NETWORKS
+ACTION THE WAY WE WORK

ONTARIO
NONPROFIT
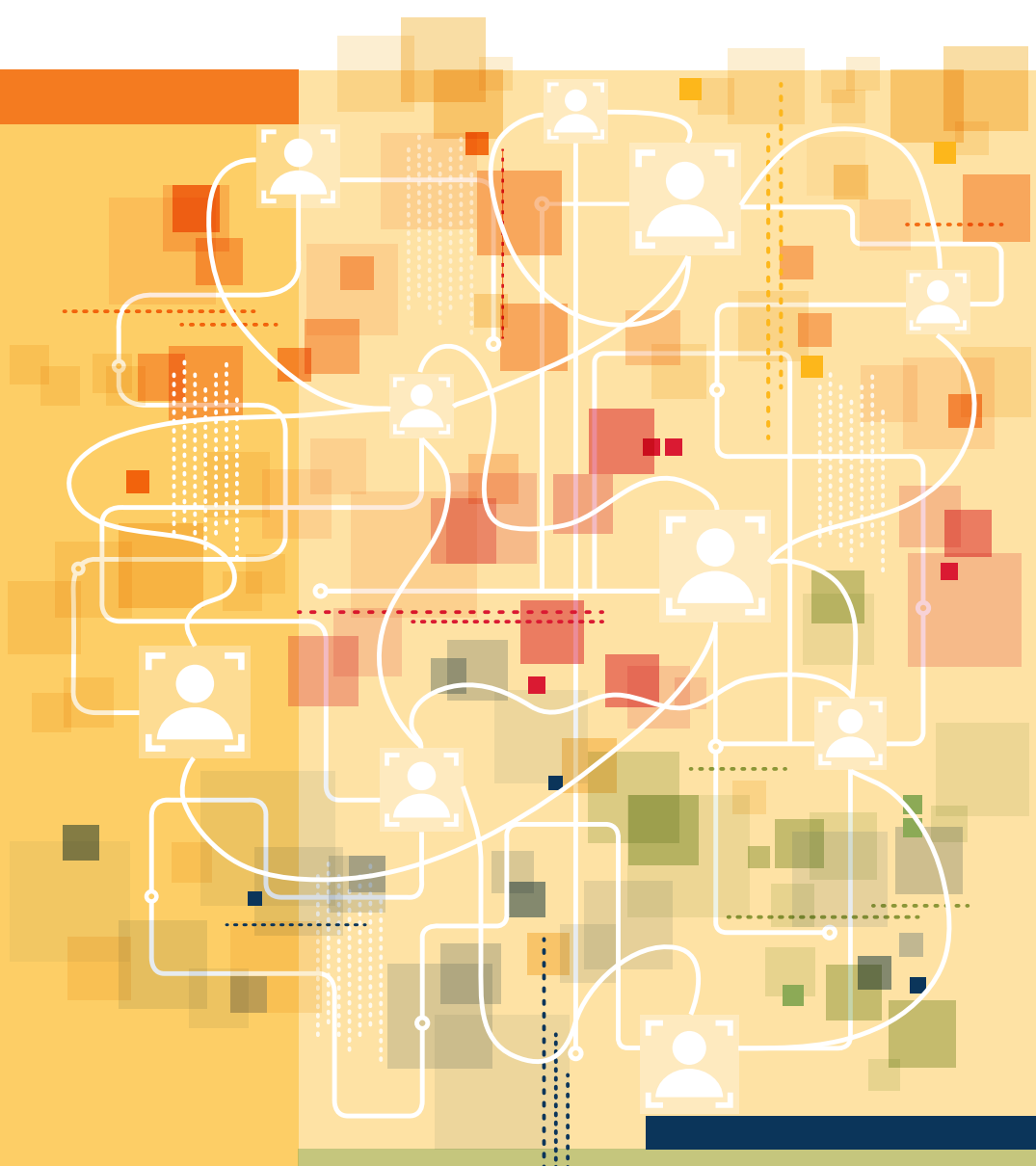NETWORK

VERSION 1.0

This guide is a chance for the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) to articulate what's currently working for us, and what we've learned from others. We hope it serves as a jumping off point for more learning across networks that do (or could in the future) partner or learn with ONN. For those of you interested in getting more involved in ONN's work, we hope this serves as a guide to how you can engage. If you're on your own organizing journey, we hope these ideas are useful for your work, and that you'll share what you're learning along the way.

