Organization Practice

To weather a crisis, build a network of teams

This dynamic and collaborative team structure can tackle an organization’s most pressing problems quickly. Here are four steps to make it happen.

by Andrea Alexander, Aaron De Smet, Sarah Kleinman, and Marino Mugayar-Baldocchi
Imagine you are a tenured CEO of a utility company. You have led your organization through hurricanes and other extreme-weather events. You have followed a playbook, and moved to a “command and control” style to address the cascading effects of natural disasters. But now you’re dealing with COVID-19, a crisis unlike anything you’ve ever experienced. There is no coronavirus playbook.

That utility CEO is not alone. Leaders across industries can’t treat this pandemic like other events they have experienced or trained for. First, no single executive has the answer. In fact, to understand the current situation—let alone make decisions about how to respond—you will need to involve more people than you’re accustomed to.

In this rapidly changing environment, your people need to respond with urgency, without senior executives and traditional governance slowing things down. Waiting to decide, or even waiting for approval, is the worst thing they can do. Yet some level of coordination across teams and activities is crucial for your organization’s response to be effective. How do you do this? How do you accomplish the seemingly impossible?

The answer: create a robust network of teams that is empowered to operate outside of the current hierarchy and bureaucratic structures of the organization.

In response to the coronavirus, organizations of all shapes and sizes are moving in this direction. They are setting up “control towers,” “nerve centers”—which take over some of the company’s critical operations—and other crisis-response teams to deal with rapidly shifting priorities and challenges. They see that these teams make faster, better decisions, and many are wondering how they can replicate this effort in other parts of their organization.

Creating a central “rapid response” group is the right first move, but leaders shouldn’t stop there. In this article, we will focus on the steps leaders should take to create a cohesive and adaptable network of teams, united by a common purpose, that gathers information, devises solutions, puts them into practice, refines outcomes—and does it all fast.

Four steps to creating a network of teams

1. **Launch teams fast and build as you go.**

Create teams that will tackle current strategic priorities and key challenges facing the organization. That’s job number one—everything flows from it.

But leaders should also understand that mistakes will be made. Maybe these teams won’t be the right ones a month down the road, but the model is built to be flexible and to shift when that happens. Teams have to make the best decisions they can with the information that’s available. Don’t worry about perfection; the key is to stand up teams and let them course-correct quickly.

The network itself must be built to learn, using information to update actions and strategies. In a crisis of uncertainty, the network spurs experimentation, innovation, and learning simultaneously among many teams, much like a neural network in which the whole “brain” is vastly smarter than the sum of its parts. There is also spontaneous learning in the face of challenges and opportunities at the individual, team, and network-wide levels.

The evolution begins when the senior executive team—or a kitchen cabinet of the leader’s trusted advisers—creates a central hub that directs and coordinates the response while a handful of related teams operate as the spokes. These teams bubble up the challenges so the central team can prioritize them. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, initial teams might focus on workforce protection, supply-chain risks, customer engagement, and financial stress testing.

The model makes it easy to add a team later when you identify a need, or to disband a team when it’s no longer necessary or has accomplished its goal.
Exhibit 1

The evolution to a network of teams often begins with a central team launching a few primary response teams very quickly.

It is important to launch two groups in particular: an intelligence team, which makes sure the network has a high level of situational awareness, and a planning-ahead team, which thinks through scenarios for the recovery and beyond. Each team should be small and contain a mix of individuals with cross-functional skills, acting with a clear mandate but also within guard rails that empower it to act.

The leader should make it clear to all members of the organization, including those in the parts of the business that are operating as usual, that these empowered teams get to make the calls within the authority delegated to them and do not need permission from others. (Although, teams will seek guidance from the central hub team even when they are empowered to act without approval.)

Next, pick the team leaders. These individuals often are not the "usual suspects" typically put in charge of key initiatives. They need to be a good fit for the task at hand: creative problem solvers with critical thinking skills who are resilient and battle tested. They should also be independent and open to a range of different perspectives. Best of all, they should be willing to say what needs to be said, and to make tough, even unpopular, decisions—ideally with a track record of having done so in the past.

