

1.

Title card

2.

Coming up, we'll see how actively listening to member needs can transform the identity and purpose of our networks. How in turn that may lead to spin-offs with more refined strategies or umbrella groups with a broader reach. We'll also reflect on the importance of acknowledging multiple identities within your network, and the different roles that may open up.

3.

Listening effectively is an active process requiring mental energy and time. This diagram from Kwai-Gamble and Gamble, whose works are linked to in your further reading, shows a progression in actions and energy expenditure. Not only can this be applied to personal connections, but we can see this as a basis for listening to your network member needs. You may do this by setting up a focus group, but most networks now have continuous conversations through online communication platforms such as Slack or Teams, so we'll use that example.

In the initial hearing stage, you have only to read or hear the conversations to say you have engaged with them, and requires no further action.

The next stage involves understanding, and to make this more active means asking clarifying questions around challenging statements, demystifying assumptions, and removing jargon.

Following that is the ability to retain what you've heard. This means not only engaging with the conversation in the moment, but referring to it again in the future so that you don't waste energy having the same conversations repeatedly. It also means you demonstrate your listening by showing you've retained what's been said.

With another stage comes more action, analysing and evaluating content so that you can prioritise issues and be critical about truth and intent. This usually means listening to multiple perspectives and doing your own research and thinking.

When you're ready to make the most of active listening, it's time to commit to a strategy for your member needs. This may mean energy expenditure in terms of the projects you undertake as a result, but also in the empathy required to demonstrate the range of what you've heard from individuals as well as the broad membership.

Opening up your strategy to items that emerge from active listening is a great way to show the value of your network, but as this becomes more common practice, there will need to be additional scrutiny on which requests are a priority, so that the active team or committee don't get overwhelmed.

Different themes on a digital chat platform will often manifest as separate threaded conversations, rather than one long stream of consciousness, which is useful for realising when an issue reaches critical mass, and may need to spin off into another community or network.

4.

In this example, a mid-size organisation in the retail sector had a small number of networks, but one of them housed a larger number of communities. These were not networks in their own right: lacking individual sponsors, budgets and committees, but they did provide a safe space for

conversation, and a platform for issues to be raised to their representatives at the network level.

The ethnicity and cultural background network was begun primarily to address ethnic diversity among the workforce, but had kept their branding open to attract a broader membership. As this grew, grassroots conversations would take more focus in areas like social mobility. While many members saw the issue of cultural and economic background as inextricably linked, they didn't want it to be seen solely as an ethnicity issue, and so created a spin-off group to focus on the key messaging and member recruitment for activities relating specifically to social mobility.

Intersectional issues and opportunities will often come to light the more we engage in open conversation, and in this case members decided that as a group who were particularly underrepresented in the organisation, they needed peer support from other black women. This was used to improve the focus of the main network by challenging them to avoid a single narrative about who their members are, and the challenges they face.

Although this organisation didn't have a separate belief network at the time, they did create a community for Jewish members. The members felt it sat best under this network anyway as within it were a mix of religious and cultural heritage Jewish people, which could not simply be described as belief.

From providing a more focused approach to tackling challenges, to acknowledging intersectional needs, to being sensitive to the network brand, there are many benefits to defining spin-off communities within your own network.

5.

Sometimes a community will reach critical mass, and the best option will be to found a spin-off network. This may mean an entirely new network in its own right, or one that is still closely associated with its parent or umbrella network. The relationship may turn into more of a mentoring setup, rather than a manager. Either way, they will have their own strategy and leadership team, much as the original network did when they first founded.

In this example from a technology company a disability network had originally represented physical disabilities, workplace adjustment issues, and neurodiversity. The intent was to focus on empowering employees to do their best work and remove obstacles. While the members shared the same values, they found that they had different challenges in communicating their needs, and were at different stages regarding legislation and policy. In their organisation they found that neurodiverse members who had not identified as disabled vastly outnumbered those members who did identify as disabled. They initially considered changing the branding of the network to reflect that, but finally decided to fully embrace a new network approach. The leaders of both networks reported that they had more time to focus on the conversations that were important to them, and were achieving more as a result. Sometimes the case for a spin-off network is not so much about how closely you are identified, or what values and vision you share, but how it affects the execution of your strategy.

This is obviously not as simple as creating a spin-off community, where you can just launch a new chat thread. It requires a proper restructuring of governance and resources including leadership time, so must be done with the buy-in of your D&I lead and sponsor. Remember that to be persuasive you should devote time to explaining the "why" of your situation, and not go straight to the "what", otherwise it may be seen as an unnecessary increase in budget-drain and bureaucracy.

6.