COLOUR CODE LEGEND

⚙️	**HOW ONN WORKS**
📙	**ONN'S STORY**
ℹ️	**NETWORK INSIGHTS**

⚙️ **ONN VISION & MISSION**

Today, ONN is the convening network for the approximately 55,000 nonprofit organizations across Ontario. As a 7,000-strong provincial network, with a volunteer base of 300 sector leaders, ONN brings the diverse voices of the nonprofit sector to government, funders and the business sector to create and influence systemic change. ONN activates the network to develop and analyze policy and works on strategic issues by engaging its working groups, nonprofits and charities, businesses and government.

OUR VISION: A Strong and Resilient Nonprofit Sector. Thriving Communities. A Dynamic Province.

OUR MISSION: To engage, advocate, and lead with – and for – nonprofit and charitable organizations that work for the public benefit in Ontario.

ONN actively convenes voices: We are not a single voice representing the sector.

With some initial research about models of organizing, leaders that had vision and tenacity, and a burning platform - a piece of legislation to galvanize the nonprofit sector - a network was born.

From the start, ONN has resisted a formal organizational structure. Instead, we focused on getting work done and testing structures to help make that happen. That **flexibility has been key**. In the initial days, when a group of sector leaders were asked about policy support for the sector, respondents explicitly rejected the idea of forming a new organization. They did agree there was work to be done... so **we focused on the work**.

The **network approach** helped to identify common cause and then distribute power and resources to involve many people in building solutions. To address the complex issues that face the sector, network approaches have proven to be better suited than a more formal organizational approach.

ⓘ WHY NETWORKS?

Action-oriented networks tend to be useful when groups of people are dealing with a complex issue, and when there isn't clear agreement and certainty about what to do - but a change is urgently needed.

When collective action is useful, a network approach brings system change by:

Improving the quantity and quality of relationships and knowledge of how people are connected

Mobilizing more leadership, expanding opportunities for people to step into leadership positions

Increasing inclusion and communication leads to tapping new resources

Generating more actions (like collaboration) that lead to breakthroughs

Facilitating and scaling impact

(Source: Network Weaver Handbook)

NETWORK CHARACTERISTICS

- Openness and transparency
- Loose boundaries and structures invite a diversity of perspectives and encourage healthy disagreement
- Focus on innovation, experimentation, and learning
- Leaders encourage peers to act and take initiative; responsibility is shared
- Organization is bottom up, emergent, and responds to current context
- Requires investment in new processes, mindsets and structures for working together

ORGANIZATION CHARACTERISTICS

- A clear chain of command and decision-making
- A strong and stable structure, where leadership is centralized and set, organizing is top-down
- People are assigned tasks according to their place in the organization
- People need to agree; there is pressure to be alike and aligned
- Focus on planning and goals

Networks and organizations are not mutually exclusive; they can work together. When they do, they need to be intentional about how their parts and principles interact.

"While organizations tend to strongly favor order and regard chaos as a crisis to be avoided, networks have to respect and maintain member autonomy—and the chaos it may bring. Members have to find their own reasons to choose to work with other members. Instead of squelching chaos, network builders have to recognize it as a source of network vitality."

(Source: Connecting to Change the World: Harnessing the Power of Networks for Social Impact)

ⓘ RECOGNIZING THE NEED FOR A NETWORK APPROACH

By definition, sector-wide work to address complex and emerging issues requires exploration, and trial and error.

