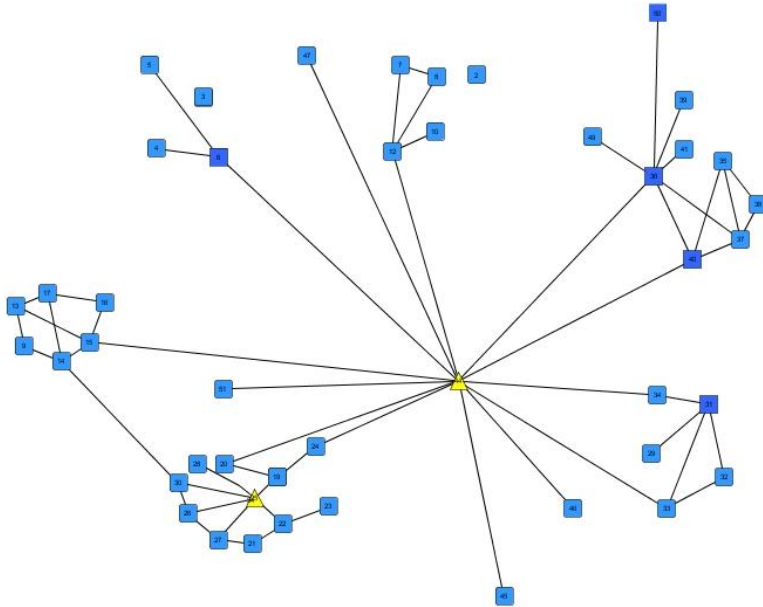**Bottleneck in your department?**
Three ways to get out of your own way and help your department thrive

By Maya Townsend & Michael Thiel
First published in AMA Playbook (American Management Association
http://playbook.amanet.org/networking-3-ways-get-way-help-department-thrive/

Managers are responsible for product delivery, project implementation, new ideas and service improvement. But all too often, things don't go as planned. If you're in this situation, you might gain feedback like this:

- You're not performing up to expectations;
- You need to do better;
- Brush up on your time management;
- Your staff lacks skills and knowledge; or
- Your department is under-resourced.

You may have worked on this feedback without satisfying results.

Perhaps you are barking up the wrong tree?

In today's business environment, work processes run across boundaries. Innovative ideas flourish through exchanges across departments and professions. Research and experience tell us that managers and technical experts who possess high quality networks are better positioned to deliver business results and actually achieve better results (see references at end of post). In other words, it's not just what gets done—it's *how* and *with whom* it gets done.

Could it be you?

Have you ever thought that you might be the cause of these difficulties? You have insight into organizational strategies and politics, market opportunities, and best ways to influence and communicate with others in the organization. Plus, you've built work relationships with other departments or organizations that help you to get things done. So far, so good. But when you delegate a task, you can´t easily transfer the tacit knowledge and relationships that are needed to do the job well.

That means that your staff can't complete work as effectively as you can. Your employees don't perform well, things fall through the cracks, and work suffers. You stop delegating as much and take on more work. It becomes burdensome, but you don't want to risk mediocre results. Too much rests on your shoulders and you have no one with whom you can share the burden.

A way out

To get out of this dilemma, design your department not just as a set of processes and tasks, but also as a web of informal relations. These relationships provide you and your co-workers with the leverage you need to implement projects, deliver services, solve problems, and develop new ideas.
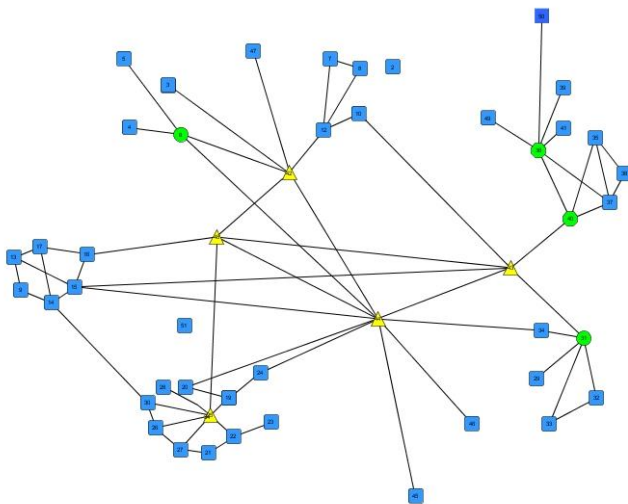
Many managers find themselves at the center of their department's network. All work flows through them and creates a [bottleneck](). To get out of your own way and enable your department to thrive, you need to bring your staffers into more prominent positions. You need them to add to the department network by weaving and leveraging connections within and outside the organization.
As they grow into these responsibilities, pressure on you decreases. You can move out of your bottleneck role and instead focus attention on what truly interests you.

