Chapter 1

Getting Started

Before you dive in and begin organizing, a bit of planning can help ensure that you and your network get off to a good start. This chapter offers some thoughts on how to go about that, helping you to move forward quickly while the energy and opportunity are there, and in a way more likely to lead to short- and long-term success, however you define it.

You’ll find here a framework that you and your team can use to develop your own unique model, wherever or whatever your community, for the network that’s most likely to provide your group with a strong foundation. You may choose to adopt one of these models more or less as described, or you may combine elements of different models into a unique vision that best suits the goals, resources, and assets of your group.

If you’re interested in more technical or academic detail on landowner typology research, please see the Appendix (page 71).

Choosing your network type

Your network’s purpose and vision

There are a variety of reasons to create a landowner network. Some networks exist mainly to offer learning opportunities to their members. Some exist to support advocacy efforts. Some support the work of volunteers who provide a valued service to their peers, local youth, a church group, or others. And, some networks exist primarily to build capacity to do on-the-ground conservation work such as invasive species control or tree inspection.

Only after you’ve articulated at least a general purpose can you begin to answer questions like:

• What would success look like for this group?
• Who needs to be involved? How many people are needed and with what kinds of skills, knowledge, connections, or resources?
• In five years, what do you want to be able to say that this network has achieved?
• How long does this network need to last? How will you know when it’s no longer needed?
• What kinds of activities will be needed to sustain the group’s energy and progress toward its goals?

Our “Getting Started” worksheet (pages 4–5) may be helpful at this stage. While you may not be prepared to fill in all the worksheet’s boxes, they may help you to think through some key questions at this early stage. We encourage you to fill it in either individually or as a group exercise with the other members of your leadership group. If possible, consider having individuals fill it in on their own, then compare answers to develop a richer picture that includes each person’s perspective.
**GETTING STARTED WORKSHEET**

**Purpose —**
Why create this group? What is its purpose?

**Outcomes —**
What measurable things do you want this group to accomplish? How will you know you’ve accomplished them?

**Communication —**
What are the three most important things you want the world to know about this group?

**Collaborators —**
Identify groups and organizations whose collaboration is important to your success.

**Marketing —**
How do you give and receive information?
Network methods —
How will you accomplish your goals? (e.g., offer tours, meetings, webinars, etc.)

Decision making —
Who makes decisions, and how are they made?

Background —
What events or conditions created the need for this group?

Opportunities —
What partners, events, or other ideas might help jump-start your group?

Constraints —
What are potential barriers to the group’s success?
Finding collaborators and building a leadership team

Working through the “Getting Started” worksheet can help with another important task early in the network visioning and formation stage: building a leadership team. You are taking a leadership role by pulling your group together and helping to facilitate its foundation. Part of that facilitation is to identify and recruit others who can help share the load.

While having a single leader has its advantages, it leaves the network vulnerable to a change in that one individual’s ability or desire to continue to lead. The most successful groups are those with several people in leadership positions sharing responsibilities. Fostering leadership qualities in others ensures the group’s continuity when life tosses in unexpected changes.

Delegate. Ask for help. Let others offer their skills and resources to accomplish the group’s objectives. If you can’t or don’t ask for help, or if you create an environment in which help cannot be offered, don’t expect it to be forthcoming. Collaboration is the name of the game. Your network will be stronger, and the workload more manageable, if a small group of committed leaders can inform and influence its early development.

You’ll need to be able to articulate your vision and purpose for the group as you recruit these leaders. While you don’t want to make all the key decisions in advance, you do want to be able to explain clearly what the network will be about and why. It’s easier for someone to commit time from a busy schedule to a well-defined, clear idea than a general concept.

What kind of leadership team do you need? Just as every group is unique, the composition and roles of a group’s leadership team can be distinct as well. The composition of your leadership team should follow from the group’s purpose and a general idea of a strategic plan:

- What skills, connections, and perspectives are needed to support the group’s work?
- Do you need a large or small leadership team?
- Should the team’s role be advisory or directive?

Some networks function best with a very small leadership group and a larger and more inclusive advisory group, which may be organized more or less formally and may or may not ever all meet together.

