

Guide to Sustainable Staff Networks

Members' resource
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Inclusive
Employers

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What is a staff network?

A group of colleagues, often with a shared heritage, experience or characteristic that come together to support each other and support the organisation in which they work.

Staff networks exist in many different formats across organisations in the public, private, third sectors and the forces. They are known by many different names and acronyms.

Staff networks are called by a wide range of different names in different organisations, for example, in Parliament, they are called Workplace Equality Networks (WENs), in an engineering firm, they are called Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) in a transport organisation, Staff network Groups (SNGs), some organisations will refer to them as affinity groups or affinity networks and there are many other collective terms too. The most popular networks in most organisations are affinity groups that are linked to the Protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010. These include, Gender networks, Faith networks, Ethnicity networks, Sexual orientation Networks and Disability networks.

Networks can be super effective vehicles to support colleagues, raise awareness, impact assess business decision and enable innovative approaches to make your organisation stronger.

Many staff networks will have a Chair, or co-chairs, they may have a communications chair, some may have a structure in which colleagues have different areas of accountability, for example, membership attraction, membership communications, event planning, consultation, leading on impact assessment. All this depends on the numbers of colleagues in a network and their availability.

Some staff networks will undertake an audit of the skills they have to hand and ask colleagues to use their experience to support the network.

Most staff networks are still reliant on the discretionary effort of colleagues, those who will invest their own time and energy to make change for all. Colleagues who drive and deliver for networks should

be recognised for all their work, once their work starts to evidence positive organisational change – we often see greater organisational commitment and support for networks.

Networks for networks' sake

At Inclusive Employers, we have seen many colleagues try to start staff networks.

There are pitfalls in this approach and we recommend the following first steps:

1. If nobody in your organisation has come forward to set up a network, or to ask if you have networks – you need to ask yourself if you should have them?
2. Your organisation's maturity model will give you a clue as to the state of play on this issue (see Inclusive Employer's Inclusion Maturity or National Inclusion Standard).
3. If you decide that you want to start a network – **handle with care** – you could start an inclusion steering group to start a dialogue about all inclusion and diversity related issues and then see if affinity networks group organically.
4. If colleagues approach you with an interest in and a commitment to staff network, harness their passion and commitment and help them. This may be that you start with one affinity group and often we will see that this is a catalyst for more groups to start to develop.

Has anyone asked for a network?

Yes	No	I'd like to start one	I don't think colleagues know they exist in other organisations and how brilliant they can be
Meet with the colleague(s) and ask them how you can help	No action required	Contact your colleagues in HR or inclusion and diversity or speak to your line manager	You could convene an inclusion action meeting and invite colleagues from across the business. Do not approach people you know who belong to a particular community and ask them if they want to set a network up!

What's the purpose of a staff network?

There are many ways that staff networks will be of benefit to your business. The following three pillars illustrate the core purpose for most staff networks:

Champion Inclusion	Support People	Challenge Inequalities
Every network has the opportunity to raise awareness to colleagues of the opportunity of inclusion – how it will make our organisations stronger and enable our colleagues to come to work, be themselves, work in a way that suits them, and deliver on our business needs.	Many people need support at different points in their lives. Not everyone can easily access that support. A network can be an amazing tool to offer support to colleagues and should be able to signpost to professional help for those that may need it.	A network is a critical tool in shining the light on inequalities and injustices that exist in our workplaces. A network is able to offer an organisation an 'early warning' or 'heads up' on inequality, injustice and cultural exclusions – they can also be the incubator of ideas to address these inequalities. A network that does both (raises the issue and offers solutions) will quickly become seen as commercially critical and is likely to be supported by our wider workforce and leadership.

Getting started with staff networks

So, you want to set up a staff network?

