1.
Title Card

2.
Coming up in this module we'll be exploring how networks understand their challenges and opportunities by gathering data and running focus groups. We'll look at tips for presenting these findings, benchmarking, and the importance of storytelling.

3.
Stories have historically been used to bind communities and create culture - a shared understanding of values and tradition. Not always for good reasons, it has to be said. But they live in the mind for longer, and more deeply, than information alone. A good storyteller will aim to give the reader or listener the opportunity to insert themselves into that narrative, and become part of that culture. This is no different to the aims of workplace engagement, but using a different language.

Stories are good at conveying complex ideas. They connect data points, make sense of the abstract, and can hold multiple meanings.

They also appeal to a broad array of learning styles. Visual learners can hold on to the mental pictures that are created through metaphor, auditory learners will engage with the words and cadence of the speaker's voice, and kinesthetic learners will remember the emotions that are evoked.

In "Actual Minds, Possible Worlds", psychologist Jerome Bruner suggests that facts are 20 times more likely to be remembered if told as part of a story, and there's a link in your further reading if you'd like to think more about storytelling. For now we'll look at some top tips for constructing a good story, with the additional lens of how it may apply to your network.

4.
When constructing your story, it's important to know what your central message is. Can you sum it up in one sentence before you elaborate on it? "We support diversity and inclusion" is less of a compelling story than "This is how we changed the face of leadership at the highest level". In fairytale terms you might think of it as "the village battled dragons" versus "How the village reclaimed the dragon's fire".

And on that note, don't be afraid to embrace conflict, because it makes a great story. Very few compelling characters go on a journey without overcoming a lot of obstacles - it makes for a more satisfying ending. Audiences will feel for the protagonist's struggle, and see how they're being treated unfairly. For networks, this may mean giving your conflict the time it deserves, or even a face, rather than living in abstract concepts like diversity data. "Enola didn't make it on the board" does not have the narrative tension of "Here's what faced Enola as she prepared to join the board."

If you want to, there are plenty of books and talks that delve deeply into story structures from different cultures. But very simple, a beginning, middle and end are good places to start. A start should not just be background information, in fact this might be seen as too much exposition. A start should be an incitement to adventure, a challenge to the status quo. This will lead to your middle - the action, and your end - how you envision a satisfying resolution. You may also find it interesting to consider your genre. Do you focus on surprise, jokes, and asides like a comedy, or rising dramatic tension as you unfold a suspenseful climax, or sci-fi as you imagine other impossible worlds, utopia and dystopia.

"Write what you know" is often used as advice to first-time writers, but as network leaders dealing with large organisational and societal issues we can sometimes forget to restate why our work matters to us. This will have the effect, not only of making your personal story more compelling, but also narrowing the focus so that the narrative doesn't get bogged down with unnecessary detail. "Networks in many organisations have noticed an increase in retaliatory behaviour in the face of harassment complaints" for example, could become "We heard from three colleagues in sales about the experiences they had trying to make this is a fairer and happier place to work. This is what was said in their exit interviews…" and then weave data throughout the narrative instead. In terms of genre this latter statement could be called "suspense" as you've shown your hand at the start, now you're going to explore how you got there, and what happens next.

The success of your story will also depend on delivery. Whether it's through vocal acrobatics on a podcast, or regular eye contact in front of an audience, or interaction in a board meeting. If your intent is to continue representing your network beyond your leadership tenure, then observing good storytellers and practising this craft will stand you in good stead to be someone who is listened to with empathy and understanding.

5.

Focus groups are good for uncovering subjective data and stories which can build on or challenge quantitative data from diversity metrics or surveys. Because they are subjective they should not be used for decision making in isolation, but they can help you form your research story. It's very difficult to run effective and unbiased focus groups, so we'll look at some tips to help you make the most of it.