**Minnesota Women’s Woodland Network**

The Minnesota Women’s Woodland Network (MWNN) “is dedicated to building a community of women owners, their families and land managers to nurture a land ethic. The MWNN creates supportive, informal, small-group learning opportunities on topics that include trees, nature, and caring for the land.”

The network consists of a 15-member steering committee composed of women representing a variety of forestry-related organizations and perspectives. Steering committee members were chosen based on their positions within their respective organizations (in some cases), to achieve geographic representation across the forested areas of Minnesota, and on personal factors such as leadership capacity and personal interest in the network.

The steering committee’s task was to discern how an outreach program could be important and to conduct a review of similar programs in Maine and at Oregon State University. From that point of discovery, the steering committee cooperatively developed a mission statement, identified core topics, sought financial support for the new program, and chose how they would engage women in learning. The committee’s vision included seven place-based networks, each with a leader who was also a member of the steering committee (though not all steering committee members created their own local networks). It took an entire year to get from organizing a steering committee to holding the first MWNN event.

The original steering committee doesn’t meet anymore, but it served an essential role early in the network’s development. This role included increasing recognition and knowledge of the group’s existence among key players in the Minnesota forestry community; developing a well informed and broadly supported vision, mission, and goals; helping to identify a workable organizational structure; and engaging key players early on.
Who are the people I want to reach?

There are many ways to get to know about the people you want to engage. Of course, word of mouth and local knowledge are important sources of information. Chances are, you’re already well connected with local contacts, and their values and perspectives should inform your work. But it’s also important to look beyond those with whom you’re already engaged and connected. It’s wise to have a clear focus on a particular group rather than trying to serve everybody, and the more you know about that group, the better you’ll be able to reach them and engage them in your work.

Sources of information

National Woodland Owner Survey (NWOS) table maker

The NWOS is a national database compiled from anonymous responses to a survey administered periodically to a random sample of the nation's family forest owners. The NWOS table maker allows custom searches at the state or multi-state level based on a variety of criteria, including owner demographics, forest holdings, and land management history. Unfortunately, NWOS data cannot be scaled down to the county or local level, but state-level data combined with local knowledge can be quite helpful and may reveal some unexpected results. http://apps.fs.fed.us/fia/nwos/tablemaker.jsp

Tools for Engaging Landowners Effectively (TELE)

Building on the NWOS database and integrating other social marketing research, the TELE website offers recommended tools and strategies to engage the people you want to reach. The TELE website can help bridge the gap between the heavy and somewhat technical data presented in the NWOS table maker and a real-world strategic planning process designed to support a local landowner group. http://www.engaginglandowners.org/

Local training sessions

There are many programs out there for woodland owners. University Cooperative Extension and state forestry agencies offer many sources of aid for woodland owners across their states. Finding these programs and attending them with both a learning and networking goal can help you find other woodland owners of like mind who might like to create a peer network group to support their own education and activities.

Research articles

If you have access to academic literature, there is a tremendous amount of published research about family forest owners. You may need to figure out how to apply studies of landowner populations from different areas and scales that range from the county to the nation, but this research may still be helpful. If you don't have access to these articles, your local Extension forester may be able to help.

Finding each other

In 2004, at a Pennsylvania Forest Stewards basic training, two landowners who happened to live in the same county in southern Pennsylvania met for the first time. After two intensive weekends of forest stewardship training, these two decided that they wanted to continue their education and link it to their local community. At that time, their county did not have a regional forest stewardship group; so, they decided to start one. They had been exposed to a broader swath of forest stewardship at the state level, and they wanted to create a place where landowners could come together, learn, and get practical advice on options for their woodland. Their initial exposure and learning through the Pennsylvania Forest Stewardship program got them started on the vision and local development process, and finding a fellow woodland owner of like mind and interest created the start of a new community group. This group is still going strong today.
**County tax records**

County assessor and/or recorder’s offices maintain records of land and landowners within their boundaries. These records are public information, and you should be able to access them. They may be useful as you develop mailing lists or seek to identify certain kinds of landowners within the county. Note that there is geographic variation: in some parts of the country, records may be kept at the town, parish, Indian reservation, or other level.