Work with the team leaders to staff their groups, keeping in mind what skills, experiences, and perspectives are most important. Each team must represent a cross-section of critical perspectives. In addition to whatever technical or functional expertise people are bringing, you are looking for problem solvers who will come up with innovative approaches and who can learn fast on the fly.

Just like with team leaders, you need individuals who have critical judgment, the courage to make bold decisions, and the ability to consider trade-offs and trust the data. These team members also need to recognize when specific expertise is needed and pull those experts in as appropriate.

Crucially, each team must also include and consider voices from people on the "edges"—the front line of an organization where the battles to respond to the crisis are taking place. While they may not be senior within the hierarchy, these people are closest to the customer or constituent and are likely to bring key information to the team.

Finally, any given team should be small enough that it can split two pizzas (according to the widely adopted Jeff Bezos/Amazon rule). Any larger, and nothing meaningful will get done on the timelines required in a crisis.

1 Courtney Connley, "Jeff Bezos’ ‘two pizza rule’ can help you hold more productive meetings." CNBC, April 30, 2018, CNBC.com.
As soon as the teams are set up, leaders should empower them to make decisions quickly. This will work only if they each have what military leaders refer to as a “commander’s intent”—a clear goal that allows them to make decisions within a set of parameters. This improves both the speed and quality of decision making. It also allows teams to respond to the dynamic demands of the external environment and is one of the strengths of the network approach.

2. Get out of the way but stay connected.

After creating the initial set of teams, a leader must shift toward ensuring that multidirectional communication is taking place—not only across teams within the network but also between these teams and the rest of the organization.

To do this, there should be steady coordination with the central team hub, perhaps in daily stand-up meetings. The central hub can check in on progress being made and find ways to support teams and make sure they are using first-order problem-solving principles.

At this point, it’s time for the leader to step into the roles of catalyst and coach. As catalysts, leaders should identify opportunities, make connections across teams, spark ideas for the teams to consider, and provide resources to fuel those efforts. As coaches, leaders should regularly engage with team leaders and members, resolving roadblocks and helping them work through challenges.

This second step is a balancing act: as the network forms and the number of teams increases and the teams make their own connections, the leader is pushing authority down and out but also staying tightly engaged.

Leaders will be most effective in this role when they are posing questions. For example: Is the hub leader effectively leading and supporting the team? If not, help them improve or replace them. Are the voices from the edges being sought and heard? If not, embolden the edges even more. Are the teams seeking approval from a leader when they could proceed without it? If so, answer their questions with a question. Help them understand you trust them to make decisions.

The goal here is to empower teams and support them at the same time, without micromanaging. This is what great coaches do: they listen to many voices and then make tough calls, even when they have insufficient or imperfect information.

Exhibit 2

A hub-and-spoke model emerges when additional teams are launched to address rapidly evolving priorities and new challenges.
Particularly early on, leaders and their close advisers will need to focus on how budgets and people have been distributed across the network of teams, ensure that the highest priority efforts have what they need, stand down or slim teams that are no longer as relevant, and form new teams as circumstances shift.

Even after the crisis subsides, leaders can find a dynamic way of allocating resources across the organization. For example, in the “helix” organizational model, leaders and their top teams can shift people and money across the organization, ensuring the right efforts are applied to priorities.

3. Champion radical transparency and authenticity.
During the coronavirus pandemic, we’ve seen instances of leaders who have behaved boldly, setting priorities for their organizations, going outside of traditional channels to procure needed equipment, speaking personally about how the crisis affects them, and being realistic about the challenges ahead.

In the network of teams context, the leader's approach to communication will foster an environment of collaboration, transparency, and psychological safety that is crucial to its success.

Collaboration and transparency take hold when individuals in an organization feel psychologically safe. Leaders should recognize people who are taking smart risks, be authentic in their communications and empathetic toward those who are anxious, and acknowledge their mistakes to others. What they shouldn’t do is punish people for failing when they’ve taken risks, or exclude those with relevant information or expertise from the conversation.

Julia Rozovsky, one of the leaders of Google’s Project Aristotle—which studied hundreds of Google's teams to understand why some did well while others stumbled—believes that groups where each member has an equal opportunity to speak is a key variable to team performance. People need to feel invited to share their ideas by the group for peak performance to occur.

