Network Relationship Patterns

Idea In Short

When a team's formal description of collaboration differs from its everyday experience, make the pattern visible. Network Relationship Patterns offers a set of common ways groups relate and asks participants to identify how they say they work, how they actually work, and how they want to work. Compare perspectives without forcing agreement; people in different roles may experience the network differently. Then examine the risks and benefits of the current pattern and select a new one to explore. Use the exercise to start a transition, not to label colleagues. Close with one experiment that helps the group practice a more productive way of working together.

A team may describe itself as collaborative while its decisions depend on a few central people. Another group may say it works in silos even though informal networks connect its members across functions. Network Relationship Patterns helps participants compare how they say they work, how they actually work, and how they want to work together. The structure uses a handout of common network patterns, along with their risks and benefits, as a shared language for discussion. It reflects the Liberating Structures principle "Emphasize Possibilities: Believe Before You See."

Name the pattern people experience

The host begins with a shared purpose and invites participants to review the available patterns individually. The source design includes ten patterns and allows the group to add one if none fits. Participants then answer a sequence of questions. Which pattern would they use to explain to an outsider how the group says it works? Which pattern best describes how the group actually works? Which pattern would help it achieve its purpose in the future?

The answers may differ. Someone in a central role may see a well-coordinated network, while a newer team member experiences a hub-and-spoke system. A project lead may

believe that decisions are shared, while implementers see that choices are made before they are invited into the conversation. The facilitator should treat these differences as information about perspective, not as a reason to select one account as the official truth.

Compare risks and benefits

Each pattern brings advantages and trade-offs. A centralized structure can support consistency and quick decisions but may create bottlenecks. A decentralized network can encourage local initiative but require stronger coordination across groups. A dense network may help people share information, yet become time-consuming if every connection requires consultation. These examples show why a group should examine how a pattern fits its purpose rather than assume that one design is universally best.

Participants can use the risks-and-benefits handout to consider what their current pattern enables and what it makes difficult. The group should look at observable behavior: where decisions are made, who holds key information, how work moves between roles, and what happens when a problem crosses boundaries. This keeps the discussion anchored in work rather than personal preferences. A pattern is not a personality type; it is a way relationships and coordination are organized.

Choose a pattern to explore

After comparing current and desired patterns, the group can select one pattern to test. It may be a small shift, such as creating more direct connections between two teams, making expertise easier to find, or changing who participates in a decision. A team should specify the conditions that would make the experiment possible: roles, communication channels, decision rights, and time. A broad statement such as “be more networked” needs to become a practical change participants can observe.

The structure encourages the group to identify its shared purpose before choosing a pattern. A network design that helps a service team respond quickly may not fit a group whose task is to ensure consistent regulatory control. The group should also consider who may be affected by the transition and how to involve them. A change in relationship patterns can shift access, influence, and workload, so leaders should be candid about the implications.

Use disagreement to improve the design

Participants should not be pushed toward consensus simply because a single answer looks tidy. If people differ about the current pattern, the group can ask what each perspective reveals. Perhaps local teams experience a different pattern from headquarters, or informal relationships compensate for a formal process that is not working. These differences can help the group decide where to focus its experiment.

The standard process takes about 25 minutes and uses individual reflection, quartets, and whole-group discussion. A group of four or more can use the exercise. In person, provide copies of the pattern and risks-and-benefits handouts; online, use a shared visual workspace. The host should give participants time to scan the patterns before asking for choices. If none fits, invite the group to describe its own pattern rather than forcing it into an inadequate category.

Network Relationship Patterns is useful during a redesign, merger, team launch, or effort to improve cross-functional work. Research on organizational networks and collaboration shows that informal ties affect knowledge flow and execution, while team design research emphasizes the fit between task and structure. 1, 2, 3

Review the pattern in action

After choosing an experiment, decide how the group will review it. Participants might examine whether information crosses boundaries more easily, whether decisions happen at the right level, or whether people can find needed expertise. Ask what changed and what became harder. If the experiment does not support the purpose, the group can adjust or select another pattern.

The pattern handout provides a starting vocabulary. It should not become a label that freezes the group’s identity. Organizations change, and the relationships that serve one phase of work may fail in another. By comparing stated, current, and desired patterns, participants can make a conscious choice about how to work together and test that choice in practice.

- 1The social side of strategy
- 2The strength of weak ties

- 3Designing teams for collaboration

Summary

Network Relationship Patterns gives a team language for describing its relationships and the changes it wants to make. Comparing the stated pattern with the lived pattern can reveal differences that formal org charts do not show. Participants should treat each pattern as a choice with risks and benefits, not as a judgment about a person. The group can identify one desired pattern and test what would need to change in roles, communication, or decision making. Review the experiment to see whether the new way of working helps the shared purpose. Relationship patterns become more productive through repeated behavior, not through a label alone.