Loosening up the bottleneck

Here are three things you can do to get out of bottleneck mode and to get your staffers engaged in the organization network.

1. **Draw a map of your relationships within and outside your division**.
   Think of the relationships that help you get work done, solve problems, reflect on ideas, and give you insights into strategic developments in your field. List them in a table like this:
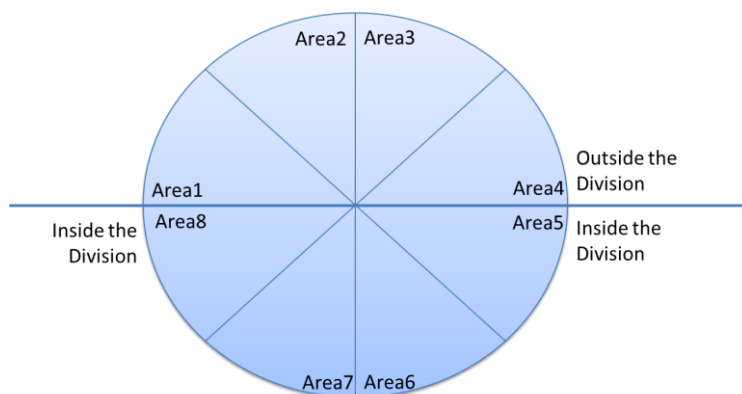
   Now do the same thing with your coworkers and direct reports. Together, you'll see the collective web you've woven and the relationships that each person brings to the table. You'll also see the gaps in your network and those of your coworkers and direct reports.

   Then develop a future map of relationships. This map should identify all the players your department or project should be connected with in order to get things done. Once you have that map, you can identify the best people to pair with each of your target contacts.

2. **Connect staffers with significant players** in other departments, with suppliers and customers, with specialists and experts outside your organization, and with higher level managers. To keep activities relevant, make sure these connections are carefully selected and in line with the previously developed team map.

   There are many ways how you can help establish those new links. You can:

   - Provide direct reports with opportunities to represent the department in high-level forums;
   - Introduce them to contacts in writing or, better, by personally connecting them at a meeting; and
   - Recommend them for task forces where they can collaborate with colleagues whom you have identified as leverage points.

3. **Help staffers develop their networks and networking skills**.

   Informal relationships in networks cannot be commanded or claimed. They must be nurtured. That requires attention to your network partners' needs:

   - What are they struggling with?
   - How could you help with their struggle by giving direct support or advice?
   - Who could you introduce them to who could help them with their challenge?

   Your job here is twofold. First, you need to recognize when your direct reports are struggling and help them with the challenges they face. Second, you need to help staffers identify their network partners' needs and help them address those challenges.

   While training can help, your staff needs your advice and feedback. You can easily weave short discussions on networking skills into regular staff meetings and project reviews. During these conversations, coworkers can support each other as they build their strategic web of relationships. Then watch as networks—and your team—grow and thrive.

For more on how networks help managers succeed:

Burt, R. (2004). Structural Holes and Good Ideas. *American Journal of Sociology*, 110(2): 349-399.

Burton, P., Wu, Y., & Prybutok, V.R. (2010). Social Network Position and Its Relationship to Performance of IT Professionals*. Informing Science: the International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline.* 13: 121-137.

Marques, D.V., Cardoso, L, & Zappalá, S. (2008). Knowledge Sharing Networks and Performance. *Comportamento Organizacional e Gestão*. 14(2): 161-192.