ONN has learned that innovations or opportunities emerge over time, from unexpected people and places, and cannot be known from the very start.
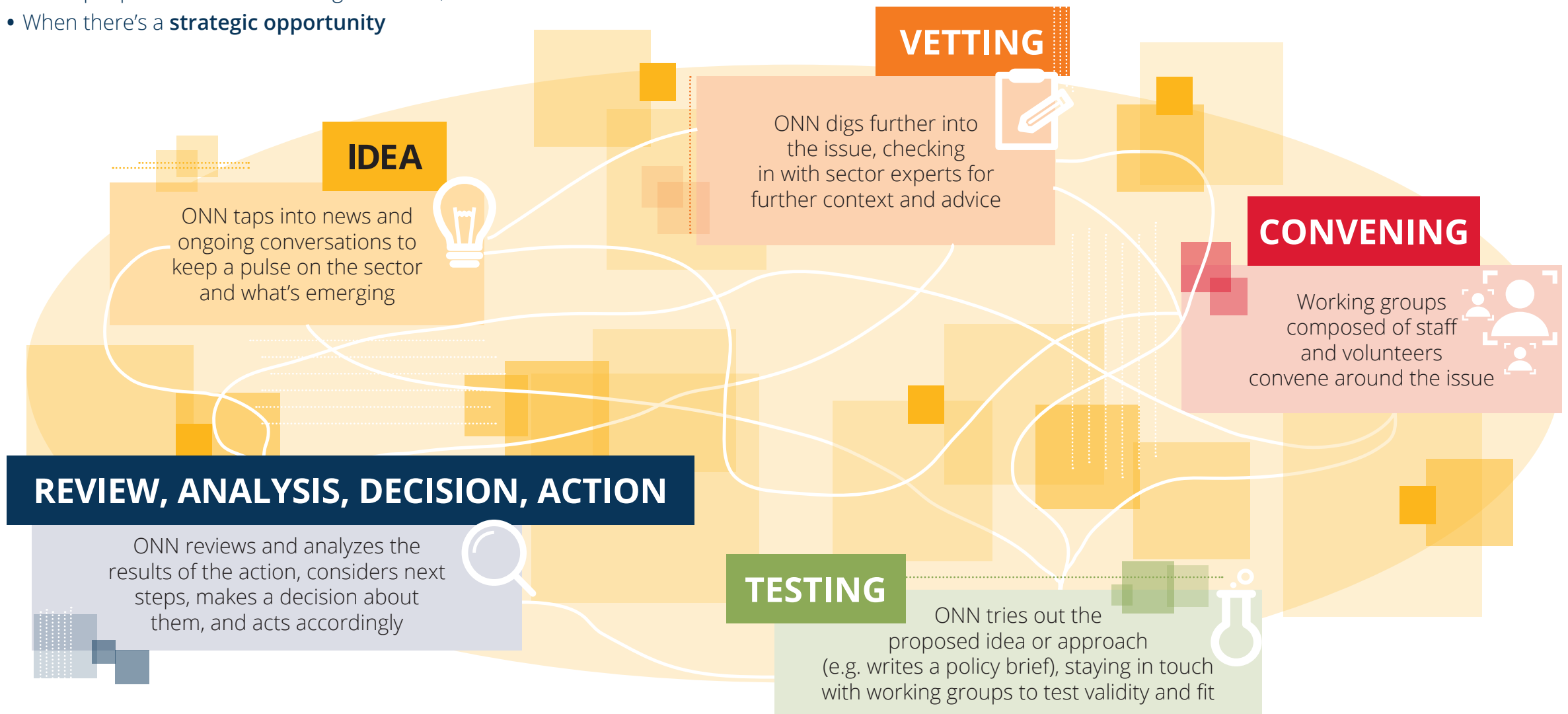
Actions that need to be taken will likely need new systems and ways of doing things, and new connections across pockets of expertise.