Umbrella networks, which are a more formalised version of the spin-offs, involves an over-arching network with individual networks, communities, and groups beneath it, each with their own business case and strategy. We see this most often with Interfaith Networks, where the mission is to provide a safe and inclusive work environment for everyone, whether they have a faith or none. Typical activities would include creating a common quiet room for prayer or meditation, monitoring diversity by belief or cultural background, and cross-faith panels to share common experiences. It represents the collaborative efforts of the networks underneath it, and acts as a strategic point between the networks and HR or the organisation. The umbrella network may be a network in its own right, but often acts instead as a consultative forum to reach agreement on common communications, rather than set up as the other networks would be, with chairs, events managers, a strategy, and so on.

In this example from the charity sector, an interfaith network has been set up like a forum, with Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Hindu networks sitting underneath it. They each operate as a normal network would with their own leadership team and strategic priorities like celebration days and inclusion campaigns. The Interfaith network itself brings together representatives from the networks. In this instance they decide to use people other than chairs, as they are always stretched for time to devote to other activities, and instead have a different ambassador. They are joined on the Interfaith network by forum members who are not part of the belief networks. These include allies and people of no faith like atheists and humanists. It also included a Buddhist, who was not represented by a separate network. This is a good way to include a broader perspective into your network, by making sure different voices have representation. The main role of this particular group was to ensure that any activities requiring budget were fairly dispersed and inclusive of the whole organisation, and the curation of Interfaith week. Their output was often just to encourage more collaboration between the networks, and to elevate key messages to HR and Executive level. The Interfaith network here had an executive sponsor, so this made sense as a key responsibility, whereas the individual faith networks had Champions, who were still senior in the charity, but usually not at board level.

7.

To look at the theme of multi-identity networks from another angle, this is a reminder that even though many of your networks may be based around a single characteristic consideration, your members have multiple concerns, experiences and perhaps identities depending on their situation or audience. This is intersectionality and authenticity in practice - the idea that there is no single narrative for a group of people, and this is often overlooked in research and policy. Even if you don't create official umbrella or spin-off networks and communities, you'll still have multiple identities to accommodate.

The first tip then is to publicly acknowledge intersectional identities, where you can by using your network communications as an example.

Secondly, with your active listening hat on, look specifically for intersecting oppressions within your network. This may require some guided conversation with trusted people, especially if your network leadership is not as diverse as it could be.

Following that exercise, you'll need to make sure you elevate the relevant voices - this is especially worth thinking about in relation to your leadership team succession plans.

If you are able to, think about how you can make sure that data gathered on behalf of your

network doesn't obscure deeper issues for your members with intersectional oppressions. For example, what story is told about gender pay-gap reporting within your organisation, versus what we know to be the case on average when also comparing to ethnicity, parental status, or immigration status.

You will need to think broadly and be open minded about the kinds of issues you address as a network. Some things may not seem instantly related, such as parental rights policy, or environmental issues. But the more you discuss this with your network, and do your own research, you'll likely find some unique challenge that affects your membership. When organisations were dealing with the pandemic for example, networks found that certain identities had become disproportionately affected even though everyone was offered the same support - or perhaps, because everyone was offered the same support.

The final tip is to bring it back to the common good. Resistance to intersectional approaches often comes from people who don't understand that solving for intersectional oppression makes systemic change that benefits everyone, not just the niche group. So think about how you can add to your network's narrative by showing the positive impact that this work brings.

8.

Not all network groups or communities are intended to last long term. Some networks decide to set up project-based communities or task forces. These could exist solely within your existing network, using members that usually take supporting roles, or it could be a collaboration between multiple networks. It ensures diverse input and a more agile approach to project management for activities that have a clear set of short-term goals.

As an example, a law firm wanted to examine its flexible working policies from a grassroots perspective, and so set up a Agile Working Network with the clear aim of transforming HR policy based on real employee needs. The network consisted of members across the company, methodically researching competitors and the wishes of current employees. Once the network had reached a proposal for new flexible practices, they tested it out within their network, paying special attention to the impact of family situations, access needs, and type of job. Following the test they moderated feedback sessions with HR and the senior team, leading to a very fast adoption of new flexible work policies, based on how they were already being trialled in the company. The accountability of its full implementation was handed off to HR, and the network began working with the internal comms team to explore how it would become the cultural norm. A year after they began, it was decided that a more agile approach had been successfully adopted and normalised, so they disbanded the network.

This approach can be great for organisations that are time-poor, and more inclined to focus on problem solving and systemic change, than community building for safe spaces. They sometimes have sponsors attached to them like other networks, although they tend to be whoever in the company is closest to the issue being addressed, rather than at board level. This can be useful for engaging the difficult middle-manager layer.

9.

The 21st century workforce is increasingly comprised of freelancers, gig workers, and volunteers; a group which are often left out of network activities due to the time demands and organisational closeness required to affect strategy. But they can't be ignored as part of your membership. A third of the US workforce for example is estimated to include freelancers, half of which now consider it a long-term situation, rather than temporary. The trend of highly skilled gig

workers is increasing among younger workers, the demographic who is also most likely to express interest in joining an employee network. It's also highly composed of people who have care duties and need flexibility. The agile, networked approach to employment should not really be at odds with the way you operate as a network - but it does require a cultural shift in how we involve members.