In many cases, staff at the appropriate office can help you identify different segments of the county landowner audience. For example, you might only want to know about landowners in one township within the county. Or, you may only want landowners who have land in a certain cover type (e.g., forest) or larger or smaller than a certain acreage. The availability of these data and the cost and time required to obtain them vary greatly based on the counties that you’re interested in.

**Local knowledge**

Chances are, you’re not the first to try to organize or assist your group of interest. Staff at natural resource agencies like your land-grant university’s Extension Service, the Farm Service Agency, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Soil and Water Conservation District, state natural resource conservation agencies, or others may have valuable insight and experience to share. Private organizations like landowner associations, conservation groups, environmental organizations, land trusts, or others may also be interested in helping.

Knowledgeable and respected landowners like those with whom you’re wishing to connect can provide a different—and valuable—perspective. A few contacts and interviews with representatives of these groups, even if you don’t particularly expect to work closely with them, may be valuable early on, both to learn from their experience and to offer them the courtesy of keeping them informed of what your group is up to. You may be surprised how willing they are to help.

**Gatekeepers**

We all know those folks who are well-connected and respected within their communities. Think about the postmaster in a small town, the minister at a local church, the Extension agent who holds educational events on myriad topics. These folks are known as “gatekeepers” because they, as trusted individuals, can open doors to new groups or help establish connections based on common interest.

Ask those you trust and that you perceive as well-connected if they know other woodland owners who might be interested in becoming a member of your group. You don’t have to know everyone; you just have to introduce yourself to people who can help you find those you don’t know. And their knowing you and what you’re trying to do...
can help you attract members. Gatekeepers can provide a “seal of approval” and support your efforts in building your group.

**Broadening the circle: recruiting members**

There’s no single “right” way to recruit members to join your group. In fact, you may not even want to at first. Some network leaders want the organization to be on firm footing before they begin recruiting members or participants. Others decide to begin recruiting before the leadership and organizational structures are in place; they want to engage potential members early on to help set the direction. Or, they may view early recruiting strategies as a way to gauge local interest in the network or to identify potential leaders they didn’t know before.

Once it’s time to begin recruiting, a variety of tactics may be useful. Some are more of a “sell” than others; you can choose the method(s) that seems best aligned with your group’s resources and preferred way of doing business.

- Use word of mouth and personal contacts to invite people who have an interest in the issues that the network will address.
- Place ads in local print or online media.
- Share press releases in local print or online media. (See Chapter 3 for how to create a press release.)
- Request time to speak at gatherings of like-minded individuals. These might include Extension workshops, local community group meetings, church groups, or others.
- Organize fun, community-building events designed to build relationships. Offer only a “soft sell” for your network.
- Partner with local organizations of like-minded people to offer events that are higher-profile than you might be able to pull off alone. This can raise the network’s profile.
- Create online spaces for potential recruits to meet and learn a bit about the organization. These can be traditional web pages. They may also include social media and other interactive communications. (See Chapter 3 for more information on social media.)

**Organizational models**

**Master volunteer program**

With this model, a small group of learners completes a structured training program of between 20 and 80 hours. Some or all “graduates” of the training go on to complete volunteer activities consistent with the program’s purpose and mission. Perhaps the best-known program offered under this model is Master Gardener. A more forestry-related example is Cornell University’s New York Master Forest Owner (MFO) program. MFO volunteers are trained to conduct one-on-one...
property visits with other landowners by landowner request.

Some master volunteer programs focus on preparing participants for leadership roles with conservation organizations. Others share their new knowledge with local networks of which they are a part. A key element of this model is building strong relationships among the cohort of trainees to support mutual assistance and contact after the training.

**What it takes**

This model, more structured and centrally managed than the others presented here, generally requires access to quality instructors and to paid staff who organize trainings, communicate with and support the work of volunteers, evaluate program outputs and impacts, and (in many cases) obtain funding necessary to support program activities. Many master volunteer programs receive significant in-kind support from Extension faculty and staff. While costs may vary widely for programs offered under this model, annual budgets tend to be in the range of $10,000 to $30,000, excluding salaries for paid staff. Major costs include instructional expenses, lodging for trainees (many of these trainings are offered over several days), volunteer communications, and evaluation expenses.