From the start, ONN has used and adapted a vetting process to determine whether we take an issue on:

- When there is **energy** to address an issue that affects Ontario's nonprofit sector
- When people are **active** in driving it forward, and
- When there's a **strategic opportunity**

VETTING

ONN digs further into the issue, checking in with sector experts for further context and advice

IDEA

ONN taps into news and ongoing conversations to keep a pulse on the sector and what's emerging

CONVENING

Working groups composed of staff and volunteers convene around the issue

REVIEW, ANALYSIS, DECISION, ACTION

ONN reviews and analyzes the results of the action, considers next steps, makes a decision about them, and acts accordingly

TESTING

ONN tries out the proposed idea or approach (e.g. writes a policy brief), staying in touch with working groups to test validity and fit

Whenever a policy issue or opportunity arises, ONN uses the process above to determine whether or not it makes sense for the network to convene around the issue. The process is not always followed in the same order. The steps are often revisited throughout the time ONN is working on a given issue.

AN OPPORTUNITY IS BORN

In 2007, a cross-cutting issue emerged for the nonprofit sector: the Ontario Government's plan to modernize the legal framework governing the sector - the new Ontario Not-for-Profit Corporations Act. This proved to be a magnet to attract people and forge a new way of working together.

ONN worked, from the onset, to establish a way to rally organizations across the sector, bring people together to address the cross-cutting issues that impact the sector's operations, and increase and build relationships across sub-sectors that were operating as separate silos.

Illustration by KAP Design

ONN WORKING GROUPS

If an issue fits with ONN's mandate, people who have strategic ideas and feel invested in the work get together and ONN reaches out to the network to connect to experts on the issue. A working group is usually a mix of ONN staff and volunteer leaders on the topic. The group clarifies why they want to work together, what goal or outcome they're seeking - and what specific actions they can take to make it happen. The group also considers who else has a stake in the issue.

