Be careful what you ask for: Things policy-makers should know before mandating networks

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Abstract

Agents of government have increasingly used networks as policy tools to connect organizations within and/or across public sector jurisdictions. This has been particularly striking in health systems across Canada. Cynics argue they are pseudo-fixes; we take a more optimistic view. We explore the unique features of mandated networks, sharing their limitations and possibilities and providing targeted messages for policy-makers considering using them, ultimately suggesting that they should “be careful what they ask for.”

Introduction

The intentional use of inter-organizational networks as public management mechanisms has been a growing trend in Canada and elsewhere over the past 15 to 20 years. Even so, defining networks is not a simple task. The literature on networks is fraught with issues related to terminology and questions about what is, or is not, a network. However, inter-organizational networks are generally described as three or more organizations working collaboratively towards a common purpose. Networks can be emergent and voluntary or mandated. For the purposes of this article, when we refer to mandated networks, we are talking about networks where policy-makers decide on the need and purpose for the network, the timing of the network’s creation, the required composition and structure of the network, and the mechanism for the network to access new or reallocated resources. It is a deliberate capturing of existing organizations under the umbrella of a new governance structure and a particular policy goal. Across the Canadian landscape, mandated networks have flourished as a policy solution of choice, often focused on improving health services and population health (Table 1 provides selected examples).

This article draws from international research and practice experience about the value of inter-organizational networks as public policy instruments and the conditions required for success. In order to understand how mandating a network influences its development and potentially its effectiveness, we explore the unique features of mandated networks, features that policy-makers and governments need to consider when constructing inter-organizational networks.

Why mandate networks?

One proposition is that mandating networks may be a way for governments to downshift or “off-load” responsibility for intractable problems, while maintaining the appearance of doing something useful. This perception may be even more pronounced when the accompanying resources are inadequate as is almost always the case in public services:

... governments may now be mandating networks in order to be seen to be doing something to address a complex policy or service issue, but without any real commitment to resourcing or supporting the work of the network. Are networks simply a way for governments to look like they are doing something, with no expectations that a network will have any success? Networks, then, particularly mandated ones, might be a suboptimal solution to the failures of government policy.¹²(p7)

We are less cynical. By mandating networks, we believe governments are counting on what the research says about the benefits, or “collaborative advantage,” of inter-organizational networks; benefits such as access to and leveraging of resources, shared risk and accountability, innovation or positive deviance, efficiency, service coordination or integration, enhanced learning and capacity building, and flexibility or responsiveness.¹ The collaborative advantage being sought is multi-faceted, including producing creative solutions that no organization could achieve alone; achieving better individual organizational objectives through the collaboration; and, possibly of most interest to policy-makers, achieving objectives for society as a whole.¹⁴,¹⁵ Is it any wonder that, when faced with complex policy problems, governments could be very attracted to a solution with this much promise?

Yet, we know from research and practice that networks, even when emergent and voluntary, are not without their challenges, and these challenges can be amplified in a mandated network. Milward¹⁶ cautions healthcare leaders against the prevailing view of networks as exclusively positive responses to difficult problems, and others identify the added structural complexity and challenges of network management
and leadership.\textsuperscript{13,17-20} On the other hand, a truly successful network, because of its collaborative capacity, may achieve outcomes far beyond those originally envisioned. We suggest that the ability to reap the benefits of networks, especially when they are mandated, is in large part based on paying careful attention to nurturing the component parts of collaborative capacity. We are not referring, here, to the capacity of organizations within the network to collaborate or to the network’s ability to build community capacity,\textsuperscript{21} both undeniably important aspects of networks, but to the ability of the network itself to achieve the benefits and advantages mentioned above. Figure 1 is provided as a work in progress displaying the basic “building blocks” of collaborative capacity. We believe that deliberate thought to this underlying scaffolding can help policy-makers avoid, or at least mitigate, the problematic aspects of mandating networks and, conversely, improve chances for a responsive, effective network to be developed.

