

Sustaining Your Rural Health Network: An Infinite Game

Promoting health and preserving systems of care into the future means responding to changing needs and contextual drivers such as national and state policies, workforce trends, shifts in demographics and disease incidence rates, and economic fluctuations.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADAPTIVE CAPACITY

Maintaining cohesion and relevance in the face of shifting local, state and national priorities is very difficult. Experience working with hundreds of networks over two decades has shown that most are *reactive rather than strategic* in the face of changing contexts — having to adjust strategies *during crisis* rather than intentionally embedding the *capacity to evolve* into the organization from day one. Many are not able to transition effectively, incapable of demonstrating value and securing resources from one “reality” to the next. In this instance, members’ interests wane, leaders become disengaged and distracted, and network staff leave, largely because the future is not secure.

Network sustainability and long-term impact depend on a network’s deeply-rooted ability to ADAPT in changing circumstances, and move beyond a “one and done” project-oriented mentality.

The collapse of networks in this situation can be attributed to: insufficient awareness of broader environmental trends and evidence-based practices; leadership and responsibility that are not distributed; relationships that are not durable; narrowly-defined visions and purposes that are not broad enough to encompass emergent needs; anemic evaluation and innovation cycles; and perhaps most importantly, limited capacity to think and act strategically on a continuous basis.

Rather than reacting to shifts in the environment only after they become too disruptive to ignore, highly adaptive enterprises constantly pay attention to what is going on — inside and outside their organizations. Sustainable networks recognize they are playing an *infinite game*¹, where the rules, roles, players, and strategies are constantly changing. Being successful within infinite games demands more than excellence in program implementation; it requires systematically seeking to understand what is happening (or likely to happen) and using that awareness to improve and evolve organizational priorities and practices *PROACTIVELY*.

¹Carse, James. *Finite and infinite games*. Simon & Schuster, 2011

A Finite Game

A finite game includes a set of clearly defined roles, rules, processes, and outcomes. A clear definition exists for what it means to win.

VS.

An Infinite Game

An infinite game offers an unclear definition of the game and what it takes to win. Infinite games have no clearly defined endpoint.

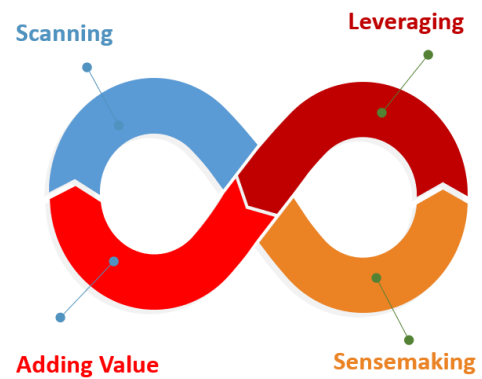
SUSTAINABLE NETWORK MODEL

The Sustainable Network Model is based on the basic assertion that long-term viability and impact require both **adaptive capacity** AND the ability to select and effectively implement **high-leverage, short-term strategies**.

The Sustainable Network Model is a continuous, proactive, non-linear approach that promotes:

- greater awareness of external dynamics;
- ongoing conversations with stakeholders about the implications of key trends;
- actions that leverage a broad range of assets and resources for change; and
- the translation of lessons learned and value added into future strategies.

The practices involved in the "infinite game" comprise **four key phases** (see image, below), and definitions (see following pages).





SCANNING

Systematic ways of staying aware of what is going on internally (staffing, resources, etc.) and externally (policy, economy, population health, system viability, reimbursement, etc.)

Program-Focused: NEEDS ASSESSMENT	Adaptive: SCANNING
Periodic snapshot of community	On-going surveillance of local, state and national trends/changes in environment
Primarily uses secondary sources of data (census, provider records, surveys)	Broad range of additional sources – policy briefs, news, trade organizations, people’s first-hand experiences
Descriptive	Interpretive
Limited scope defined by conventional practice set in advance	Open-ended inquiry
Extracurricular – not part of day-to-day activities	Integrated and systematic
Completed by designated staff and presented to partners	Many parties actively engaged and sharing responsibilities, internally and externally



SENSEMAKING

Processes and habits in place for continuously considering the implications of trends for the structure and work of the Network.

