Social Network Webbing

Idea In Short

When a project depends on relationships that are invisible in the formal organization chart, map the network around the work. Social Network Webbing helps a core group identify key roles, immediate contacts, and people on the periphery who could contribute. Participants draw connections and consider who has relevant expertise, influence, or access to others. Use the map to find missing perspectives and practical introductions, not to rank people or gather intelligence about them. Make participation voluntary, handle names carefully, and ask before contacting anyone. End with a short list of relationship-building actions that advance the shared purpose. Use participant questions to guide what the group explores next.

A project may have access to valuable expertise without knowing where it sits. A frontline employee may know a customer advocate; a partner may have experience with a related initiative; a person outside the formal team may help remove a recurring obstacle. Social Network Webbing makes these informal connections visible. Participants map roles, people, and relationships from the core working group to the wider periphery, then identify opportunities to connect people who can help the work. The structure reflects the Liberating Structures principle “Include and Unleash Everyone.” Its purpose is to expand the group’s capacity through relationships, not to create a directory for monitoring individuals.

Begin with the purpose and roles

The host starts with a shared challenge and asks participants to identify key roles in the work. Individual reflection and small-group discussion help build a consolidated list. Roles may include users, decision makers, specialists, implementers, funders, or connectors. A visible legend assigns a color to each role type, making it easier to see which perspectives are present and which may be missing.

Participants place their names in the core area of a large map. They then add people they

know to the immediate network and identify people who could contribute on the periphery. A person may appear in more than one role, and connections can carry different strengths. Participants can use lines or symbols to show who knows whom, who has expertise or influence, and who might introduce the group to someone else. The goal is not to catalog every relationship; it is to notice where a useful connection exists or could be made.

Look for missing connections

Once the network is visible, the group can look for “closing triangles”: connecting two people who could benefit from knowing or working with one another. For example, a customer support specialist may know a user researcher, while a product designer knows the team responsible for the service. An introduction could let those people examine a recurring issue together. The connection matters because it supports the shared purpose, not because the map makes it possible.

The group should also look for gaps. Is the network missing people affected by a decision? Does it depend too heavily on one connector? Are important functions or communities absent? A sparse area can reveal a need to listen or build trust before asking for help. Participants can decide whether to invite someone into the core, seek advice, or simply learn more about their perspective. The map should not imply that every person named is available or obligated to contribute.

Handle relationships with care

A social network map contains personal information. Before the session, explain how names and connections will be used, who will see the map, and whether it will be retained. Ask permission before sharing the map or contacting someone based on it. People should not be treated as resources to be deployed without consent. A facilitator should avoid ranking individuals by influence or using the map to bypass legitimate decision processes.

Participants can be invited to add names based on what they know, but the map remains incomplete by nature. It represents the perspectives of the people in the room, not a comprehensive record of an organization or community. The group should not interpret a missing connection as a lack of willingness. A person may be unknown because they work in another region or because the core group has not yet built a relationship with them. That recognition can itself be valuable.

Make the next connection actionable

The official process takes around 55 minutes. It moves through role identification, legend creation, mapping of the core and immediate network, extension to the periphery, and a discussion of potential connections. The final step is to decide how the group will invite, attract, and weave new people into the work, work around blockages, and boost progress. Each action should have an owner and a respectful next move. “Connect with the community team” is vague; “ask Maya to introduce the project lead to the community liaison to learn how residents experience the current process” is clearer.

Online, the group can use a shared visual space with movable notes and lines. The host should explain how to use the map and offer a simple alternative for participants who find the tool difficult. The exercise benefits from varied perspectives, so the technology should not limit who can contribute. After the session, confirm with participants before sharing the map beyond the original group.

Network research highlights the role of relationships in knowledge flow and collaboration. Harvard Business Review has explored how networks shape career and organizational outcomes, while academic network research examines how bridging connections can move information across groups. 1, 2, 3

Keep the network in motion

A map has value when it leads to genuine interaction. The group can schedule introductions, invite a new voice into a planning session, or ask someone for a short conversation about a specific question. It should also reflect on whether those connections changed the work. If new people join the network, revisit the map and clarify what role they want to play. A relationship is not a line on a chart; it is an ongoing exchange that requires attention and respect.

Social Network Webbing helps a group see beyond formal structures and find resources already present in its relationships. The map can reveal both potential and responsibility: who could help, who has been left out, and who needs a clearer invitation. When the group follows up with care, it can strengthen its network and make progress without relying solely on hierarchy or a large new program.

- 1How to build your network
- 2The strength of weak ties
- 3How to build social capital at work

Summary

Social Network Webbing turns informal relationships into a shared resource for action. By mapping the core, immediate network, and wider periphery, a group can notice expertise and connections it has overlooked. The map is only useful when participants treat people as partners with their own interests and consent. Identify a few introductions or invitations that could help the work, assign someone to make each connection, and follow through respectfully. The structure may reveal that a network is too narrow or dependent on a few people. Use that insight to broaden access and strengthen collaboration around the challenge. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.