Volunteer workers, as we might see in charities, sit nicely in the community groups where they can feel engaged with the broader workforce, and contribute their own perspective, without getting too involved in strategy. But temporary or freelance workers are often brought in to solve specific problems, change management, or for innovation, and might have some skills that you need for a project.

You'll find more about the rise of the on-demand workforce in your further reading. Next time we'll be doing more "good" work, by looking at ideas and frameworks which help networks to balance their business and ethical cases.

### Interviews Video Transcript

Names	Commentary
CH	So you mentioned earlier around this kind of concept of the umbrella network...
SC	Yes.
CH	...could you just tell me a little bit more around how that works?
SC	Yeah, absolutely. So, as I say, it was my colleague that came on the Radius course and we got together after I had completed it and we were discussing it. We basically were thinking about how we can, yes, having these employee network groups is fantastic. However, we wanna make sure that we are doing more to align ourselves to the business strategy and get the buy in from the business and the wider leadership team.
SC	So, what we decided to create was an umbrella basically, so that kind of overlooks all of the ERGs, which we're calling the "Action for Inclusion Group" and how we kind of envisioned this working. To start off with is the leaders from each network will all come together once a month and actually discuss everything that we're doing within each different network, so we can look at how we can maybe work together on some intersectionality pieces but also I think it's important as well for us to still kind of be discussing any issues that anyone's faced within the organisation, from any area; not just kind of one.
SC	So, it's about kind of making sure that we're not kind of being siloed as I suppose because actually, you know, in terms of kind of like diversity of thought, it might be that something that is affecting balance actually ties

into LGBT or, you know, any of the other networks that we have or hoping that we can kind of create moving forward. So, we want to kind of come together and meet and take away the core things that we get from each network. So, whether it be challenges or events that are coming up where we could work together, or particular practices or policies that we've noticed, so that we can kind of take that and create business cases and just take it to, I guess, another level.

SC So, taking away from the maybe the social aspects and the safe spaces but also then taking it into a more kind of strategic level. So for example, talking about earlier working on the policies and the practices, that will be something that the AIG specifically work on. So, we'll have discussions with our networks and all kind of bring, I suppose, our findings from the different networks together so that we're kind of getting it from all areas and not just looking at it kind of on like a bit of a streamlined approach, if that makes sense.

CH Okay. And do you have any umbrella networks? So for example, at some organisations, they'll have Inclusion at Lloyd's Bank and then you'll sit within that, or do you have any sub-networks within your own network?

MS So we generally sit at the top of the tree, so we're the National Race Network. We cover the whole department. We've got representatives on the Board from different parts of the directorates. But then within that, we've supported the establishment of a number of networks within those directorates.

CH Mmm, mmm.

MS So, we've got the Policy Group, the Finance Group, Key People and Capability which is HR, you know, already have some networks. We're working with colleagues in digital, to set up their network. So, where there is a, you know, network presence, we've supported them and engaged them. Where there isn't, we're working with them to help establish them. I think, you know, that's that, and we're working very closely with colleagues in Wales, in Scotland, to establish now national networks within Wales and Scotland and I think that's a key priority for us, but we'll be sitting at the top and they'll generally come under us.

MS And then if we're going in the opposite direction across the Civil Service wide, DWP is a key partner in the Civil Service Race Forum, which is representatives from the various staff networks across the Civil Service and Government departments and we're a key partner in that. We help deliver Black History Month Conference on first (1<sup>st</sup>) of October and, you know, we're able to be, not just be a supporter, but be part of the working group that put that conference together.

CH Okay. So, from my understanding then, in terms of those smaller networks that you've just mentioned – so digital, policy, finance – is the

assumption that your overall vision principals and kind of ethos – what you exist for – propagates down to them as they're starting, kind of fuse and then they then form their own network tailored to their business area?

MS

Yeah. So, the idea is that we stay on top and within our umbrella, we set these networks up. So for example, in Wales, we have lots of issues around race equality, lots of racism and lots of examples of bullying and harassment. That includes Employment Tribunal cases which DWP staff have taken the Department to Court on and they have been quite publicised in the media over the last twelve (12) months. So actually, it's working with those individuals to establish the network, but then making sure that at least one of them is on our Board, so that we've got that connection – a two way process of flowing information between the two networks. So, yeah, they'll very much be autonomous in the sense of they'll all, they'll determine their own agenda, they'll determine what they want to work on, who they want to work with and who they want to engage. But, you know, and they'll have their own distinct identity, but they'll be very much, you know, part of the National Race Network. Same in Scotland. Same in some of the other parts of the Department. You're starting to see regional networks pop up and our ambition is try to have them under our umbrella.