The Structural Characteristics of a Modern, Effective Network

To take the mystery out of network-building, we've condensed decades of research and experience working with thousands of leaders into three key components.

Think ODD: Open, Diverse, and Deep

An effective professional network has an **ODD structure**: it's Open, Diverse, and Deep. For decades, network researchers have mapped the connections between people and groups within organizations. They've found that a person's network characteristics can impact how they achieve work goals and progress in their careers.

This kind of network is also odd because it is uncommon! An ODD structure is unlikely to develop naturally. Creating it requires awareness and intentional effort.

Let's take a closer look.

Open

The value of your network isn't just based on who you know—but also by who those people know. Openness is the key way to think about this: how many people in your network **do not** know each other?

If you have an open network, few people in your network know each other. You are the link that connects most of them.

The opposite structure is a closed network

A closed network means most people in your network also know each other. A network is even more closed if those people have few connections outside of each other.

The openness of your network is the number one factor for an effective professional network.[1] This is because the more open your network, the more unique inputs you have. Everyone in your network is hearing different news at different times. You have access to a range of ideas and information, rather than recycling ideas or reinforcing similar thinking. You hear about a wide variety of opportunities or projects, and you can give or receive recommendations, referrals, and introductions. Your network openness enhances innovation and adaptability for both you and your team, increases your influence, and nurtures career mobility over time.
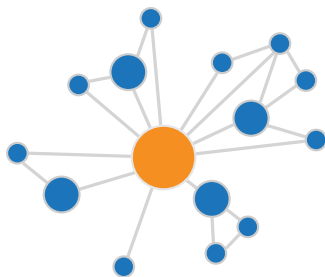
OPEN Network Structure
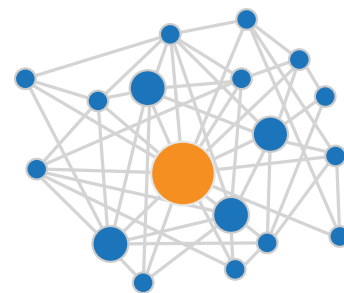
CLOSED Network Structure

What's the problem with a closed network?

At times, nothing! In fact, networks often oscillate between open and closed.[2] A closed network creates a sense of camaraderie and bonding, which is great for a small team that is crunching on a critical project and needs everyone in sync or when you are just starting out and need to get to know other people and they need to get to know you (i.e., when you are beginning to build your reputation). The pros become cons if your network stays closed for months, even years. Over time, the interwoven relationships of your connections restrict the flow of external information and opportunities. Your network falls into group think, with everyone agreeing to the same ideas and no influx of new perspectives. As a result, you will be slower to adapt, less influential, and miss out on new or different career opportunities.

> Bring people with positive energy into your inner circle. If those around you are enthusiastic, authentic, and generous, you will be, too.
>
> — *Rob Cross and Robert Thomas*
>   *A Smarter Way to Network*

Striving for openness

If your network has been closed for more than 6 months, it's a good idea to open up—even connecting with just one person who doesn't know anyone else in your network will generate benefits. Plus, if you are in a role or organization in which closed groups are the norm and generally create efficiency, you add unique value by having a more open network than your peers.[3] Overall, having an open network can bring greater innovation, collaboration, and growth opportunities, so don't be afraid to reach out and engage.

Diverse

The value of your network grows when people in your network are different from you and different from each other. The greater the variation, the more diverse your network.

In terms of your professional network, think of diversity in five categories.[4]

Vertical
Relationships up and down the hierarchy and formal power structure of the organization.

Horizontal
Relationships that cross-team and functional boundaries. This is the most important boundary—and often overlooked and under appreciated.

Stakeholder
Relationships with customers, vendors, and external partners, or with thought leaders or colleagues outside your organization.

Demographic
Relationships with people who look different or have a different background or identity than you (age, gender, sexuality, race, nationality, etc.).

Geographic
Relationships across regions and localities or with people who do not physically work in the same space.

As a practical matter, these categories are general adjectives that might describe someone, for example:

- Senior art director for a key product line. 40-something. Black female. Based in Chicago.

- Team leader in R&D. Part of project X. New employee. 29 years old, Korean-American.

- Key client contact. EMEA business development manager. German male.

