CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL NETWORK

Participants in the scoping and in-depth interviews identified a number of characteristics of successful networks. These have been grouped around the five key recurring themes of:

- Purpose;
- People;
- Process;
- Planning;
- Products.

PURPOSE

Networks are usually established when there is a clear reason and purpose. Like other alliances they evolve to serve a need. Once that need is satisfied, networks may disintegrate over time. It is generally agreed that there is a need to regularly review and evaluate networks to ensure that they are still relevant and serving the purpose for which they were set up.

While people get involved in networks because it serves a useful purpose for them, some people saw it as very important not to use networks for personal gain and not to abuse networks by over-using contacts or stretching the focus to serve personal interests rather than those of the group as a whole.

PEOPLE

The quality of the people involved is recognised by all leaders as the key to a successful network. Many people commented on the importance of having people at the table who can make the decisions and speak with authority on behalf of their organisations.

It is also important to have people at the right level for the task – operations people for the detail and strategic thinkers for the big picture.

Networks would appear to work best when there is a “good fit” between members and a shared vision, passion or belief about the importance of the task and the outcomes required.

Self-knowledge is seen as essential so that people honestly recognise their skills and level of influence and know when they are not the right person for this particular network.

Networks rely on the quality of the relationships developed between members. Trust and respect are established over time. This means that networks are not transferable from one person to another and they do not attach themselves to a position. Good leaders provide a climate that encourages and supports others in developing their own networks.
PROCESS

While it was agreed that you can’t have too many rules for networks since they tend to evolve organically, a degree of structure is important.

Initially someone must take responsibility for establishing and resourcing the network. There needs to be a clear understanding of how the group will move towards being self-supporting, ie what type of support will be needed and for how long?

The process needs to be flexible enough to sustain the inevitable changes in people in the various organisations. There needs to be a way for new members to join and be given time to acclimatise to the culture of the network.

PLANNING

Often the success of a network has a lot to do with timing. A problem has been identified, two or three key people with the passion and power to take action, come together and others are drawn into creating the solution. Often this occurs at a time when Government policies or programmes align with the identified issue and funding or other resources are made available.

This alignment is usually not a happy coincidence but the result of years of behind the scenes planning, lobbying and advocacy. The success of environmental rehabilitation projects is an example of strong community networks who were well positioned to take advantage of Government funding when this followed a change in policy that elevated the importance of the environment.

Another key element of planning is succession planning by leaders within networks. It is important that someone else can take the leader’s place when the time is right for them to step aside. Leaders have to be willing to communicate with and trust staff with delegated authority. Sustainable networks depend on spreading the knowledge and the resources for the future. Sharing leadership and mentoring others is essential.

PRODUCTS

“By their fruits you shall know them”. Networks need to deliver outcomes for their members, the organisations they represent and the community of northern Adelaide.

Networks produce ideas and actions. Some are more ideas focussed and others concentrate on actions. It is generally agreed that better links are needed between the ‘ideas’ networks and the ‘action’ networks. Some successful networks have both elements and find that allowing people to choose the type of involvement that suits them, eg practical, political, educational or social has contributed to the group’s longevity.

Networks can also produce people who are skilled and confident. They contribute to the development of leaders and people with the ability to influence others.
SUMMARY

A successful network:

• is resourced and supported;
• has credibility with other agencies and the community;
• makes decisions and gets on with it;
• is sustainable because it is bigger than any one individual;
• knows when it has done its job and proactively disbands or reinvents itself.

(Paraphrased from personal comments made by Avril Stoffels).