Great, these are the 10 top tips for getting started:

1. Be clear on your super objective – what is it you want to change or make happen?
2. Map out who your stakeholders are/ who you need to influence
3. Articulate who your members will be – map out the membership
4. Develop your terms of reference
5. Establish your governance structure
6. Map your actions to address measurable change – check against your organisation's inclusion and diversity strategy
7. Develop a communications plan – to attract members and to work on the activities
8. Welcome everyone and listen to their ideas
9. If you are the founder of the network, always bring the work of the network back to the core objective
10. Remember, your role is more to signpost to support, than to solve issues



Inclusive networks

Over the years, there have been networks in organisations that have been seen to exclude or alienate colleagues. At Inclusive Employers, we promote the concept of inclusive networks – where all colleagues are welcome to join and support a network. Just because a network is inclusive, it doesn't mean that there won't be times that it be helpful for a group of people of a particular affinity to meet alone to share experiences

and develop ideas to address inequalities. Sometimes, many of us will benefit from meeting with colleagues who have a similar heritage, background, experience, life choice or ambition to discuss in confidence these issues. The advantage of an inclusive network is that you can then take these issues out to your wider group to develop shared action on inclusion.

Allies programmes

Many organisations have developed Allies programmes – this builds on the work of an inclusive network and offers the opportunity for those that don't belong to a particular affinity (for example non-LGBT+ people) to be a change maker for those that do (in this case the LGBT+ community). These people will often be referred to as LGBT+ Allies, or BAME Allies.

At Inclusive Employers, we have developed a programme for all colleagues called HUMAN ALLIES™. This is, in simple terms, how we all become the champions for all. We all step up, look out for inequalities and champion inclusion for everyone.

Staff Networks' focus areas

In our work with staff networks across the UK, there is a uniting purpose. People who join networks in the main are committed to building more inclusive workplaces.

Sitting below this super objective, we often will see that commitment to inclusion is

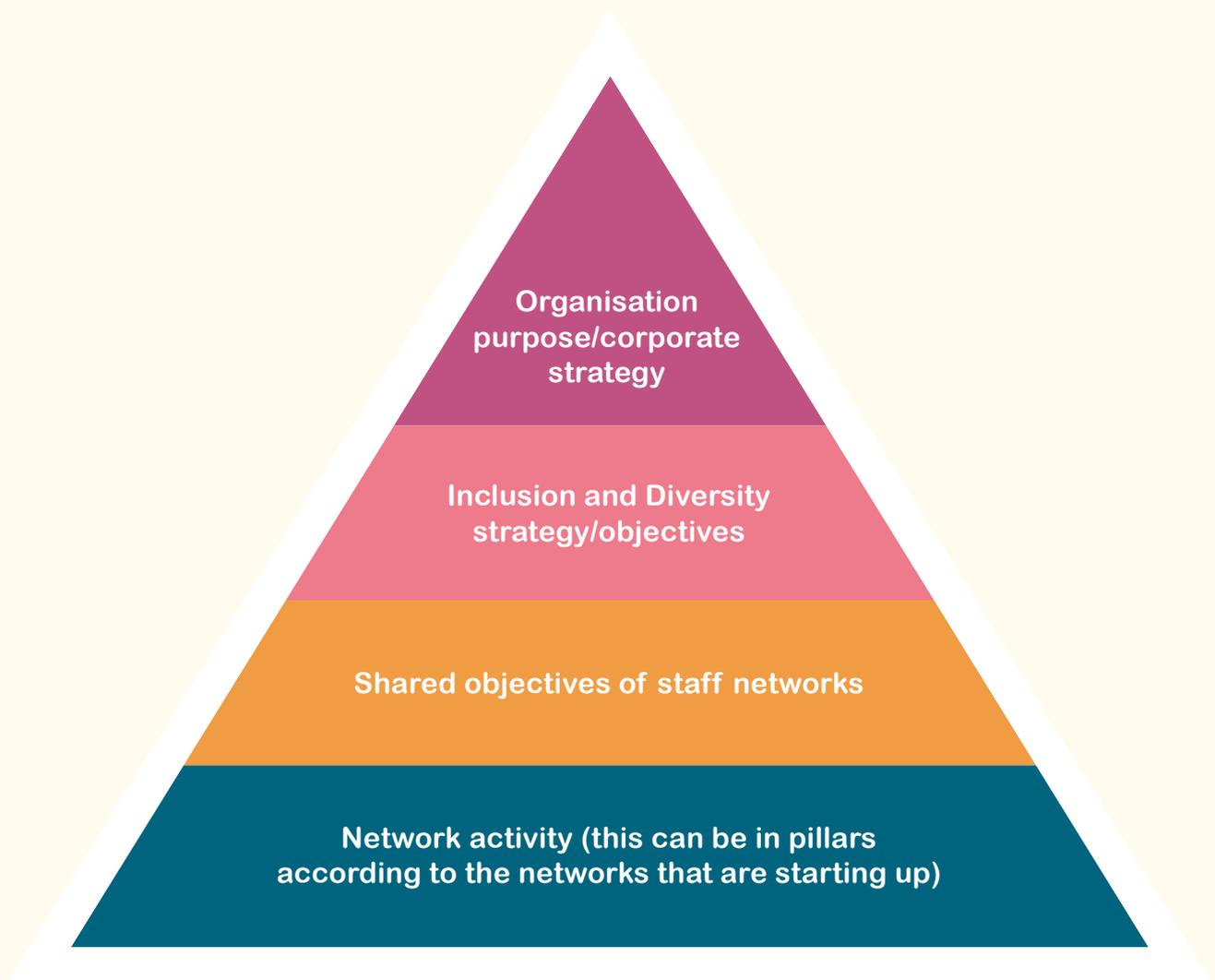
focused on a particular area or group. (Please note that the diagram below is designed as demonstration only and cannot be all encompassing of the possible/ existing network groups – we hope that we have covered the most common groups though).



