

## Network Governance and Leadership Structure Development

### Document Purpose

---

This document is designed to help a network develop its governance and leadership structure. It can be used by emerging networks to develop leadership out of the gate, or by existing networks to re-design their current leadership structure.

It contains: Best Practice, Guidance, Worksheet Template, and an Appendix with examples.

### Best Practices

---

In the beginning, network governance tends to be informal. Typically, the network's founders form a steering or planning committee that usually operating through consensus and makes some of the early organizing decisions for the network: what the purpose is; who will be invited to join the network and what the membership rules are.

It can be challenging to balance efficient decision making with member-driven focus, because there isn't a single clear path that all networks need to follow. Consolidating leadership in a core group of members is important to generate buy-in and establish shared responsibility. Networks can enjoy long-term success by following basic guidelines that cultivate trust among members in self-governance systems.

Determining a network's governance involves enabling the network to come to life organically and stay alive over time with more and more structure as individual leaders change. There's a balance to be found. On the one hand, it's not ideal for only a few members to have all the decision-making authority. On the other hand, it's important for the network to be able to efficiently make decisions in a timely and accountable manner.

### Guidance

---

A new network must make three guiding choices: Who decides? What is decided? How is it decided? Answering these very basic questions can determine the reach and power of the network's governance structure. Establishing clear governance and associated responsibilities serves to establish clear and transparent expectations about network decision-making. It's crucial at the beginning to be clear about whose network it is. It's easy to say that it belongs to the members, but sometimes network founders carry too much responsibility and bear tasks they should be sharing.

The following charts break down each of these three elements. Much of this guidance can be found in [The Guidebook for Building Regional Networks 2.0](#)<sup>1</sup>

Who Decides?	
Smaller Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Members have equal power and decision-making abilities</li></ul>
Larger Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Larger networks can create representative governance in the form of steering committees</li></ul>
Large and Small Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Trust must be established through dialogue and consensus between members</li></ul>

---

<sup>1</sup> Plastrik, P. and Parzen, J. (2012). [Guidebook for Building Regional Networks 2.0](#).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Although leadership may be delegated to a steering committee, network goals and activities need to remain member driven and focused</li> </ul>
--	---

<b>Network Design Decisions Often Addressed by Network Leaders</b>
<p>Important leadership conversations include the items below (note: they may need to be revisited over time as the network grows and changes):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Purpose of the network—mission, vision, operating principles</li> <li>Objectives/goals</li> <li>Values and beliefs of the network</li> <li>Membership arrangements in the network</li> <li>Responsibilities of members</li> <li>Plans of the network</li> <li>Staffing or coordination decisions</li> <li>Distribution and acquisition of network resources (budgeting and fundraising)</li> </ul>

<b>How Are Decisions Made?</b>	
<b>By Imposition:</b> conditions set by others	A network founder, an individual member, or a funder of the network makes certain decisions. This entity acts independently to decide what the collective value proposition of the network is, or what the rules of communication among members are, and often works independently to complete work of the network.
<b>By Community:</b> participation by all members	All members discuss, deliberate, and decide. Decisions may require unanimous consent, or some majority of the members. Many users of consensus arrangements find that this method can get bogged down when there are disagreements among members.
<b>By Democracy:</b> majority vote of network representatives	A time-honored governance mechanism, this method empowers a representative group of the membership to make leadership decisions on behalf of the membership.
<b>By “Emergence”:</b> actions of members	Sometimes networks decide not by making decisions. The network will let each member do what it wants, as long as it doesn’t negatively affect the network. At points, the network will need to make a decision in order to move forward. At that time and place the network will address how, what, and who will make a decision. This method lets network decisions emerge over time.



## Appendix

The following is an excerpt of a leadership governance document created USDN and modified for use by SSDN:

<b>Southeast Sustainability Directors Network Steering Committee Roles and Responsibilities</b>	
1)	<b><u>Criteria for Selecting Co-Chairs</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) Must be a SSDN Steering Committee member</li><li>b) Have passion for building the network</li><li>c) Have a vision for the future of the network and a desire to achieve it</li><li>d) Have shown leadership within SSDN</li><li>e) Are highly connected to other members / commit to exchange with more than 8 other members</li><li>f) Past participation in SSDN activities exceeded minimum network participation requirements</li><li>g) Willing to serve for two years and execute the responsibilities of the position</li><li>h) Contribute to diversity of the Steering Committee (race, size of city, region, etc.)</li></ul>
2)	<b><u>Steering Committee Co-Chair Roles and Responsibilities</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) Set priorities for the Steering Committee with Network Coordinators</li><li>b) Lead network fundraising efforts</li><li>c) Confer monthly (at least 1 half hour phone call) on SSDN business</li><li>d) Chair Strategic Network Calls, Annual Meeting, and other meetings</li><li>e) Develop relationships with all funders</li><li>f) Co-lead SSDN Annual Meeting</li></ul>
3)	<b><u>Steering Committee Selection</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) SSDN members can nominate themselves for a Steering Committee Position.</li><li>b) Nominees should have intention to serve at least three years or for as long as they are SSDN members.</li><li>c) If a Committee member is nominated but is not interested or available to take on the role, he or she can decline.</li><li>d) All interested nominees will draft a short paragraph (2---3 sentences) about why they would like to serve on the SSDN Steering Committee.</li></ul>
4)	<b><u>Steering Committee Roles and Responsibilities- the SSDN Steering Committee seeks candidates who:</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) Have exceeded minimum network participation requirements</li><li>b) Are regularly connecting with other members</li><li>c) Have shown leadership within SSDN</li><li>d) Have a vision for the future of the network and a desire to help build it</li><li>e) Will contribute to the overall diversity of the Steering Committee (race and ethnicity, gender, size of city, and region)</li><li>f) Are willing to serve for two years and execute the responsibilities of the position, which are:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>(1) Contribute to achievement of the purpose of SSDN</li><li>(2) Help establish goals, objectives, and budgets</li><li>(3) Assist in fundraising for SSDN</li><li>(4) Be an ambassador for SSDN</li><li>(5) Participate in at least 75% of steering committee calls</li><li>(6) Respond to requests for help from network coordinators</li><li>(7) Lead one or participate in several SSDN activities (i.e. committees, groups, emerging projects)</li><li>(8) Recruit members to SSDN</li><li>(9) Communicate regularly with members about their activities, interests, and needs</li><li>(10) Read the weekly e---newsletter and make regular posts to the usdn.org website</li><li>(11) Dedicate at least 5 hours/month in total</li></ul></li></ul>