**Examples of master volunteer programs**

- New York Master Forest Owner
- Idaho Master Forest Stewards
- Pennsylvania Forest Stewards
- Oregon Master Woodland Manager
- Minnesota Master Naturalist

**Individual local learning network**

These networks exist mainly to offer minimally structured learning opportunities to local residents, not to create a cadre of volunteers or advocates. Local learning networks can be small and informal, and participants have a prominent role in designing and offering learning events. Meetings are often informal and can be held at regular intervals (i.e., monthly) with a big meeting once or twice a year.

Events can take many forms, from a book club or discussion-based home study model to a series of member-hosted property visits. They can include presentations from outside experts or simply a time for members to share their experiences and information. Events can and should be tailored to the preferences of group members.

While every group is different, research suggests that learners place a high value on the comfortable atmosphere created by repeated contact with their peers and resource people. Over time, the social value of this contact can become important for learning and for motivating continued participation. This is particularly true of women. Women learners also value hearing periodically from a variety of people, including academic researchers, conservation professionals, and both new
and long-time landowners. Many conservation-related networks especially value frequent field site visits, at least during certain seasons of the year.

What it takes

While these networks are quite diverse, a few things can make life much easier for their organizers and contribute to their stability. The simplest networks, which may operate much like book clubs, require only simple coordination and planning (e.g., email exchanges to keep each other informed). Some small groups may have the support of an Extension educator or other organization staff member who can help coordinate the group.

For larger or more complex networks, paid professional educators whose knowledge and personalities are well aligned with the group can offer invaluable and, potentially, long-term support to learning networks. They can also be important bridges between learners and professional and academic resource people.

Examples of local learning networks

• Book clubs or home study groups
• Woodland owner groups and associations committees

Centrally led, local learning networks

Local learning networks can be stand-alone or subgroups of larger regional networks. Of course, more centralized management has both advantages and disadvantages. Advantages include more streamlined operations, a reduced burden on local leaders, and coordinated planning. Disadvantages include less local control and, in some cases, a dependence on the central leader. This dependence can inhibit local leaders’ initiative for creating new ventures due to perceived or real conflict with the centralized direction.

What it takes

Depending on network size and scope, this model may require both a central leader and local group leaders. The level of central and local control can vary widely among programs, and central leadership can reside either in an individual or a committee. In some cases, a committee of local leaders can serve as a leadership team, although a dedicated central leader can be a great asset to local groups.

The funding required to run a successful, centrally led local learning network depends on communication systems, the format and location of learning events, distance between local networks, how frequently a coordinator must travel among networks, and other factors. Learning networks that are able to use communication technology such as Skype, videoconferencing, and similar technologies, or that do not require frequent visits from distant experts, will have lower costs. But, in many cases, participants most value hands-on, field-based learning that cannot happen online. We discuss funding variables in more detail in Chapter 5.

Examples of centrally led, local learning networks

• Oregon Women Owning Woodlands Network (WOWnet)
• Minnesota Women’s Woodland Network
Paid-membership association

Whatever your group’s purpose, a paid-membership model may be appropriate. Participants make some sort of annual payment for the benefits of membership. Benefits may include access to member-only communications, reduced registration fees at events, greater access to network staff, or votes on organizational decisions, to name a few.

The membership model has both advantages and disadvantages. Membership fees provide relatively stable revenue to fund paid staff, to support communications like mailed newsletters or Internet hosting fees, and to offset the many other costs of running an organization. Fees can also create a sense of investment in members, which may affect both their commitment to the organization and the strength with which they identify with the group.