When your network reflects all five categories, you have access to a diversity of knowledge, opinions, and experiences. This diversity provides you with perspectives and insights you would not gain on your own, or by working with only people who are similar to you. You will be more likely to be challenged, creating the collision of knowledge that is needed for innovation and problem-solving (as well as for your own professional development).

Even if your network is open, a lack of diversity is a liability. For example, if you are a white male engineer of a certain age who solves problems with other white male engineers of the same age, you may see short-term progress, but over time you are less effective and less innovative. In contrast, if you rely on engineers with different backgrounds and expertise and can bridge the functional boundary between engineering and marketing, you can learn quickly what others need, translate information, and broker solutions. These interactions will lead to new ideas and stronger outcomes. The resulting quality of work adds to your value, builds your reputation, and leads to more opportunities and experiences.[5,6]

The challenge to having a diverse network is that we are naturally drawn to people "like us."[7] It's a built-in human response. It's easier to connect with others through our similarities than it is to build relationships across boundaries of difference. The probability of having a homogeneous network is high unless you intentionally build diversity into your networking habits and engage others in ways that appreciate differences

Deep

Finally, the value of your network is solidified when you receive help and support when you really need it—which requires a deep network. If you have invested in deep relationships, not just superficial connections, you can readily ask questions, reach out, or make a request. Deep relationships also provide the feedback, guidance, and support needed for solving tough problems, making big decisions, and planning your next steps.

If the majority of your relationships are shallow, then your network is likely being underutilized. If you don't know your connections well, then you may not know their value and what they can contribute to you, your team, and your organization.

What makes a deep relationship?

According to Mark Granovetter, one of the founders of network science, deep relationships are defined by three factors:[8]

Reciprocity

Deep relationships are not one-sided; they involve mutually beneficial give-and-take. Both parties help each other, in different ways and at different times.

Trust

Deep relationships require trust, but it's a specific type of trust that is needed for deep professional relationships. It's not about emotional closeness, or whether you'd let the person babysit your kids, or that you are likely to be non-work friends. That's not what is needed. What is needed is "perceived benevolence." This is a form of trust that comes down to whether or not you believe the other person has your best interest in mind.

Frequency and/or Intensity

Deep relationships are formed by spending time together. This may be frequent contact over a sustained period of time (for example, working on the same team for a year), or intense interaction (responding to a crisis over a month). In both cases, people have opportunities to help each other and show you care about what is in each other's interest—the other two factors.

Deep relationships have a unique value: they never go away.

They may go dormant, even for years, but they can easily be resumed. When you have a deep relationship, you pick back up with a level of trust and reciprocity that is understood. In one study, individuals were asked to call connections they haven't spoken to in 5, 10, or 15 years, and ask them for advice on their current work situations.[9] Not only did the old connections answer the call, but they provided high-value perspectives and ideas. Why? Because of the deep relationship that had been built earlier in their careers.

This is not to say all your ties need to be deep! That would be exhausting and, in fact, counterproductive. Shallow ties will provide novel and unique information when they add openness and diversity to your network. These weaker ties, or lower-stakes relationships, are great for recommendations and referrals, including job opportunities, and also contribute to a sense of well-being. Plus, the time involved in maintaining a very deep network may be restricting you from connecting with new, strategic relationships.

How much time does it actually take to develop a deep relationship?

Network scientists have actually looked at this. Usually, building depth is pretty time-consuming work, on average, research finds it takes:

50 Hours to go **from acquaintance** to **casual friend**

40 More hours to go **from casual friend** to **real friend**

110 More hours to go **from real friend** to **close friend**

So usually, if you want to move someone from acquaintance to a close friend, it takes about 200+ total hours.[10] That is a lot of time!
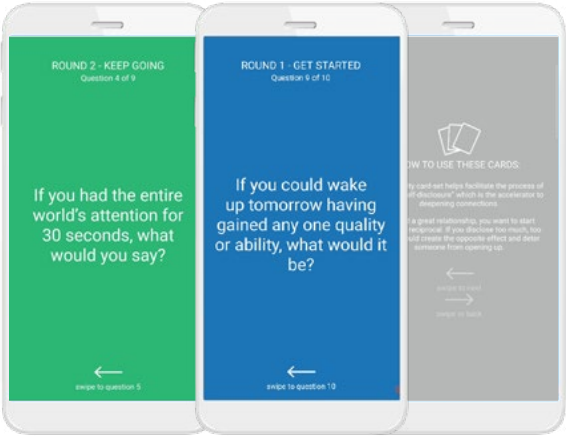
But there's a shortcut you can take

Arthur Aron and colleagues developed a simple set of questions, called the "Fast Friends Protocol", that has been proven to shorten the time it takes for people to have a meaningful dialogue and build a strong relationship.[11] It uses the process of paced mutual self-disclosure to encourage each person to first share easy personal details, then go deeper with every question. Eventually the questions become not only about each person, but about the relationship. It's a fun way to connect to someone and really get to know them. Want to give it a try? We developed an app to make it easy.