First of all, clarify your focus. What are you trying to learn, and therefore what questions can help uncover that? Also decide how this information will be used, who will see it and why. For employee networks your goal may be to uncover practices in the organisation which are seen as uninclusive, asking for examples where participants have felt excluded, and using that narrative to support data on attrition or engagement. You may be running a focus group on a new product with the aim of discovering bias that had been overlooked during the design process, in which case your session may want to walk through a practical demonstration of the idea, and share the findings with product management.

Secondly, who is in the group? It makes sense for your purpose that the group consists of your network members, but this doesn't necessarily have to be the case. You may want to contrast stories between a group of members, and a group of non-members. You should decide whether you want the focus to be targeted, or diverse, and also how power dynamics come in to play. For example, we find that employees can be less open in the presence of a manager or senior figure. You should find ways to anonymise the output of your focus group if that's required for more honest discussions. It's usually best to conduct focus groups with 5-10 people, but remember that when you invite them, there will be drop-outs. To help gain their trust and engagement early on, don't forget to say the purpose and format of the discussion as you gather your participants.

Thirdly, the moderator is crucial for an effective focus group. They should be knowledgeable about the subject without adding their own insights to the discussion. They need to be a good listener and know how to handle group dynamics to diffuse conflict, and make sure everyone is included. Moderation is what makes this form of research so difficult, so you may want to consider whether these skills are available to you before embarking on this research. Good practice is to set rules and expectations at the start of the session, including anonymity, respect and openness, no right or wrong answers, and the option to leave the conversation. Open-ended questions are best, with plenty of time given for them to be answered - being comfortable with silence will be important if you want to uncover more left-field ideas and hidden stories. You may be required to run these online, in which case it may be more difficult to observe non-verbal communication, but this would usually be a strength of focus groups, so ask people to share their videos where available.

Finally, you'll need to extract your key findings with analysis. It's useful to have someone in the session who can record findings so that the moderator is free to concentrate on group dynamics. Remember to go back your original focus - did you learn what you wanted to, or do you need more sessions? Does the new data support or challenge your quantitative data? In what format will you summarise these findings for different audiences? For example, you may want to use just one good story that came out of discussions to help the wider organisation understand the real impact of workplace discrimination. Or you might bring together all the statements into a composite that illustrates a key challenge to a stakeholder that can give support to change.

In your worksheet, plan a focus group, with particular attention to how you will resource and excel at each of these stages.

6.

Your area of focus may arise quite obviously from an incident at work, from an HR report, or something in the news. But you may also want to take a more measured approach to uncovering issues in your organisation using a congruence model. This has its roots in organisation development from Nadler and Tushman - linked in your further reading - but can be adapted to any performance issues. We've constructed this one to appeal specifically to employee networks.

While it won't tell you the solutions to your problems, it can help identify areas where the organisation isn't fitting together, and can be a starting point for planning change. The four key areas are:

Purpose - this is your vision and mission, which can be addressed either at an organisational level, or a network level, depending on what you're trying to model. To what extent do people understand and agree on the goals? Do your capabilities match your goals? Is there a sense that these are being achieved? How much difference is there between what you say your purpose is and what you do?

Inclusion - this should be familiar territory, but to clarify we're talking about how engaged people are, what opportunities they have to contribute, how good the organisation is at listening to employees and recognising talent. This is also about the reduction of bias in processes, systemic inclusion, and the social impact of your product or service.

People - of course an employee network will be thinking about diversity in this key area, but it's also about relationships, the broader network of power, influence, and communication across the organisation, and their attitudes to the other key areas.

Reward - does your organisation recognise and reward efforts which align to your purpose. Do they walk the talk of their inclusion statements, and is it easy for talent to be fairly compensated and promoted. Are “good” ideas receiving investment? Are there behaviours which run counter to this?

Once you have reflected on each of these areas (policy, systemic practice, behaviours, and outcomes), it’s time to compare them to each other and identify areas of fit, and incongruence. As an example, networks may find that leadership are consistently rewarded without demonstrating good practice or hitting their diversity targets. In this instance the purpose may be clearly stated, but it doesn’t match the rewards practice.

