networks felt a challenging lack of emotional connectivity, as people faced lots of tasks and stress. Network managers often found it challenging to meet and accommodate everyone's needs as well as to manage up to leadership and meet expectations. At times, network leadership experienced power struggles and conflict over how to prioritize and care for individuals versus performing the work of the network. Overall, cultivating a climate and culture of respecting boundaries and showing grace and gratitude helped ease tensions around performing and perfection.

SUPPORTING THE NETWORK BY SUPPORTING NETWORK MANAGERS

Though networks operate through collective action, network managers can often struggle to maintain a balance between working on behalf of the network and facilitating member-led efforts even in the best of times. Unfortunately, managing networks in the pandemic quickly became a constant grind and many felt that the work was never-ending and ever-changing. Demands on network managers became heightened across delivering on activities, stewarding members to participate, adapting to and coordinating across new technology platforms, and developing new skills for virtual facilitation and online event production. Some of the network managers turned to the Collective Mind community for support, a space for network practitioners to connect with peers, brainstorm around network issues, and learn new skills.

These summary reflections and experiences represent practitioner input and conversations from across the co-creation process. While these insights are nuanced and valuable, they cannot be fully comprehensive of everything people experienced in the pandemic. Important contexts such as location, culture, industry, identity, and politics shape networks' experiences in diverse and unique ways. We hope that the lessons gleaned from this process capture takeaways of universal value.

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UPSIDES AND SILVER LININGS

While the pandemic challenged and stretched networks, it also revealed silver linings that helped networks to reprioritize and reaffirm their core strengths, values, and shared purpose.

COMMUNITY

Networks provided a critical source of connection and community for members and offered a space to share advice and exchange tools on coping with the pandemic, both personally and professionally. Networks and their staff rose to the occasion to find creative ways to strengthen connections between and amongst members, often through informal online gatherings and new virtual platforms for exchange. This flexibility and openness led to new ways to foster community.

ACCESS AND INCLUSION

Networks were forced to move most activities online. While internet access and digital infrastructure pose challenges worldwide, networks also saw virtual engagement increase network access for more isolated members and make activities more geographically inclusive. Some networks were able to expand their membership through online participation and more remote access. Coordinating and participating online offered more and different ways to engage, setting a precedent to reimagine convenings. Reflecting on and centering values like equity and inclusion brought about stronger, more empathetic networks.

LEARNING AND EMPATHY

Network leaders made intentional efforts to listen to and learn from members and their needs, often in deeper, more engaging ways. Slowing down and coming together in crisis allowed people to bring their whole selves to the network and show vulnerability. In response, networks strove to be flexible and adaptable to accommodate members' needs and capacity, adjusting expectations for programs and deliverables where they could. Showing gratitude for people's time and energy reaffirmed the community, and the value of the network shown through in peer exchange and resource and idea sharing as members became energized to learn with and from each other.

AUTHENTIC CONNECTION

Relationship-building fosters resilience in a network. Getting to know people as individuals, instead of just as their job titles, humanized networks and reinforced relationships, for members, leaders, and staff alike. Network managers played the critical role of network weaver, intentionally building connections based on common interests and goals. Networks that usually gather in-person and rely on the spontaneity of organic connections leaned into building virtual and remote connections. Authenticity in relationships also invited people to uphold boundaries while being open to new opportunities.

TECHNIQUES TO KEEP MEMBERS ENGAGED AND ACTIVE

SOCIAL MEDIA FEATURES

Highlighting members' successes and stories -- both personal and professional -- on social media can help build community, spark new relationships and points of connection, and be mutually beneficial to boost the profiles of the network and members.

ONE-ON-ONE CHECK-INS

More personal and small group check-ins between leadership and members outside of larger group meetings can help leaders and staff to better understand members' needs, hear from less vocal members, and inform where and how to pivot and be responsive.

ROTATING LEADERSHIP ROLES

Rotating hosting duties and informal leadership roles can be an empowering and inspiring way to refresh meetings and activities, maintain engagement, experiment with new ideas and approaches, and promote equity and inclusion.

BUDDY SYSTEM FOR NEW MEMBERS

Implementing a buddy system between new and veteran members can help new members to integrate and feel more connected, foster exchange and support between members, and break down boundaries and siloes to build mutual understanding.

VIRTUAL GALLERY OF MEMBER HIGHLIGHTS

Celebration and fun can be important for community building. A virtual gallery of personal stories or creative projects from individuals across the network is a fun way to learn more about each other and build personal rapport.

NETWORK POWER HOURS

Hosting virtual "happy hours" or networking power hours can give members opportunities to share stories and engage in a more casual setting.

MIXING UP TOOLS FOR VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

Migrating activities and members to new virtual portals and video platforms was a significant undertaking. To keep engagement fresh, networks can look to incorporate and experiment with more online tools for different kinds of collaboration and creative exchange as people become more comfortable with virtual meetings.

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More opportunities for practitioners

Join us for future learning exchanges and trainings!

Our learning community provides **practical, interactive opportunities for network practitioners** to build skills and knowledge, co-create solutions to network challenges, and engage with peers around the world. Sign up for our newsletter to hear about upcoming events, new resources, trainings, and network offerings.

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