The Three Most Important Roles

That You Don't Know About... Yet

The most powerful people in organizations often can't be identified on organization charts or process maps. These "stealth players" occupy critical places in informal organizational networks and have the ability to make or break change.

Who are the most powerful people in an organization? You might say the CEO or CFO. You'd be right… but not completely. Every organization has highly influential people who fly under the radar screen.

Underneath an organization's formal power structure, there are three hidden positions that have a great deal of influence (Stephenson, 1999). The first step towards identifying these people is understanding how they fit into the organizational landscape.

The Organizational Landscape

People create relationships in order to get things done. They connect with others who serve as trusted advisors, confidants, information brokers, and subject matter experts. These connections form the organization's informal network. In fact, employees are much more likely to go to people for information than they are to go to the internet, intranet, or corporate knowledge base (Cross, Parker, Prusak, & Borgatti, 2001). Sometimes people take their requests to their bosses. But they're more likely to turn to a coworker for help (Katzenbach, 2007).
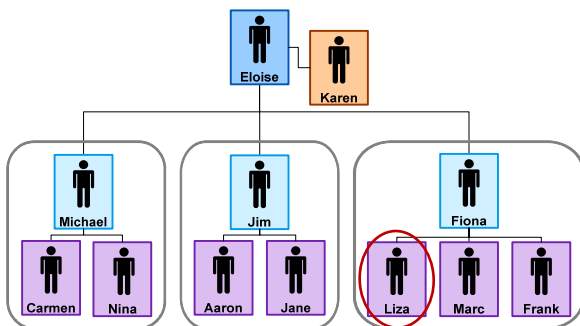

Figure 1: An Organization Chart
Image: Partnering Resources

Figure 1 shows a typical organization chart. In this example, Liza reports to Fiona who, in turn, reports to Eloise. This information is codified, confirmed, and consciously identified in the organization. What's not overt is Liza's informal network.

Figure 2 shows the network diagram for the Liza's organization. Here Liza connects directly to her boss Fiona and her departmental colleague Marc. She's also connected to Karen and Nina, with whom she has no formal reporting relationships.
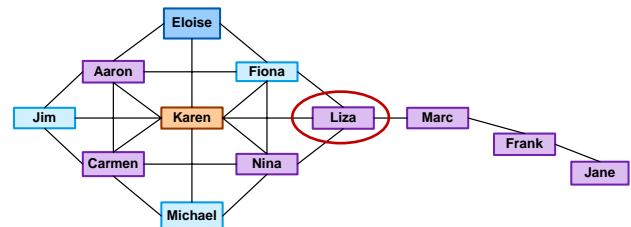

Figure 2: The Informal Network
Image: Adapted with permission from NetForm™

Why does it matter if Liza has direct connections outside her reporting structure? Because these are the relationships that she'll draw on in times of need.

In your organization, do you know who is connected to whom? Do you know the informal subject matter experts that people go to when in need? Do you know who is particularly good at creating innovative ideas? Who's great at finding better ways to get things done? Who's fantastic at strategic thinking?

You may have guesses. However, many of these people fly under the radar screen. Their importance is only felt when they leave the company—taking their knowledge with them. If you can identify your organization's informal network, you can tap into its power.

The Three Positions

Three critical positions emerge as "power roles" in informal networks (Stephenson, 1996). People in these roles have immense influence although they often don't know it.

The Hub. Hubs are directly connected to many people. They're the social butterflies of the company. They tend to know everyone and multitask effectively. They're compulsive communicators; tell something to a hub, and soon the entire organization will know about it.
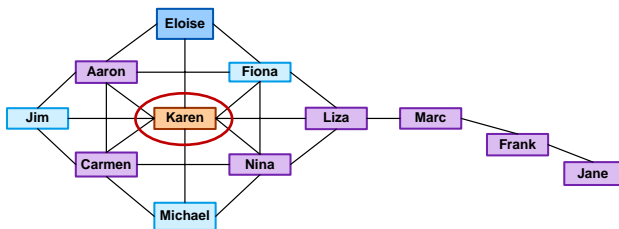

Karen is a hub. Despite having no direct reports, she has more connections than anyone else: she links directly to Jim, Aaron, Eloise, Fiona, Liza, Nina, Michael, and Carmen.

Although often unaware of their role, hubs are invaluable to organizations. For example, hubs can:

-   Disseminate messages quickly about a new process or procedure
-   Spread the word quickly about an important event
-   Get the people to know about a change in strategy

The Gatekeeper. Gatekeepers hold the keys to specific parts of an organization and groups of people. They must be accessed in order to receive certain information. Gatekeepers can be intense obstacles to change or tremendous supporters.
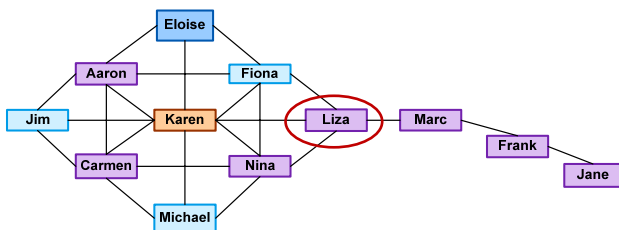
Liza is a gatekeeper. Marc, Frank, and Jane all work through Liza to access the informal knowledge they need from the rest of the organization. When Liza is engaged, she can:

-   Coordinate speedy passage of needed information
-   Approve access to certain people and data
-   Broker relationships between parts of the organization
-   Engage people past the "gate" in change

The Pulsetaker. Pulsetakers are the most covert of the three roles. Their claim to fame is that they are indirectly connected to a great number of people in the organization. They tend to have their fingers on the pulse of the organization. Without much effort, they can filter through information to tell you what's really happening in the company.
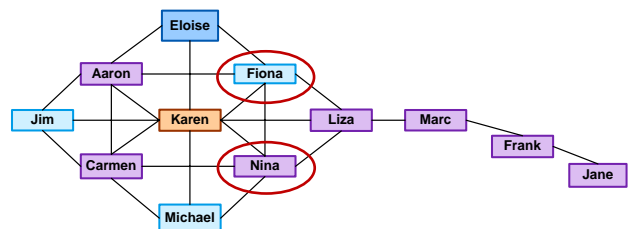
Fiona and Nina are pulsetakers. They can:

-   Get the word out quietly about what's going on
-   Tell you how people are feeling about the new change effort
-   Access the people who know the right people

How to Use the Three Key Roles

When properly leveraged, hubs, gatekeepers, and pulsetakers can help an organization implement change faster, execute projects more effectively, and make better decisions. Taking the time to identify people in these key roles can make the difference between a successful and a challenged project, a finished and an incomplete change initiative, and a satisfied and a dissatisfied customer.

Reference
Cross, R., Parker, A., Prusak, L., & Borgatti, S.P. (2001). "Knowing What We Know: Supporting Knowledge Creation and Sharing in Social Networks." *Organizational Dynamics*.
Katzenbach Partners (2007). "Don't Take Our Word for It: What Your Employees are Saying About the Informal Organization." In *The Informal Organization.*
Stephenson, K. (1999). "Networks." *CRC Handbook of Technology Management.*

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