You may see that people are asked to accept work which is deemed “urgent” by key stakeholders, and told it’s about fostering a sense of collaborative teamwork, but actually runs counter to inclusive practices by demanding overtime and physical presence.

Fill this out for yourself in your worksheets, and see whether any area in particular highlights a need for further research.

7.
Although there may be a lot of awards and power lists out there, at Radius, we often find that in reality diversity and inclusion is a non-competitive environment. Networks from across industries find tremendous value in socialising, sharing best practice, and brainstorming challenges. So an essential component of your research kit should be the attention you give to external networking.

In this example, members from LGBT+ networks across the tech industry gathered for a “hack for good” event. Through brainstorming practical solutions to address social challenges as an industry, individual members were able to report back to their networks about what is trending in other organisations. Not only does this offer some quick research into employee network activities that can make a difference, it potentially offers competitor research and innovation for the product and research teams. Encouraging members to write quick reports about their learning and outcomes from networking events gets them in the habit of viewing them as more than socialising. Obviously you don’t want this to be seen as extra work, so think about how you can make this a regular conversational debrief, or create an online space for them to add to as they are able.

Spending time with other networks can naturally lead to comparisons, but be mindful that you may not be working under the same conditions or to the same targets. To take a more measured and research-based approach, you might consider benchmarking.

8.
To benchmark objectively, you’ll want to be precise about the issue or process you are comparing, on a team or organisational basis. If you decide to benchmark, it’s also a good idea to do this on a regular basis and consider it a reflection of continual improvement, not an award ranking. In fact it’s very useful for stakeholders to see this like a metaphorical progress bar. People are increasingly transactional, expecting immediate output from their investment. Showing continual progress is a good way to ease that pressure.

First of all, you need to define your scope. What area do you want to compare, and why? Make sure you're choosing something that will make significant impact for you, not what you're already best at. This is why taking ego out of the equation, which can be flattered by rankings and achievements, is so important.

Secondly, who are you going to compare yourself to? Your subjects may be other networks within your organisation, which can be very useful for seeing how you operate within your organisational culture, or differ by location. They may be similar, but external networks in your industry, which is helpful for seeing societal trends. They may be unrelated networks who you feel exemplify best practice and are worth emulating. Each scenario offers something helpful whether they are experts or not.

As you consider what indicators you want to know more about, such as what roles networks feel are important, or to what extent they are resourced, remember that you should only ask what you are also willing to share. In this way you can make the benchmarking broadly available and useful to your partners. Questionnaires are the most typical form for data gathering, and while open-ended questions produce interesting results, you will benchmark more easily if these also contain quantitative values. Ensure your data is gathered securely, and with minimal bias. For this reason you may want to use an external partner for larger projects, although there is still use in conducting small-scale and highly focused benchmarking on your own terms.

Finally, once you have identified behaviours that you want to adopt, incorporate this into your action plan. Remember benchmarking is not about achievement level, it is a research tool to help you make continuous progress. You may also use this to identify key partners to collaborate with, either as more advanced mentors, or as networks who are in a similar position and want to progress together.

9.

You might also consider rating yourself against the expectations of your members, or wider organisation. In this sense you could think of your network as a service provider, and use models which assess your service quality. RATER is an example of this as detailed in the book Delivering Quality Service, which uses a gap analysis across the five areas of reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness.

These are listed in your worksheet, where you can reflect on your desired future state, your current position, and the actions you want to take as a result.

For reliability, you might assess how resilient your network is. How often do you communicate? Are your committee roles all filled and active? Do you offer your members what is promised, or what they expect?

For assurance, do you have the skills, experience, and resources to properly execute your strategy? Do key stakeholders trust in your ability and impact? Does your network offer a safe and supportive environment?

Tangibles relates to proven impact. How many examples of practical outputs do you have? Are they the measurements you expected, or did they provide other learnings? Are your communications around this up to date and accurate?