Table 1. Mandated networks within Canadian public sector jurisdictions—selected examples

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network(s)</th>
<th>Description/Mandate</th>
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<tr>
<td>Child and Youth Health Networks (CYHNs)</td>
<td>By 2004, approximately 20 CYHNs had been established across Canada\textsuperscript{2} to coordinate services, plan collectively, develop shared priorities, undertake research, or share information. Some focused on healthcare, and others had an intersectoral focus and addressed broader child well-being. Many were deliberately mandated or indirectly supported by provincial/local governments.\textsuperscript{3} for example, Southern Alberta Child and Youth Health Network, Child and Youth Health Network of Eastern Ontario, Network for Children and Youth, Eastern Nova Scotia.</td>
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<td>Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs)</td>
<td>Ontario established LHINs in 2006 to set priorities, plan and fund local healthcare services to improve coordination and integration of services at the local level. LHIN mandate: engage people and providers about needs and priorities, ensure better access to coordinated and integrated services through proper planning, and build on the strength of local health organizations.\textsuperscript{4}</td>
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<td>Integrated Health Networks (IHNs)</td>
<td>In 2008, British Columbia announced formation of 25 IHNs across the province to improve access to health services, reduce pressure on the health system, and address challenges associated with an aging population. IHNs are a joint initiative of the Ministry of Health Services and the Health Authorities and viewed as key components of BC's Primary Health Care Charter.\textsuperscript{5}</td>
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<td>Strategic Clinical Networks (SCNs)</td>
<td>Alberta Health Services began to establish SCNs in 2010 with the goal of improving specific areas of healthcare. Mandate: find new and innovative ways of delivering care that will provide better quality, outcomes and value.\textsuperscript{6} To date, approximately 11 SCNs have been established.</td>
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<td>Regional Collaborative Service Delivery (RCSD)</td>
<td>In 2013, Alberta implemented RCSD, establishing 17 inter-organizational partnerships across the province comprised of health, human services, school authorities, and community partners. Mandate: work together to provide integrated supports and services to children and youth at the regional level.\textsuperscript{7}</td>
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<td>Chronic Disease Prevention Partnerships</td>
<td>Aligned with international trends on the promotion of intersectoral partnerships to address public health. Canadian governments have invested in inter-organizational partnerships/networks to address chronic disease prevention\textsuperscript{8-10} (eg, Canadian Partnership Against Cancer, Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada, and Alberta’s Primary Care Networks).</td>
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<td>Pan-Canadian Public Health Network (PHN)</td>
<td>PHN was established by Canada’s Federal, Provincial and Territorial (F/P/T) Health Ministers in 2005. Mandate: strengthen public health capacity in Canada; enable F/P/T governments to better work together on the day-to-day business of public health; anticipate, prepare for, and respond to public health events and threats; and support horizontal linkages across public health policy issues.\textsuperscript{11}</td>
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Figure 1. The building blocks of collaborative capacity

What does it mean for a network to be mandated?

A fundamental question debated by practitioners and researchers alike is whether a network can be mandated at all. Certainly the membership can be dictated, and a particular structure required, along with specific processes. In other words, the supporting frame for the network can be mandated. However, if the network itself consists of the relationships among actors and the quality of those relationships, one could argue that a network (ie, collaborative relationships) cannot, in fact, be mandated and that collaboration by its very nature is
impossible to mandate. This point is critical to what occurs when attempts are made to mandate networks. In order to shed light on this, we address each of the building blocks identified as critical underpinnings for the collaborative capacity necessary for effective networks, drawing out issues and guiding questions for policy-makers contemplating mandating networks.

**Vision.** When networks emerge, they generally do so because of a common vision. In a mandated network, the vision may be imposed, meaning that organizational buy-in to that vision could vary considerably, and more time might be necessary than in emergent networks to cultivate a genuine commitment to the vision. Since commitment to a shared vision is critical to network effectiveness, this is a factor that must be taken into account when mandating a network even if, as some research suggests, complete agreement on how the problem is framed is not necessary in order to proceed.