ONTARIO NONPROFIT NETWORK
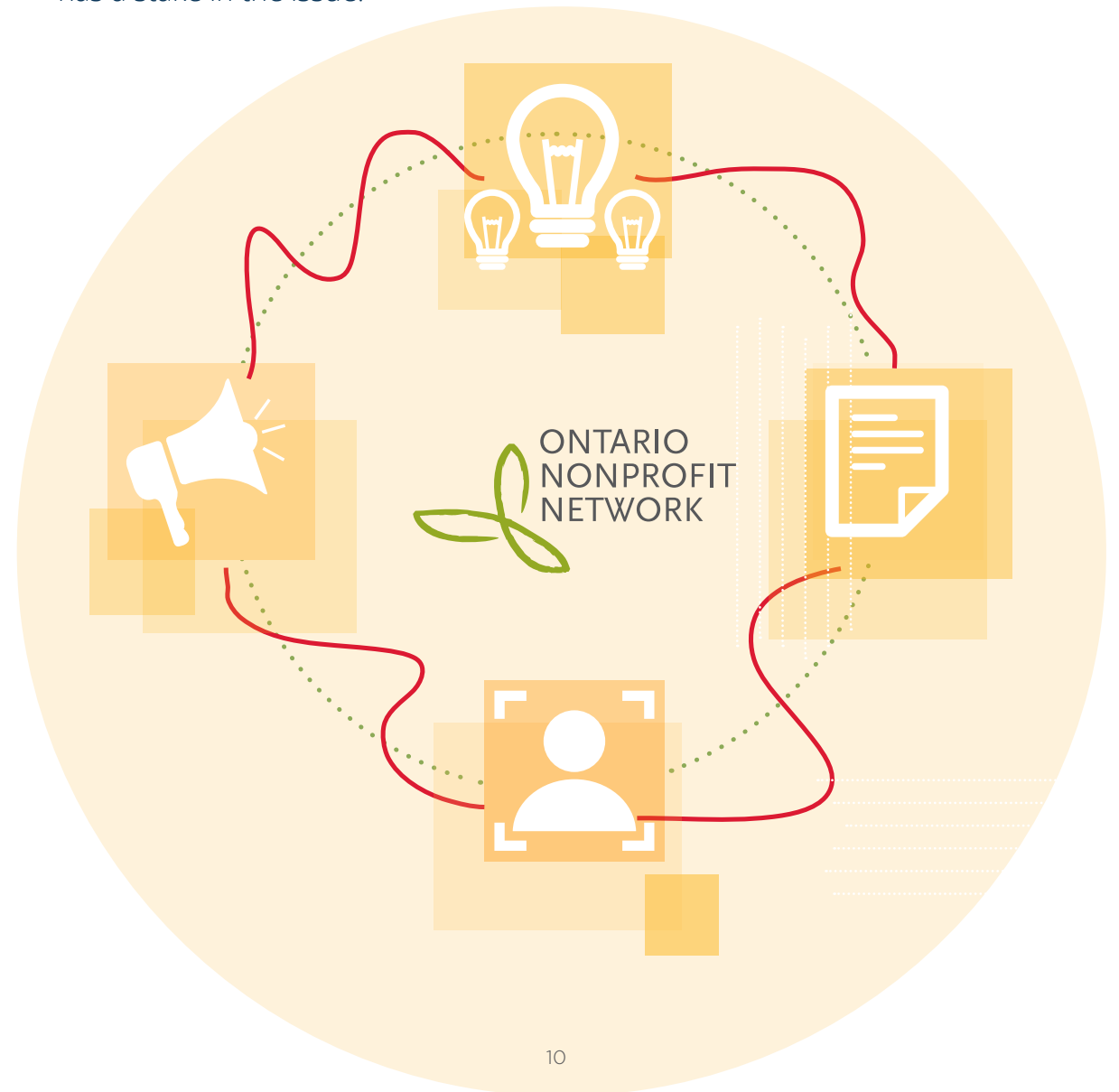
Once formed, a group might get big or remain small. It might stay together for many years, or only for a short time. It might become a bit more formal, like a Council, or it might be an informal series of conversations and emails. All those essential details depend on three things:

1) an attractor (clear motivation)
2) clear strategy (an idea about where the work might go and what actions to try)
3) an active group of stakeholders driving the work forward (the perspective and expertise needed to get the job done).

ONN's working groups usually have a core leadership team and a broader group of people who provide perspective at key points. E.g. through key informant interviews, feedback through an email list, etc.

ONN's working groups are not committees. They are not structured on formal or representational seats - membership flows in and out depending on the capacity and expertise available. They are viewed as temporary, staying together only for as long as they have an opportunity to make a strategic difference.

ONN developed through the creation of a working group on the new Ontario Not-for-Profit Corporations Act. With the working group, ONN generated briefs to inform and gather insights from the sector. The role ONN took on to brief the sector defined our purpose as a network: **to connect resources and generate ideas, and provide policy support to the sector. This meant convening people and encouraging everyone to act.**

ONN CONVENES FOR ACTION

ONN has developed its culture and practice around action (as we say, "getting stuff done!"). By using community organizing principles and tapping its network, together as a sector we can do a lot with what sometimes seems like a little. **The Basics** (page 13) are a set of practices that help keep ONN's work action-oriented.

⚙ ONN'S POLICY FOCUS

The nonprofit sector is an ecosystem and widespread patterns can affect us all. If we don't work together to pay attention and shift the patterns, individual organizations or subsectors can end up diverting energy into reactive fixes, over and over again. We need an enabling environment for organizations to get their work done in communities, and we all have roles to play.