Empathy is obviously an important aspect for network leadership and good community-building, but how are all your relationships? Does conflict still play a part with other stakeholders? Do people genuinely care about your network, or is it just seen as best practice.

And how responsive are you? Do you take feedback on board and create actions as a result? Are these actions then visible so people can understand the value of offering feedback? Are you easy to talk to as a network if you're not a member?

If you discover room for improvement when you conduct this exercise, think about how you can test progress in future and show the relevance of asking your target audience for this input. If this is your first time asking for feedback about your network, you may want to start small with a test audience, before expanding your sample size, so that you can refine your questions for better quality feedback.

10.

A library space, whether physical, online, or metaphorical is a good way to think about all the research you're gathering. It shouldn't be stuck in an email or anyone's head, but shared as broadly as possible. The more you are able to turn this into a range of accessible content the more useful it will be, from bite-size digests of reports, to fully realised and illustrated personal stories. When all networks can contribute to and access this library it exposes intersectional issues and opportunities for collaboration. It also helps prevent networks from doubling-up on research activities, or offering conflicting messages.

An online space is the most useful in terms of access, but don't underestimate the impact of a physical space too. Networks often use notice boards or digital displays to tell employees about upcoming events, which can give the impression that this is all networks do. You may be sharing some great insights at your events, but not everybody will attend. Sharing your research directly and publicly in a bite-size format can be a good way to help potential allies understand more of the network's background.

Think about how libraries also provoke individual thought and criticism, not training. How can you present research in a way that engages hearts, minds and experimentation, and not come across as a published policy or homogenous vision.

11.

Remember in the last session we talked about finding your activation point? This is a reminder that whatever you uncover in your research will need to be tailored to your target audience. In one way this seems like more work, but actually this can mean using just one really good piece of data and retelling it in many ways - like a content marketing campaign.

As an example, a focus group run by a women's network at an engineering company found that pregnant women had been working in overalls designed for men, because they didn't have any maternity-wear. This was uncomfortable and inhibited their work, but had never been raised by an individual before. Initially this was simply presented as a request to HR, but it was also used more widely to demonstrate how networks can uncover hidden biases that might lead to exclusion. Once the issue had been resolved and maternity-wear provided, it was then used as a success case to show how recruitment wanted to encourage more women into engineering, and led to a further examination of parental leave policy.

In another example a social mobility network dedicated time to reading the latest reports on what works in inclusion efforts. They realised that compulsory training , such as unconscious bias, does not have the effect it intends, and can in fact harm progress on inclusion. While this would be an issue for the D&I team, they wanted to first of all share it with the other networks. This led to conversations that highlighted, while they agreed resources should be put into positive actions, they didn't want to shut a programme down without having something to replace it with, as this could be misconstrued as a backwards step. Together they were able to strongly suggest that getting involved with network activities and voluntary learning would be more impactful than compulsory training. By presenting this not as a negative report, but a positive opportunity, they were able to better target their audience of senior stakeholders.

A single piece of research can have a long life-span when you consider the different audiences it can serve.

While conducting research you may discover that an issue becomes all-consuming and leaves little room for anything else in your network, and that's when you may consider the benefits of a spin-off network. We'll look more closely at that in the next session.

Video Interviews Transcript

Names	Commentary	
	CH	So, do you ever spend time researching issues that you personally feel are important for you and the business? And, if you do, how would you advise others to kind of turn that into a story that could then be shared with colleagues?
	SC	All the time (laughs). I'm reading things all the time and actually my, kind of, the co-founders of the network as well, we're constantly on WhatsApp sending each other things and things like that so one of the key things that we wanted to make sure we did when we launched this network is make sure that … this is something that we did take away from the course … was that it's so key to keep momentum up and also communication as well. So … it's so, so important obviously to have the social events and to have that space for people to come along but also, in terms of actually educating people and encouraging self-education as well, I think it's such a key thing to do and I also think, within the last year, we're actually in a very, very good place for that because I feel with people not having to commute, with some of the things that have happened this year as well, like Black Lives Matter, people are actually starting to be a little bit more self-aware and I think they actually are, kind of, really keen to educate themselves. I've certainly seen a shift in a lot of people that I know that really are kind of making that conscious effort to understand more. So one of the ideas that we came up was, because we do read so much content and one … under the education pillar for the network, we want to make sure that Yes, we're sharing internal things that we're doing but

