



# bridges to learning

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Bridges to Learning connects educators with knowledge and research that shows every student can learn when provided cognitively challenging instructional opportunities, and learning environments can flourish when collaboration is valued, voice is honored, and agency is realized.

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## IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE IN ACTION



# How can network leaders design for a strong, productive network?

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Networks have always been a mechanism for improvement; as social learning theory reminds us that, when well organized, opportunities to learn together can be more powerful than individual learning. We know that bringing people together to work on a common goal can be exciting, but to enact real change we must push beyond a sharing network—a collection of educators who share their practice—to a scientific professional learning community—one in which a diverse set of individuals engage in disciplined inquiry to solve a common problem of practice (Russell et al., under review). In our work with networked improvement communities, we know full well the complexity of the challenges network leaders face as they design for this collective work. We offer a few tips to think about how to design and sustain strong, productive networks. These ideas are meant as a place to begin and not as an exhaustive list.

### 1. Spend time understanding the problem and the system that created the problem. Really.

In education we are very quick to jump to solutions. In our rush to

get to work, we often start to work on something that is not the true problem or does not reflect how the problem really is created and sustained.

### 2. Build a clear theory of improvement and make sure everyone in the network understands the theory.

We often think we mean the same thing when we use the same words. Spend time making sure the common language is truly reflective of common understanding, and make sure that everyone in the network knows how the network intends to bring about the desired change. It is critical that everyone involved understands what the theory of improvement is and buys into that theory of improvement.

### 3. Build participation structures to support engagement and collaborative learning.

Teachers are busy. While they might be highly motivated to engage in the work, they are unlikely to engage on their own. Usually network members are interested in seeking out other teachers and carving out extra time to collaborate, but it rarely happens unless it is formally designed into the work of the network, even if teachers already have strong a connection with each other. The structures matter for creating the opportunity, momentum, and accountability for

meaningful work.

### 4. Build in true joint work to accelerate learning and understand variation.

When teachers engage in true joint work (not simply individual work on the same topic), they can problem-solve on a deeper level and they can better understand the variation which is so critical to accelerating learning. Structures and routines can support or impede joint work. Network leaders can be intentional about what kind of joint work would support the theory of improvement and how to design for that.

### 5. Be strategic about how to tap practical knowledge.

While there is no doubt that networks that tap into the practical wisdom of teachers are more productive, network leaders must be strategic about what teachers are good at (e.g., How does this measurement tool fit into your practice? How might you adjust your routine to fit this strategy?) and what is not a good use of time for teachers (e.g., building practical measures, inventing strategies when the field already has made progress on what best practice looks like). Most teachers are not trained to design measurement tools, but they can tell you if a tool designed by an expert in measurement is useful in practice. ■