In a crisis of uncertainty, it can be easy for leaders to embrace the role of sole authority figure. For a while, people will feel comforted that a leader is taking charge. But if that is at the expense of allowing diverse views to assess the situation, anticipate what might be coming, and land on creative solutions to novel problems, then the teams’ performance will be suboptimal.

Exhibit 3
The hub and some of the spoke teams morph and add more teams as the network experiments and learns.
As the crisis unfolds and new needs emerge, panel three shows how this empowered crisis-response structure should evolve and grow, expanding naturally from the initial set of response teams to include additional subteams around each spoke. Teams whose work is interrelated, which will be commonplace, should connect directly with one another, not necessarily turning to the hub to share information and make joint decisions.

When leaders foster connections between and among teams, that will move the model away from a hub and spoke to a more extensive network. In this phase, there’s a lot going on with many teams. You’re doing everything you did in step two, but now your teams aren’t afraid to say something isn’t working. Part of the radical transparency in this phase is that teams can say, “Our plan isn’t good enough, we need to launch another team or several more teams.”

Creating psychological safety from the top down becomes even more important during times of crisis, when people are concerned about their own and others’ welfare. Members within and across teams must trust each other enough to share information with the collective and to continue experimenting after making mistakes. Otherwise, the new network may fail to deliver results.

Psychological safety underpins successful networks of teams by enabling the rapid sharing of information to address changing goals, and fostering an environment in which individuals and teams can rapidly test ideas, iterate, and learn from mistakes.

4. Turbocharge self-organization
We’ve discussed many of the technical points to setting up a network of teams—who should be involved, what their mix of skills should be, how they should interact, what resources they need, how the leaders should act. And at this point, once the initial network of teams is established and after support from leadership early in the journey, the network should become self-sustaining and self-managing.

In the fourth panel, the network begins to work together to mobilize at the edges, where the crisis is being fought most intensively. As problems are solved, some teams may go away.

As the number of people and teams increases in the network—in both the third and fourth panels—fewer people are connecting with each other all the time, but when they do, it is more meaningful. They know who to go to for what task. At the same time, too many connections per person can also lead to overload (too many emails, meetings,

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communications, and touchpoints). But with the right network structure you can achieve a “small world network,” which may be large with many teams, but it feels much smaller because of the degree of separation between people.

In a well-functioning network, the central hub does not begin to mimic the bureaucratic hierarchy that the network of teams is supplanting. The central hub stays connected to all the activities, but it avoids becoming a bottleneck that slows down the response.

Liberia’s 2014–15 response to the Ebola crisis is a good example of removing a bottleneck to get to a desired outcome more quickly. The nation’s initial Ebola task force was hampered by slow decision making and hierarchy, so it set up an “Incident Management System” network that empowered teams working on case management, epidemiology, safe burials, and other related issues. Liberia’s president interacted directly with the incident manager and convened a small group of advisers who provided advice on policy and sensitive matters.

It’s important to note that the empowered network of teams won’t encompass all of the organization’s activities; this is not a re-org. There is still a core set of functions operating in the more traditional way, where the normal organizational structures are still operating and performing their typical duties in a more or less traditional way.

Even though the evolution often happens organically in a successful network, it’s still crucial that leaders do their part to keep it going. They should encourage connections between teams. When a team comes to the executive team asking for support or expertise, the team should encourage the two groups to connect directly.

The centrality of the leadership hub that launched the teams will also decline. The importance of the respective teams and the leaders within the teams

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1 Average degrees of separation.

will evolve based on changes in the environment not on the designation of the leadership.

But even as you interact with individual teams less, your role becomes more important. You should continue setting the tone, modeling the actions you want to see, recognizing others who are taking risks and making real change, removing roadblocks for teams, and connecting people across the network. Finally, communicate widely, transparently, and authentically about your experience and the implications for others around you.

These tasks are a tall order for any leader who is working without a playbook. But a network can help by infusing the organization with a common purpose that allows it to respond more quickly to the challenges unleashed by the pandemic. It can also highlight important behaviors like empathy, communication, and clear decision making, and point the way to becoming a more dynamic, agile organization down the road.

These uncertain times can also spur leaders to reflect on what kind of organization, culture, and operating model they want to put in place, so they can avoid returning to previous patterns of behavior and instead embrace the next normal.

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