Download the free
**Leader Network Diagnostic
Question Card App**
Use PIN# - 1337
This activity card set helps facilitate the process of 'mutual self-disclosure' which is the accelerator to deepening connections.

Download on the **App Store**

GET IN ON **Google Play**

What does all of this mean for you?

Most people do not have a network that is naturally Open, Diverse, and Deep. One recent study found that only 4% of trainees who were about to begin a network development program had all three characteristics of an ODD network.[12] This kind of network takes awareness that paves the way for intentional investment in your network development (see our Ebook "Beliefs and Blind Spots Blocking Your Networks' Success"). Thinking about your network as having a structure – open or closed, diverse or similar, deep or shallow—is one way to understand how well your network is working for you.

Network Self-Assessment

Take a moment to self-assess the openness, diversity, and depth of your current network using the visual network scale below or visit networkleader.com to learn how you can take a deeper dive assessment of the effectiveness of your professional network.

Think about 8 to 15 people who are important to you in your professional network and with whom you've had a conversation with in the last 6 months. They can be people who give you information and resources, help you solve complex problems at work, or provide you with developmental advice or personal support.

1. **Openness - To what extent do your contacts know each other?** Remember, if most of your contacts know each other then your network is closed, whereas if most of your contacts do not know each other your network is open.

Open ———————————————————————————— Closed
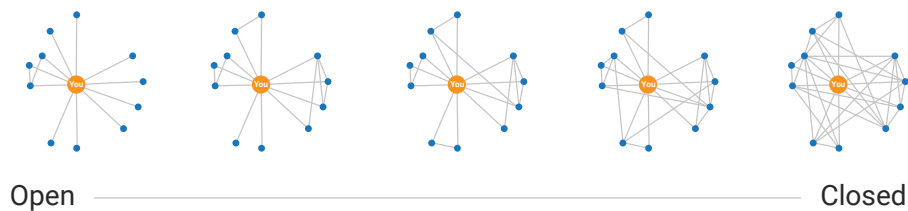
2. **Diversity - Next consider whether the people you are connected to are similar to one another (and to you), or if they are more diverse.** Think about whether they are inside your team or department, work at a different location, are at the same or a different level in your organization's hierarchy.

Diverse ———————————————————————————— Similar
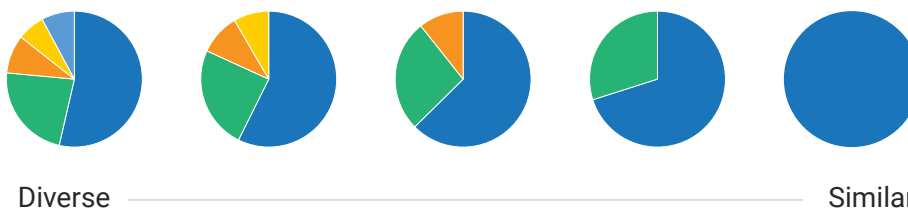
3. **Depth - Finally, use the rings and think about yourself in the middle.** How close do you feel to the people in your network? A deep network is filled with mostly people who are close to you whereas a shallow network has mostly acquaintances.

Deep ———————————————————————————— Shallow
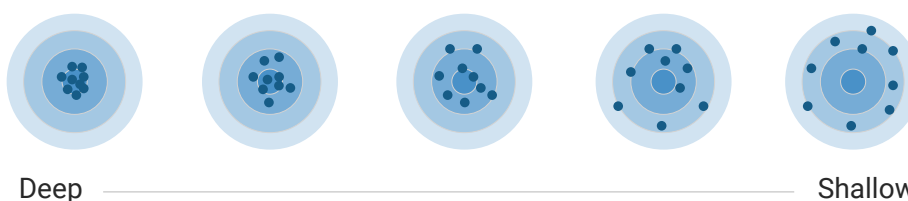
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