Of course, there are also drawbacks. Membership records must be maintained and members cajoled to renew every year. Membership fees can be a barrier to those who cannot or do not wish to pay for an educational service. This is especially true for Extension programs, which historically have been well-funded and free. Most people are reluctant to pay to join a network or group unless they see a clear value (although some will join just because they like the group or support its mission). In other words, if they don’t have a reason to expect membership benefits at least equal to the annual cost of joining, people may simply not join the group. This creates a continuing challenge to network organizers and leaders not only to provide, but also to communicate, the network’s value to potential members.

An alternative method is to invite or encourage donations in lieu of a requirement to pay every year.

What it takes

Running a paid-membership organization is more complex in some ways than running a free network. At a minimum, the organization will need a person who is responsible for tracking the status of members, soliciting new members, and inviting existing members to renew (and then reminding them, often many times); and, that person will likely need software and a communications system. The organization will also have to develop policies to manage lapsed memberships.

Examples of membership associations

- Local conservation groups
- Minnesota Seasonal and Recreational Property Owners (MSRPO)
- State forest landowners associations

Action- or project-based conservation network

Some networks exist mainly to mobilize volunteers to work on conservation activities. Simple but labor-intensive activities like invasive species eradication or ecological restoration are well-suited to this model. The work can be done either as a series of work parties on members’ properties or on public lands.

What it takes

Depending on the scale, this model can use more- or less-centralized leadership or coordination. A key consideration: For any activity that involves using hazardous
equipment or chemicals (e.g., chainsaws or herbicides), liability must be an important concern.

Examples of action-oriented conservation groups

- Trees for the Evelyn and Atherton Tablelands (an Australian Landcare group)
- Alliance of Forest Workers and Harvesters

Choosing the right model: some thoughts

While nothing is set in stone, it is important to make an informed decision about the organizational model your network should use. Changing the group’s structure can be difficult after the group has formed. The people you hope will take part in the network should have a role in choosing the network’s form and structure, because the alignment of their preferences with what they experience through the network will be crucial to their continued involvement.

Consider the thoughts that follow as you weigh the pros and cons of the organizational model you might choose.

• Your network’s purpose and goals

Remember that a group’s main purpose, whether it is to foster learning, advocacy, or conservation action, determines its needs and guides the choice of organizational model.

• Costs and a financial plan

While revenue may not seem a major concern early on, that can change as the group grows and evolves. Funds may be required to cover travel expenses for a distant instructor, printing and postage (or other communication) costs, equipment, and other expenses. Networks that may have a greater need for funds should organize in a way that supports those expenses through membership fees, grants, or other strategies.

• Leadership capacity

A single, motivated leader can get a lot done. But a single-leader model leaves the group vulnerable over the long term. Having more than one leader, or rotating leadership, can provide a more stable foundation. Groups that have a number of committed leaders or the financial wherewithal to hire staff may support more ambitious growth with less risk than a group that has leadership concentrated in a single individual.

• Scale

Your vision of the scale on which you hope the group might eventually operate should guide the choice of an organizational model. For example, as happened in Oregon: If you have a network that is free to join, funded through grants with the idea of serving 100 women in 3 counties, what will you do if the group grows to 500 women in 9 counties who want to get together on a regular basis?

Some models scale up or down more readily than others. For instance, models that offer the kinds of services that justify membership fees (such as postage, renting porta-potties at field events, or facility rental) will still be able to support these services as the group grows, because membership income will grow as well.
• **Liability and legal considerations**

  The last thing you want to do is expose volunteer leaders or yourself (paid or unpaid) to liability risk. Incorporation and development of standard procedures (e.g., bylaws) can provide some measure of protection (but only if you follow them!). Careful selection of activities that the group may organize can increase or reduce risk; chainsaw work by untrained volunteers, for example, may not only expose the volunteers to personal risk, but the group and its leaders to liability risk.

• **Social capital**

  A broad base of support within the community can be invaluable. As we discuss in Chapter 5, developing relationships with local conservation organizations such as the Extension Service, Soil and Water Conservation District, state and local conservation agencies, nonprofits, and others can connect you to potential instructors and provide information about funding opportunities and emerging issues. These organizations are often eager to support self-sustaining networks of learners or conservation advocates and can be important connections for your group.

*Women and Their Woods members staying warm during a field tour.*