ONN does three things for policy and systems change:

1

LEAD
- Acts as a provincial hub for policy development
- Builds and maintains strategic partnerships and collaborations
- Provides strategic leadership to strengthen and sustain the sector and the network
- Proactively explores, identifies and forecasts trends and issues

2

ADVOCATE
- Develops, shares and communicates evidence-informed research, analysis and information to support the work of the network and the sector
- Provides strategic communications on the network's activities to support policy and systemic changes
- Articulates and responds to emerging public policy issues and challenges

3

ENGAGE
- Collaborates in developing sector goals and priorities, as well as ONN key activities
- Ensures that our work is sector driven and responsive
- Creates processes that support opportunities to engage, strengthen and sustain the sector
- Develops mechanisms with partners to assess the network's progress and performance

▱ COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

A focus on policy and systems change, and a network approach are the cornerstones of how ONN works. This means: listening for and learning about policy issues that emerge; bringing the broader community along; engaging new people and ideas through the network; identifying energy and actions to advance policy and system change work; and, keeping in close touch with the people who know the work and will be affected by it.

These minimum specifications help explain how ONN takes action. We'd love to hear about the "min specs" from other networks focused on making change:

Work is action and energy focused. "What do we need to accomplish and what is the best way to get there?" Pre-determined structures might help, but they don't necessarily drive the way we work.

Balancing order and chaos. Plans can change a lot, so flexibility is key.

The network is smarter than any one of us. Working groups with diverse people from the network provide multiple viewpoints on an issue.

Learning from failure. When an approach isn't working, or something we're trying comes to an unexpected end, we need the confidence and humility to let go, disband, and move on.

Speak truth to power. Even when it's not popular, stand by core values.

A clear common motivator. There's a reason for the work of the group. Answering "Why are we doing this together?" should be easy.

Agreeing to disagree. Getting organized as an ONN group is not binding on partners' other work. We need common interest, not full consensus.

Self-interest is acknowledged and harnessed for mutual benefit. Not everyone needs to have the same reason to be at the table, but surfacing why we're there helps us move toward common goals.

Leadership is shared, not hierarchical. The goal is not for one group to command others, but to join-up everyone's contributions.

We win together. We want to build up the leadership of others, and redistribute opportunities and resources to those who may be better positioned to take them on. We're stronger working together!

Here are some approaches that ONN has found helpful:

Have a working objective.
• Clearly articulate and identify the need or opportunity, and the people that need to be involved. Keep building from there.

Focus on building relationships and trust.
• Regularly share information and cultivate a culture of openness and transparency to help build momentum and investment.
• Share drafts - don't wait for perfection. Let people know what is happening as things progress.

Get the work done.
• Connect people in the network to each other directly to get going on work: avoid bottlenecks that slow communication.

Share ownership and credit.
• When so many people are involved in multiple ways, credit for a paper or project can't go to a single lead. Exclusive branding or hero stories tend to weaken network trust.

Develop and practice network culture.
• Pay attention to culture, and pay attention to success. What makes it work? These will help you discern the beliefs, habits, and values of the working groups that you can build on over time.

Make sure form follows function.
• Try out ways of working to see if they are useful for a time. If they stop being useful, change them up and move on.

Invite unusual suspects and support healthy differences of opinion.
• Find people who can engage with different viewpoints and move towards shared goals that emerge through discussion.
• Don't expect people to come to you; actively recruit the best people for the task ahead.

KEY QUESTIONS WE ASK OURSELVES TO BE STRATEGIC (AND STICK TO OUR MANDATE!)

Scope

- Does it cross geography? (e.g. Ontario-wide)
- Is it cross-sectoral? (impact multiple sub-sectors**)**

Approach

- Does it benefit from collective action?
- Does it have potential for policy or systems change?
- Does it have strategic value for ONN?

Purpose

- Does it increase the profile of the sector?
- Does it enable the sector to do its work better? (opportunity for additional resources or reduce barriers, etc.)

Potential for Results / Value to the Sector

- Does it have strategic value for the sector?