Developing your network strategy

Over the years, networks have been heralded as champions for change or criticised for having no impact. At Inclusive Employers, we have developed a range of

models to help ensure that networks are able to focus on making change that is critical to organisational culture and success and therefore they become critical to all.



Terms of reference for network members

The remit of a member is:

- Lead by example; be an advocate and help promote inclusive behaviours and activities across the organisation
- Support relevant activities and events, as appropriate. This could include talking to colleagues at their relevant location or setting up an area to promote a particular event for example
- Develop, share and consider ideas as to how we might develop a more inclusive culture
- Talk to appropriate internal or external stakeholders who may have a local affiliation to their relevant location for example charities, local community projects etc. as appropriate
- Attend each meeting at a geographically appropriate location

They are not expected to:

- Be subject matter experts in Inclusion & Diversity. All questions, concerns, queries should still be addressed to the Inclusion & Diversity team
- Train people on inclusion, diversity and equality issues
- Replace the role of Trade Union

representatives in any formal disciplinary or grievance procedure which may be related to matters within the respect and dignity policy. It should be noted that they can still act as representative in the capacity of a work colleague should they be asked

- Work solely in the capacity of a member – this is a voluntary, unpaid role and they are expected to continue with their primary job role to the best of their abilities. Priority will always be given to the operation of the business

Each member is expected to:

- Hold a 'term of office' for a maximum of 24 months with the opportunity to join again, if they so wish
- Attend each meeting where practicable and without impact to the operational running of the business
- Contribute at each meeting by discussing thoughts and ideas relating to the development of an inclusive culture