**Trust.** In emergent networks, like-minded actors come together voluntarily: “actors make choices about who to connect with, [and] what to transact . . . without guidance from any central network agent.” These relationships are trust based or governed by social contracts or norms of reciprocity. In a mandated network, relationships are primarily regulated or arranged. As the optimal mix is of both, a question arises as to how to leave room for both regulated and voluntary relationships to develop in a mandated network. To see the value of the network above and beyond nominal participation, network members must be afforded opportunities to find and explore serendipitous relationships. Being forced into relationships can result in a situation where reluctant participants are either pseudo-collaborating, while working to maintain the status quo behind the scenes, or even deliberately undermining the work of the network. If participation is involuntary, it is likely to take longer to find the unexpected synergies, develop trusting relationships, and cultivate a genuine interest in collaborating. However, there is some research that suggests focusing first on collaborative behaviours, rather than attitudes towards collaboration, can help build a reinforcing pathway in a mandated network.

The quality of pre-existing relationships can either support or inhibit network development. Being mandated can be beneficial if pre-existing relationships are good because of the additional resources and supports. When pre-existing relationships are not strong, being mandated can either provide an impetus to work together or confirm the lack of interest in truly collaborating.

The research on how trust is built in networks identifies factors such as personal propensity, perceived trustworthiness, and trust transfersability; receptivity to trust; and the cyclical nature of trust building, along with the importance of addressing power differentials. All of these factors contribute to the development of trust and serve to suggest that the creation of trusting relationships is not an easy, linear task in any network, let alone in one that is mandated.

**Goals.** There is considerable evidence about the difficulty networks may have with conflicting goals or goal incongruence. In a mandated network, goal incongruence can be even more of an issue. Involuntary participants may not embrace the mandated goals, and underlying individual or organizational goals may be substantively different, meaning that directional support for the network’s goals may be faint at best. Vangen and Huxham suggest there can be pseudo-goals in play in a network, where the stated goal may appear to meet the expectations but lack any real intent. Our experience suggests that this may be more likely within a mandated network, especially early on in the network’s life, with one unique exception: in a mandated network, the one universal condition is that all members are required to be there. Mandated participation can provide a rallying point for network members against the conditions or authority that established the network and its mandate. In other words, there can be goal congruence in fighting the imposed conditions. Ironically, resisting a common enemy may help to build a shared understanding among network members. However, the understanding developed through united opposition may, in turn, contribute to delaying the ability to see the value that could arise from collective engagement in an authentic goal. It would, therefore, be a mistake for governments to assume that organizational partners in a mandated network are all on board with the agenda, and additional time and incentives may be required to help members get to a place where they can genuinely support mandated goals.

**Resources.** Mandated networks can bring additional human, financial, and technical resources that, if sufficient, can provide an incentive to work together and contribute to early success. Transaction costs can be higher in the early development of any network as trusting relationships and processes get established, meaning that additional resources may be needed, at least temporarily. When participation is mandated, even more time may be required to develop network processes, since the motivation to do so may be initially lacking. As well, a mandated network may immediately be expected to carry a heavier load, which may be unrealistic if available resources do not account for both the early transaction costs and the increased workload. While a benefit of networks can be efficiency and leveraging of resources, policy-makers need to understand that this takes time, and sufficient supports and resources are required to set the stage for network success. A point of discussion may be for how long those additional resources must be available. The reduction in resources at any time is likely to create some instability, and the network must be sufficiently resilient to withstand the shock if it is to survive. In general, the extent of available resources is seen as a factor contributing to ongoing network effectiveness.

**Shared or systemic risk.** Mandating networks to provide integrated service models may be intended positively but can also inadvertently create systemic risk. If one part of a highly connected service network fails, the entire system may be vulnerable to failure, resulting in negative consequences for
service recipients. For example, one point of discussion that often arises in practice is the desire to reduce redundancy. Yet, a certain level of redundancy, especially in a service delivery network, can help offset systemic risk. While perhaps not initially obvious, governments must appreciate the potential for systemic risk, and the value of building and supporting processes to ensure unintended negative impacts can be minimized.