Strategies

- Is there a timely opportunity for impact on the issue? (answer the question: why now?)
- Is someone else taking it on effectively, or could someone? (does the issue benefit from ONN's involvement right now?)

Practicality

- Does it align with ONN's current strategic priorities?

WHERE WE'RE AT AND WHERE WE'RE HEADED

In 2014, seven years after the network was founded, ONN incorporated to streamline administration. Growing the network is the goal, not growing the organization. **At this time, we have:**

- A staff core to support and grow our decentralized and fluid network (See A Sketch of the Network).

- A Board, which focuses on legal and fiduciary responsibilities and the organization's strategy, listening and championing the health of the network.

- A Policy Committee, made up of a range of sector leaders who meet quarterly, that helps ONN identify issues and opportunities within the sector, provides feedback on our policy work, and acts as a place for cross-sector discussion.

- Working groups that are connected to one or more ONN staff, and that play a facilitative leadership role in moving issues along.

ONN continues to grow and explore the network, community organizing, and policy and systems change practices. Our mission, vision, values and culture practices help us resist tendencies to centralize, keep staff in service to the network, and maximize the capacity of everyone to lead and engage in creating a strong and resilient sector!
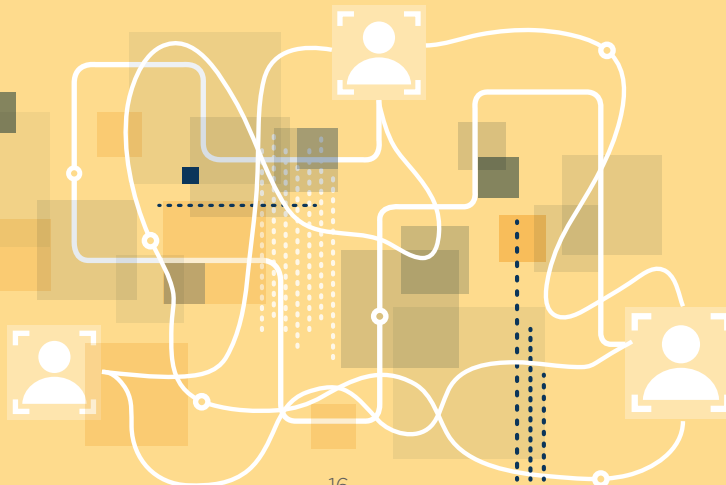
RESOURCES

Here are related topics with online resources to read more.