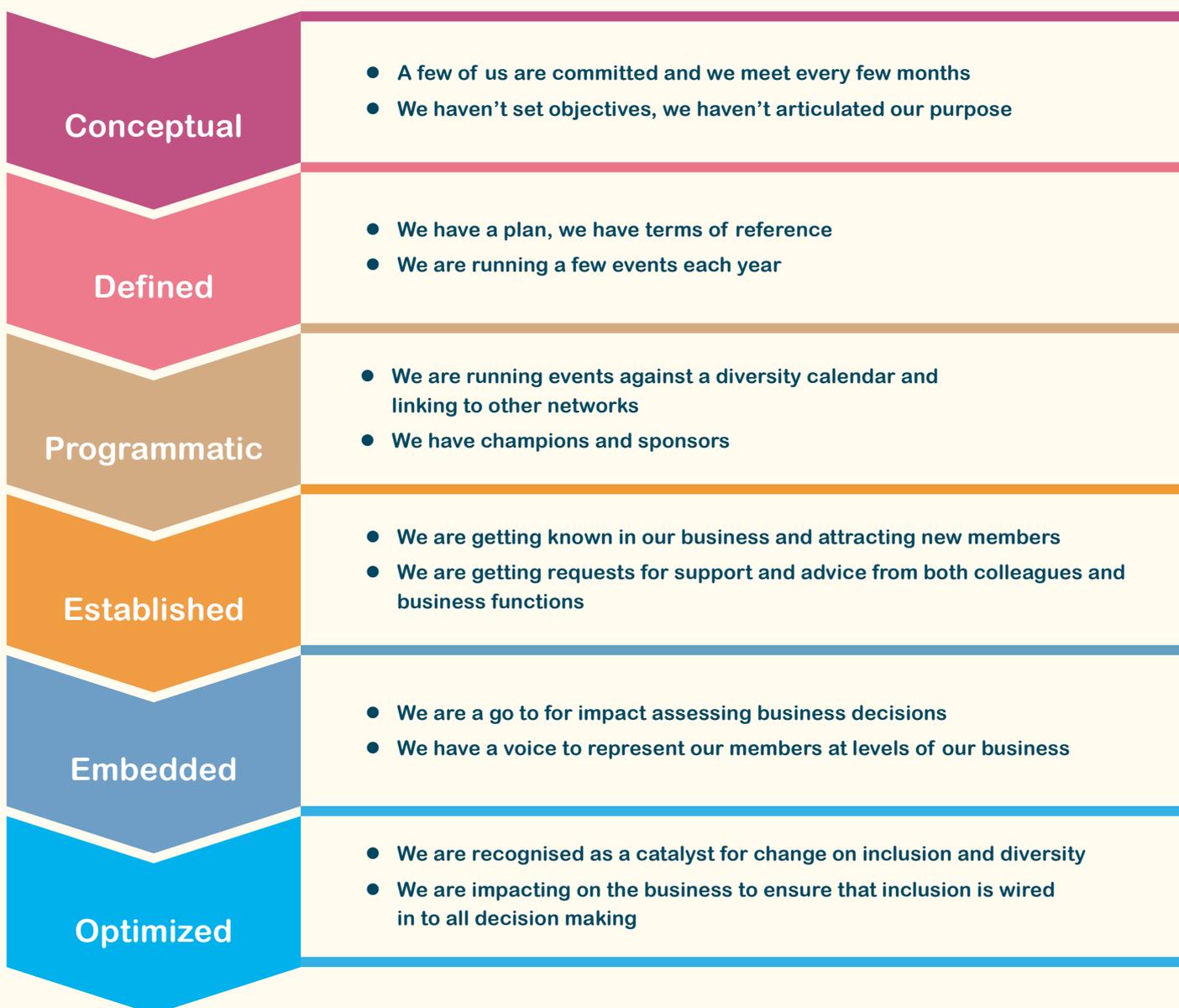
We ask that:

- The appropriate line manager allows the paid release of the colleague, similar to the arrangements in place for Trade Union representatives

Is it time to audit your network's progress?

It is important to check where your network is in terms of its business impact. If you can identify where you are now, it is much easier to develop steps to get to the next level.

You can use this tool to check the maturity of your staff network and then put in places plans to develop.



Network action plan

You can link your action plan to your organisation’s inclusion and diversity plan.

One model that some organisations have found helpful is linked to The National Inclusion Standard – see below.

Engage	Embed	Empower	Equip	Evaluate	Evolve
Actions to reach colleagues, customers and communities to help everyone understand the opportunity of difference.	Looking at business decisions and ensuring that inclusion is wired into the thinking so it becomes an everyday reality.	Signposting and supporting colleagues and communities to ensure they are able to be the best they can be - they feel safe, feel valued and can add value.	Giving people awareness of cultural, community and colleague differences, helping people to learn about differences and how they make our businesses stronger.	Creating workplaces where people feel safe to be themselves and share information about their differences. Using information to develop strategies and actions to address inequalities.	Measure your impact and how you have made a difference to ensure that inclusion truly becomes an everyday reality in your organisation.