**Legitimacy.** The effect of being mandated on internal and external legitimacy, key constructs connected to network effectiveness, is another important consideration. External legitimacy, the value of the network as perceived by stakeholders outside of the network, may be achieved quickly in a mandated network because of the very fact that it is government supported and funded. Internal legitimacy, the value of the network as viewed by its members, however, may be more difficult to establish. Unconvinced network members must work through adopting or adjusting a prescribed vision, establishing trust, and uncovering the advantages of the network within a context where their participation is compulsory, rather than voluntary. Even more problematic is if network members and policy-makers fail to comprehend the necessity of establishing internal legitimacy in order to sustain the network, since research has shown that a lack of internal legitimacy, particularly in mandated networks, contributes to network failure. If government support is time limited, as is largely the case, and there is little or no internal legitimacy, the network is likely to experience reduced effectiveness, or not survive at all, once left to its own devices. Those with an interest in using networks as policy tools must recognize that a prerequisite of mandating a successful, self-sustaining network is to provide the network with sufficient time and support to establish internal legitimacy, especially if prior relationships were not strong or nonexistent.

**What does this mean for network leadership and management?**

Leading and managing inter-organizational networks is challenging at the best of times. Even in an emergent network, there can be varied levels of commitment and differing goals and expectations, all of which must be managed. However, in the case of voluntary networks, members are free to come and go. What is different for mandated networks is the potentially involuntary nature of the participation (we acknowledge that membership can be mandated, but still be voluntary if the organization is solidly aligned with the network’s mandate). Given this and the issues discussed earlier, it is clear that leading and managing a mandated network is even less straightforward. Yet, the performance of a network is often tied to the availability, type, and quality of leadership and management.

Good leadership in a network is routinely depicted as distributed among members. Distributed leadership may be attainable in a voluntary network where the buy-in is reasonably high, but it may be more difficult, or impossible, to achieve in a mandated network if members are either overtly or covertly uncommitted to the agenda. Embedding the leadership with members who may covertly be activating against the collaborative agenda could not only undermine efforts but spell disaster. Centralizing leadership is also problematic, as it does not promote the shared ownership that can help sustain networks in the long run. This speaks to the necessity to carefully consider the governance structure of a mandated network and to select organizations for leadership roles based on their ability to sincerely embrace the agenda and lead with an inclusive style that will engage others.

The job of network managers is to undertake purposeful actions to create value in, or extract value from, the network in such a way that its merit is demonstrated for network members. There are various perspectives on how a network manager accomplishes this task including facilitation, negotiation, addressing blockages and managing conflict, cultivating relationships, enabling serendipity, framing issues, and managing commitment and accountability. There is debate in the literature about whether network management is unique or requires a different knowledge base from traditional hierarchical management. Some research suggests management practices in mandated networks might tend towards more hierarchical management traditions, perhaps due to the often associated formalized structure of a mandated network. However, the question has also been raised as to whether there could be a “tipping point,” where the use of hierarchical management techniques could compromise the desired collaborative culture of a network.

Overall, descriptions of network management “include a focus on the intentional use of processes towards particular ends and depict network management as a highly conscious activity.” Undertaking these activities in any network requires substantial skill and finesse. In a mandated network, where membership is obligatory, the task requires even more sophistication. Network managers must be skilled enough not only to manage in the absence of authority, draw from a variety of management practices and processes, and cultivate a culture that supports and facilitates a network’s development, but most importantly, to convert involuntary participants into champions of the network. The working titles often given to these roles, such as manager, facilitator, coordinator, or mediator, belie the depth of expertise required. In mandating a network, it would be wise to ensure attention is paid to how the network will be managed and by whom, and invest adequate, justifiable resources in the complex network management functions of critical importance to a network’s success.

**What conclusions should policy-makers draw?**

Simply mandating a network into existence is far from sufficient, and even working together does not guarantee either successful processes or outcomes. While networks may seem like a panacea, it is important to understand that networks take longer to achieve outcomes than hierarchical organizations because they are dependent on building trust, and on the associated relational transactions, to meet common goals. If
We firmly believe that properly resourced and supported, a mandated network can be an essential, effective policy catalyst for vital public sector reforms.

**Conclusion**

We firmly believe that properly resourced and supported, a mandated network can be an essential, effective policy catalyst to address compelling public policy issues. However, those interested in mandating networks must know that networks are not a short-term solution or investment and also be truly prepared for the result. If a mandated network is successful in evolving its collaborative capacity, it may well unleash unanticipated potential, the intensity of which may be more in keeping with what might be expected in an emergent, voluntary network. Collective actions, processes, and outcomes, indeed power, far beyond the original intended mandate may emerge—ergo our initial note about being careful what you ask for.

**References**

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