NETWORK BUILDING, MAINTENANCE AND EVALUATION

POLICY CHANGE

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

ONN'S LEGACY MODEL AND
ORGANIZING INSPIRATION

WORKING IN COMPLEXITY

EVALUATING NEW APPROACHES

NETWORKS AND SOCIAL IMPACT

COLLECTIVE IMPACT:
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

www.theonn.ca/networkresources

GET CONNECTED TO ONTARIO NONPROFIT NETWORK

Subscribe: www.theonn.ca
admin@theonn.ca   416-642-5786

Thanks to our supporter

Ontario Trillium Foundation / Fondation Trillium de l'Ontario
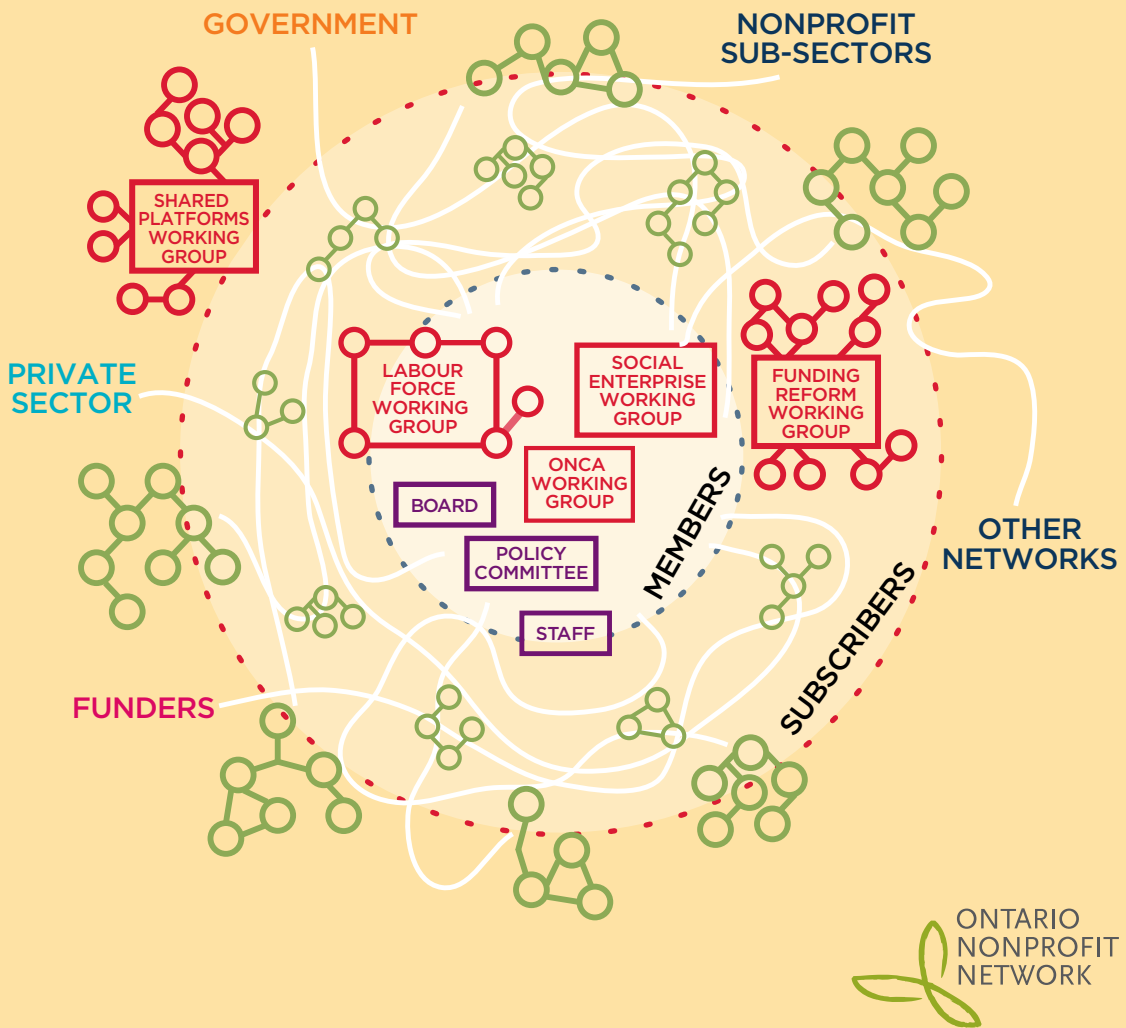
Access more of Networks + Action -
The Way We Work at www.theonn.ca

Networks + Action:
The Way We Work by Ontario Nonprofit Network is licensed under a Creative
Commons Attribution - NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

A SKETCH OF THE NETWORK

GOVERNMENT

NONPROFIT SUB-SECTORS

SHARED PLATFORMS WORKING GROUP

PRIVATE SECTOR

LABOUR FORCE WORKING GROUP

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE WORKING GROUP

FUNDING REFORM WORKING GROUP

ONCA WORKING GROUP

BOARD

POLICY COMMITTEE

MEMBERS

OTHER NETWORKS

STAFF

SUBSCRIBERS

FUNDERS

ONTARIO NONPROFIT NETWORK

LEGEND

□ ONN CORE SUPPORT

□ ONN WORKING GROUP

⚇ RELATED/PARTNER NETWORKS

Our network is dynamic and changing. This is a snapshot and does not include all working groups and partners that we work with.