MANAGEMENT OF A NETWORK: SOME SUGGESTIONS

Samlee Plianbangchang

WHO Regional Director Emeritus;
Senior Consultant, College of Public Health Sciences, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 10330, Thailand

DOI: 10.14456/jhr.2016.41 *Received: November 2015; Accepted: February 2016*

PREAMBLE

Networking is a popular approach to interlink institutions and promote effective collaboration. The link may be between and/or among institutions so that their work and endeavor are related to each other. In South-East Asia Region (SEAR) during the last decade, there have been a number of networks developed with support from organizations like World Health Organization (WHO), such as South-East Asia Public Health Education Institutions Network (SEAPHEIN), SEA Regional Nursing Association, SEA Regional Association of Medical Education, SEA Regional Network of Medical Councils, and Network of WHO Collaboration Centers and National Centers of Expertise (NEWCCET) in Thailand. These networks have coordinated concerns and efforts of the related institutional members on various specific areas.

Although forming or developing a network may not be difficult, it is a real challenge to set up the network's functioning as intended. To assure that the network will become operational as desired, there are some requisites to be ensured which are:

a) The concerned institutions should see a strong need to work together in fulfilling the desire to achieve their individual goals through the spirit of group/teamwork.

b) Objective, operational plan and working approach of the network must be mutually developed and adopted by all (institutions) members of the network.

c) Roles and responsibility of each individual institution towards the operation of the network should be made clearly understood to all network members, so as to ensure coordinated actions.

d) One of the golden rules in the network operation is that all network members contribute equally to functioning of the network, and therefore equally benefitted from the working of the network. In other words the institutions need to be equal partners.

e) Responsibility and leadership in running the network both in terms of technical and management aspects, must be shared equally among all members as much as possible.

ORGANIZATION OF A NETWORK

A network is framed on the basis of the will of all concerned institutions to work together towards their common objective in achieving their respective goals. An organization is required to ensure systematic management of the network but may be different from other types of organizations in that it has to be significantly un-hierarchical as much as possible, while maintaining a clear role for individual members.

To ensure a network functions as desired, it needs an efficient secretariat which among other things, is responsible for the overall coordination of the implementation of the network's work and operational plan. Normally, members would like the secretariat of the network to be rotated among the concerned institutions, and this type of secretariat is sometimes called the network focal point. The secretariat needs information and communication tools to ensure efficient coordination with all institution members. For example web pages, newsletters and applicable social media tools should be used. Again, regular staffs to run the secretariat is important and for a big network with many members, a full-time staff may be essential. The

* *Correspondence to: Samlee Plianbangchang, M.D., Dr.P.H.*
E-mail: samlee.p@chula.ac.th

Cite this article as: Plianbangchang S. Management of a network: some suggestions. J Health Res. 2016; 30(5): 305-6. DOI: 10.14456/jhr.2016.41

secretariat staff should be very good at planning, communication, and coordination of all activities.

Important role of the secretariat is to keep the network functioning efficiently. Through various information and communication channels, the network members should be regularly informed about the progress in implementation of the operational plan, and facilitate the working and activities of member institutions that are part of the network operational plan. In addition, the secretariat is expected to convene a general body meeting once a year to discuss the progress of the network operations, and to review its policy and strategy. This is in addition to specific or ad hoc meetings to consider managerial and technical matters.

RESOURCES FOR NETWORK OPERATION

Resources are extremely important for a network to function, and both human and financial resources are needed for running of a network particularly to support the secretariat activities. The secretariat staff may be deputed from the institution which functions as the network's focal point or from other member institutions if an agreement can be made. In case of a big network, full time staff at least at clerical level may be hired for the operations and management of the secretariat. Often times there may be other ways to get this type of staff for secretariat.

The network may have operational constraints without adequate financial resources and some of the possible sources are:

- Support from a funding agency, especially during the start-up or initial period of 1-3 years. If several funding agencies are interested in the work/activities of the network, support can be extended for many years. The network's scope of work has to be made extremely attractive, and to achieve this, a lot of advocacy is required.
- Contribution from member institutions: Members may be willing to make financial contributions to the working of the secretariat, but the amount may be insufficient, or far from the requirement. Although it may be small amounts, contributions should be collected wherever possible.
- Financial resource from technical services: This is very important, and should be discussed and agreed at the initial stage of network development. Member institutions will have to agree about working together in running technical activities as a part of the network and to generate income for implementation of the network's operational plan. These activities may be in the form of seminars, workshops, and short training courses. But, a lot of effort is needed for this type of income generation in a network.
- In addition, income from consultancy services from the network may be attempted. It should be made in the way that the network is in the best position to identify experts/specialists for consultancy services, especially to international organizations. Dedicated experts from the member institutions who are willing to sacrifice a small part of their consultation fee for supporting work of the network must be identified and enlisted for this purpose. At the same time, it has to ensure that these experts will get something commensurate with their sacrifice in return.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS OF A NETWORK

- The network is really relevant to the current challenges of the concerned institutions.
- There is proven evidence on the network's performance it terms of efficiency and effectiveness.
- The network is so popular that it can effectively attract the attention of national and international agencies working in that area.
- There is a really high spirit of working together among member institutions, ready to dedicate and sacrifice.
- The network and its secretariat is under an outstanding, strong and effective leadership.
- The network has extraordinary capability and capacity in planning and management of its communication and coordination work.
- Use of appropriate online or social media in communication and coordination of activities.

These are conceptual suggestions and still need thorough discussion and considerations before implementation and realization.