also we’re keeping people up to date with things that are happening externally. So we have created like a post that we do called “The Bi-Weekly”. So we send that out every two weeks and we post it on our Yammer page which is kind like, it’s almost like an internal, I suppose, Facebook/social media kind of sharing page within the organisation. And then we send out an announcement that goes to all colleagues on email. And, within that, everybody from the network – we kind of do it on a rotating basis – and they share some kind of content that they’ve either read – it could be a book; it could be an article; it could be a podcast that they’ve listened to; a film that they’ve watched; sometimes we share maybe kind of inspirational people to follow on social media or charities to follow as well because obviously you get a lot of information through that kind of portal and channel. And that’s actually had really, really good response so we’re kind of thinking about ways that we can measure that at the moment. We’re kind of … without kind of creating a bit of a virtual book-club, we want to kind of get feedback from people but we have had people that – from all different areas of the organisation – that have contacted people from the network to say You know, I actually read that and it was really, really interesting so that’s kind of one of the things that we’ve been doing.

And then the other thing that we’ve been doing, which was a piece of work that we did alongside Balance, the women’s network, we created an inclusivity library. So what we did was we all got together and we’ve kind of created … almost like a live document that we have stored on one of the kind of the streams that we’ve got and, within that library, we’ve got content that covers lots of different areas of inclusivity so we’ve got stuff specific around disability, BLM, we’ve got things around LGBT, gender issues … and that’s kind of something that’s a bit of a work in progress but we shared that to … to the rest of the business and we encourage people to add to that as well as and when they’ve kind of watched or read or heard anything. So, what we kind of liked about that again is that we’re very, very keen to encourage self-learning and that’s actually again tied into the wider business strategy as well which is what we’re trying to kind of move towards in terms of our learning and development is that we’re trying to encourage people to kind of … it’s more about self-learning and self-educating and I guess, for us, it’s little bitesize bits of information people can access as and when they want to.

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KS So what we did in our network is we started to create greater linkages with the academic world. So we worked with two independent universities to do independent research for us to help us understand the As Is and therefore we could, when we were evaluating success or looking at success measures, we could look at what independents had told us in this base too as well as putting in the best practices to see if they were making traction in those areas that we’d asked them to do the research.

CH That's really interesting. So that research that the academics were doing, what was that targeted at … similar public bodies or the kind of wider community?

KS No, the wider community. So, for example, one of the researchers … well, actually it was both. One was an independent assessment on how well we're working as an organisation but also what's happening across the Civil Service – that was one piece. The second piece was How do we attract more talent in women from different socio-economic groups? Specifically those on the lower socio-economic groups. Now that was research that we needed academics to do for us because of the outreach being so big and so diverse that the Home Office could never had done that.

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KB … because I'm constantly researching it. It's a part of who I am. I'm on Instagram; I'm watching the news; I'm like consuming content all the time on these issues … and, sort of, I now have the tools to be able to take that in a really efficient way back to the business, not just Oh I read this article; it's interesting. I read this article; did you know that X, Y and Z is going to impact our sales this year or the direction we should be going with video, things like that. So, you know, I just feel like I'm constantly armed with information that I can use when having, you know, not just, not just in D&I conversations, in business decision making conversations, I sort of have a really strong narrative that I'm able to use. A really … yeah, just a really … I have strong straplines that I can bring out every day and that's because … yeah … I spend my life researching these topics (laughs).