Program-Focused: PLANNING	Adaptive: SENSEMAKING
Needs assessment/data used for setting project priorities within program areas	Broad participation in conversations to understand data, explain observations, and look for patterns
Identify immediate opportunities and “solutions”	Used for strategic positioning over the long-term
Reactive to what exists now	Proactive -- anticipate implications for local system and the network
Asking tactical questions that will inform program design and work planning	Asking big-picture, general questions – new questions emerge



LEVERAGING

Exerting influence or control over circumstances or indicators that members care about by leveraging resources (data, access, knowledge, people, passion, experience, etc.) through experimentation and implementation of best practices.

Program-Focused: IMPLEMENTATION	Adaptive: LEVERAGING
Emphasis on linear solutions, fixed milestones, and adherence to work plans	Innovatively marshal a variety of resources to address system changes before/as they arise
Resources primarily directed to produce program outcomes	Exerting influence over complex system dynamics
Projects seen as ends in themselves	Engaging in multiple and multi-step activities with less predictability and control
Responding to immediate and most threatening risks	Being innovative and experimental – staying “ahead of the curve” – viewing each activity as input for future leveraging



ADDING VALUE

Demonstrating and communicating the value of working together toward short- and long-term goals. Members see progress and reinvest learning to expand on clinical, financial, and system improvements.

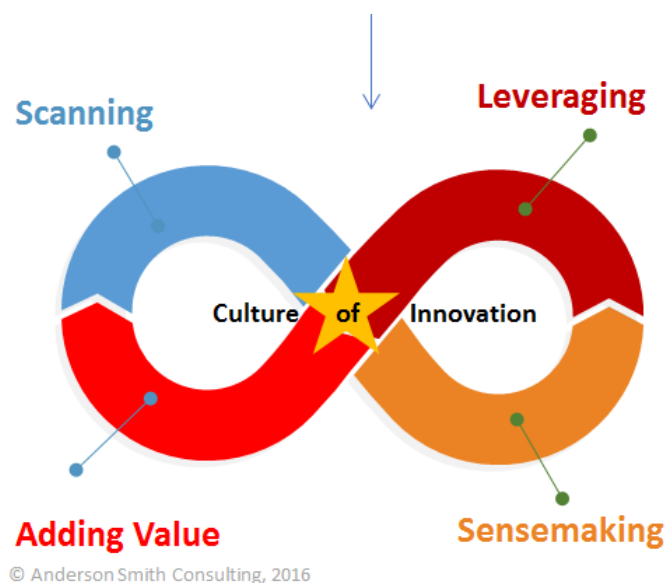
Program-Focused: MEASURING PERFORMANCE	Adaptive: ADDING VALUE
Program excellence viewed as primary opportunity for adding value through quality improvement and outcome measurement of current activities	Deliberate reflection on competencies, capacities, and relationships that produced prior success and application to exploit new opportunities to create value
Focus on documentation and improvement of programmatic outcomes – usually short-term successes	Deliberate, sequential opportunities for adding value over the strategic time horizon -- cumulative
Dependence on plan going as designed	Ability to adapt optimizes success/value produced
Goals and objectives are finite	Belief in “infinite” future of possibilities
Communication of program successes to network partners	Comprehensive communication strategy for promoting the value of the network
Relevance of network internally focused	Network positioned to influence policy, system, and environmental changes

THE ADAPTIVE NETWORK CORE: A Culture of Innovation

Organizational Culture refers to the values, behaviors, and shared vision that contribute to the environment of an organization. Culture determines what matters most, what is acceptable, and what is not. On a very practical level, culture strongly influences the actions we take, how we invest our time and money, the processes we institute, and how we are structured. And while we often think about various businesses, communities, or groups of people as having particular cultures, this is not a common topic related to Rural Health Networks.

The Sustainable Network Model, however, calls attention to the importance of culture as a determining factor for impactful, long-lasting networks...but not just any culture.

A Culture of Innovation – depicted as a star at the core of the infinity loop (see image) – is what feeds and supports the adaptive processes: Scanning, Sensemaking, Leveraging, and Adding Value. A *Culture of Innovation* serves as a fuel for anticipating and responding to changes in the environment on a continuous basis.



Networks that, at their core, demonstrate a culture of innovation have the following attributes:

- *They assume change is inevitable.*
- *They see innovation as a crucial part of their DNA.*
- *They value learning together.*
- *They are willing to try new things.*
- *They create a safe environment for risk-taking.*