

5 First-Year Networking Lessons

This past year we launched a regional diaspora network for the Philadelphia area. I've been learning or relearning a lot as we move forward. Here are a few challenges we have encountered.

1. Clarify Your Purpose

Defining what we are and aren't about was a task I assumed we would finish in our initial organizational stage. But it wasn't that simple. What seemed like a clear purpose statement to some of us turned out to not be so clear to others. People raised legitimate "what's-in, what's-out?" questions we hadn't even thought of. Taking the time for these discussions has been critical.

2. Balance Individual and Network Interests

Like many networks, ours includes a lot of participants who represent a particular ministry. A key motivation for joining is the hope that their organization can be served by our network. We **do** want to benefit these ministries; helping them is one of our key purposes. But the network cannot be a place where people just troll for volunteers and support, or assume they can advertise any and all projects or events. Saying "no" to solicitation has felt awkward at times because we believe networking is all about making contacts. But we recognize it is important to create a context where people will not feel they are just targets for recruitment.

3. Match Network Commitments with Leader' Availability

We have a great leadership team of five people who represent various churches and ministries. All are highly committed—and very busy. Each of us has major "day job" commitments. What time we have available for the network does not necessarily match the time when work needs to be done. This is probably a scourge of all volunteer leadership teams. We have come to realize that we need to figure out how to better utilize others participants in our network and at times downsize our expectations.

4. Challenge Observers to Become Participants

We quickly discovered that lots of people wanted to join our network as long as someone else was doing all the work. That's human nature and a reality when everyone is already overcommitted. But it can be discouraging to leaders who see collaboration at the core of networking. In identifying our expectations of those joining our network, we needed to keep the threshold low enough to welcome those who aren't sure if they want to be a part, while also making it clear that everyone's contribution is needed.

5. Balance Networking and Partnership work

We want to be a partnership-spawning network. But balancing the two can be tricky. We realized that siphoning off too much energy into projects could drain the needed resources from the network. We are learning as we go!

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