This framework will also support your organisation’s commitment to inclusion if they are participating in the National Inclusion Standard.

Watch out for!

Ever heard of Founder's syndrome?

If you have been a network founder, do ensure that you consider the opportunity of the network for all. Networks are at their

least successful (and sometimes can be unintentionally damaging) when one person mistakes the network and shared purpose, for inclusion for all, with their network.



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- Want to heighten the profile of our profession
- Are ready to expand your mind and outlook

Our new CMI accredited programmes are specifically designed for diversity, inclusion and organisational development professionals. The programmes run regularly throughout the year.

**If you'd like to find out more,
please get in touch.**
students@inclusiveemployers.co.uk

Top tips from a network chair



We asked Madeleine Hale who chairs L&Q's Inspire network for her top tips on creating and sustaining successful staff network.

Madeleine Hale works in Strategic Partnerships at L&Q and is the Chair of Inspire, the organisation's gender equality network. As well as launching L&Q's first Gender Equality Week (which now happens annually), Madeleine has curated external partnerships with UN Women UK, the National Association of Women in Construction and the NLA's Inspiring Women programme. In addition Madeleine has led policy interventions on the gender pay gap and L&Q's parental leave offer.

Top tips

Madeleine Hale



- Have an Executive Sponsor at the top of the organisation. Having someone advocating on your behalf at the top level is pivotal in the delivery of policy recommendations. They can also help with making sure you have a budget for events!
- No one can whistle a symphony. It takes a whole orchestra to play it. Having an enthusiastic committee makes for impactful change. Meet regularly and give people real responsibility.
- Be a critical friend. Challenge your organisation to be the best it can be, but remember you're working with them, not against.

The Gold Standard Staff Network

Strong Support from the Wider Organisation:

- Staff network members given time to do their job away from main role
- Organisation's commitment to diversity and inclusion in wider capacity
- Budget
 - Events and resources
 - Investment into training and development for members/leads
- Active senior leader team sponsors and mentors
- Having ambassadors and champions across the organisation

Effective Communication:

- Communications plan
- Agile technology
- Inclusive and accessible communications
- Visible branding
 - Marketing
 - Networking events
 - Collateral
- Different communication methods e.g.
 - Intranet
 - Social Networks
 - Blogs
 - Accessible non-internet communications e.g. flyers

Within the Network:

- Safe space for people to share
 - Discretion and trust
- Democratic steering group and membership
- Challenging ideas
- Engaged and passionate members
 - Using strengths of the group members
 - High levels of participation and proactivity
 - Open and engaging atmosphere
 - Fun
- Owned by the members – created with them not for them
- A board who are:
 - Passionate
 - Accountable
 - Have strategic oversight
 - Chair with adequate time for the role
- Network is respected and credible

Structure, Direction and Process:

- Clear purpose and objectives
 - Developed action plan with outputs
 - Achievable and measurable goals
 - Aligned to business priorities and organisational values

The Gold Standard Staff Network

- Effective use of data
- Transparency
 - Published goals and KPIs
 - Within the network
- Clear delivery plan
- Communication of purpose
- Developing and evolving over time – not a static entity
- Clearly defined process
 - Structured and well-organised
 - Standards of operation
 - Policies and procedures
 - Code of conduct
 - Clearly defined roles
- Continuity

Collaboration:

- Collaborative working with other groups

- Links with internal organisation departments
- Working with communities – outward as well as inward looking
- Sharing of ideas and stories

Diverse, Inclusive and Intersectional:

- Intersectional – meeting with other networks and thinking about how different identities interact
- Accessible – both in terms of access requirements and for example non-digital marketing as some people do not have access to computers
- Inclusive – making sure everyone who is part of the network feels valued
- Representative

In summary

Networks are a brilliant way to help organisations become more inclusive and to help our colleagues feel safe, feel valued and add value. Networks are huge assets to any organisation.

Design by **Strudel**

If you'd like more support to develop your network, please contact us

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