

# Networks and How to Broaden Them

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Our networks largely define the information we have to do our work and the opportunities we have for program development. Broadening networks can reap large dividends of new information, knowledge, and opportunities. Extension offers a wealth of possibilities for network expansion. However, broadening networks requires effort on your part... even if small. First, identifying people outside of your normal network with whom you have something in common. Nearly everyone in EFANS who serve organizations external to the University of Minnesota received a map identifying who many of these people are. Contact them, not necessarily to develop partnerships, but to learn about the organization(s) you share and what they do... and to build a connection that may produce opportunities within your contact's networks at a later date.

## Why make contact?

First, to share and develop knowledge about the organization(s) and the larger context in which the organization(s) plays a role. Secondly, to build a knowledge network that you can use over time, at key points, to inform your strategy. Lastly, if there appears to be value in collaboration, you explore opportunities to partner. Your small effort will grow in social capital, information, and opportunities over time when someone you don't know makes contact with you. In addition, you may finish your conversation with new insights about the organization and the role it plays within a larger context. This may lead to more effective decisions.

## Protocol for making connections can

Even though connections are just a call or email away, it can be hard to take that extra step. Here are some ideas to get started.

Introduction:

*"I was sent a map of the organizations I support that includes names of other EFANS staff who also support these organizations. I see you've worked with [name of organization(s)].*

*"What do you do with them?"*

### **Consider talking about –**

**The organization.** This may include organizational changes, situation, structure as it relates to Extension support, priorities and biases, leadership, programs and activities, as well as individuals and contacts.

**The organization's role within a larger context.** What does the organization do? What is it trying to achieve? What does Extension have to do with it? What are the trends that surround its objectives? How does that influence Extension's support currently or in the future?

**The Extension person/team's challenges and successes in supporting the organization and the larger context in which the organization plays a role.** How have they supported this organization? Does the approach work well? Are there challenges? Are they planning for any changes in their approach – either in the breadth of what they do for the organization, or the method in which they serve that organization? How do they serve the larger context in which the organization plays a role? Same set of questions apply.

**Opportunities that currently exist or may be on the horizon in working with the organization or within the larger context in which the organization plays a role.** Do they see emerging opportunities with this organization or the larger context in which the organization plays a role? Are trends and changes making some types of support obsolete?

## Outcome of making contact

You are all connected with new staff and programs and will pass this knowledge forward to others you know. Your networks are broadening. Taking effort to make connections between two parties makes you a network "bridge" – a great position from which to gather information and learn about opportunities that feed innovation, new development, and effectiveness.