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COMMENTARY

Bringing polycultural organizations to life: A network analytic strategy

Scott Hines and Elizabeth Conjar

Amazon Web Services, North Seattle, WA, USA
Corresponding author: Scott Hines; Email: hinessco@amazon.com

Introduction

The emerging polyculturism perspective seeks to address inclusion shortcomings by emphasizing the interconnectedness of the workforce. With repeated interactions greater trust is engendered, promoting pro-social behaviors that benefit the entire organization (Pentland, 2012). This is consistent with social network practices where informational advantage is gained by tapping into under-connected pockets of the organization, allowing for increased flow of knowledge and mutual influence. As such, inclusion efforts may be amplified by striving to gain greater connectivity between employees of various backgrounds and through repeated interactions of disconnected groups. The goal is to break down barriers, increase awareness and cooperation, reduce perceived group differences, and create a more inclusive culture. This is how social network analysis, a data-driven approach to understanding the relationships between individuals and groups within organizations, measuring the flow of resources, information, and influence (Borgatti et al., 2018), can support polyculturism in increasing inclusion in a measurable way.

Extending the reach of polyculturism using network analytical research and approaches

Valenzuela and Bernardo (2023) provided some initial high-level guidance to increase inclusion within organizations. We supplement these strategies with additional research-backed network analytic strategies to jumpstart within and across group interconnectivity, enhance inclusion of the entire workforce, and improve organizational functioning. We recognize that organizations can often struggle to implement new ways of behaving, particularly when such patterns are well-established in the cultural fabric. Likewise, retooling an entire organization or cultural milieu is difficult and beyond the scope of most organizations. One of the primary lines of study in network analytic research is identifying methods to increase the probability of interactions and thus information sharing. In this commentary, we provide some simple data-backed recommendations to promote a polycultural organization and increase collaboration through connecting people from different regional, gender, ethnic, racial, experience, and tenure backgrounds as well as different internal organizations:

- **Promote Employee Voice and Psychological Safety:** For employees to share their voice and be active members of the organization, they must first feel safe to do so. As noted by Kremer et al. (2019), psychological safety is the foundation on which all additional interconnectivity and the freedom to openly share information are founded. As such, senior leaders play a critical role in promoting and integrating a secure environment in which group norms

promote information sharing. Psychological safety can also be analyzed at the group level, examining how high levels can improve disconnected group connectedness or may spread throughout the network in a contagion model.

- **Provide Behavioral Models:** Observing the behaviors of others and the resultant consequences, even when such observations are incidental, has substantial impact on changing the future behavior of the observer (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Indeed, due to the speed of uptake, Pentland (2012) suggests that as much as 90% of our learning should take place through observing others. As such, developing a culture of sharing information across boundaries may be as simple as modeling the desired behaviors and positively reinforcing them in others. As shown by Weber & Murnighan (2008), the presence of even a single consistent contributor tends to encourage others that share information as well. Thus, behavioral models set the stage for a cultural cascade influencing employees several steps away (Arena et al., 2023) and can be measured using social network analytics.

- **Incentivize Exploration and Seeking Diverse Perspectives:** New ideas are unlikely to arise through interactions within one's own inner circle. However, developing connections outside of one's familiar circle can be uncomfortable. Incentivizing nudges may be implemented to encourage cross-organization collaboration and information sharing. As noted by Pentland (2012), direct economic incentives can work, but network-based incentives increase the amount of social activity around a targeted idea increasing the likelihood that peers with incorporate these behaviors. For example, when a member of a team engages in a desired behavior (e.g., making a connection to a member of an otherwise unconnected team), all of the members of the focal employee's team are rewarded. Such schemes have been used by Pentland to increase the physical fitness of workout buddies, showing 4x better results than traditional methods and in neighborhoods to reduce energy consumption by 17%.

- **Activate Network Influencers:** As noted by Burt (2004) network brokers (i.e., influencers) are individuals who span clustered segments in the network by activating weak ties, connecting groups across disconnected gaps. These brokers have broad influence across the network with early access to diverse, often contradictory, information and interpretations, which gives them a competitive advantage in seeing good ideas and ability to successfully apply old notions in different ways. Through conducting network analysis, identifying these network influencers, and empowering them to act as organizational ambassadors to gather and disseminate information, organizations can better foster connections across employee segments and collaborate more effectively.

- **Bake Exploration into the Normal Course of Business:** In order to gather a broad array of perspectives, leaders may prioritize or require new projects to be reviewed by employees in different departments, geographic regions, and/or cultural groups to provide robust perspective and challenge the assumptions made. This process may take place using a simple acknowledgement section in projects, noting that input has been gathered from employees outside of a department that have not been previously connected.

- **Randomize Interactions Across the Employee Network:** Ideally, connectivity schemes would pair employees across an organization who operated in different employee segments, social clusters or departments, thus, providing access to greater diversity of thought from around the social network. In cases where such nuanced pairings are impossible, organizations may randomize employee connections, arranging for employees to socially connect and share information as a means to tie the organization together.

- **Develop Fast Movers:** Recent research conducted by Cross, et al. (2021) identified the practices utilized by newly hired and new-to-role employees who made rapid gains in establishing network influence. These employees proactively reached out across organizational boundaries to collect diverse perspectives, identified gaps in their existing network connections, built relationships with opinion leaders, and found advisors/trusted confidents to quickly and more successful integrate into networks at work. Such practices can be

formalized into existing onboarding programs to jump start careers, accelerate employee acculturation, build reputations and leverage broad perspectives. When done in tandem with formal mentoring, such programs enable better integration into the organization.

The strategies listed above incorporating the network perspective to promote polyculturism has the added benefit of generating greater organizational awareness of issues, processes, and initiatives taking place across an organization, reducing the number of steps required to connect any two employees and making the organization a smaller place. As such, employees may experience greater embeddedness by becoming more aware of the work that is taking place across the organization and how it contributes to the organization's goals.

Final thoughts

Effective communication is at the heart of any successful organization. Through a smooth flow of communication and tapping into diverse perspectives, an organization can better meet its ever-changing needs. Many organizations have utilized multicultural methods to create a variety of perspectives, but this can also come with its own set of challenges, leading to the emergence of the polycultural perspective. In order to promote a more inclusive and interconnected workplace, it is important to understand the concept of cultural diversity and network to improve employee communication. In this paper, we have outlined strategies that can help facilitate the flow of diverse perspectives and promote better communication and idea sharing. By embracing cultural and organizational diversity and promoting an inclusive workplace, organizations can foster a more collaborative and innovative environment for their employees.

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