

# Social Network Theory



We live, work, and play around other people. Some we know, some we don't. Some we like, some we'd rather avoid. If we were to map out all the people you are connected to and all the people they are connected to and so on, we would create a map of your social network. Recently, this field of science, called social network theory (it is not the study of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), has discovered that your behavior and beliefs have a significant influence on the people in your social network. What you eat, wear, and drive, how you feel, spend your time and whether or not you smoke affects the likelihood of your friends, friends, friends doing the same. It is not until three degrees of separation that your influence begins to wane. And it works both ways. **It's only three degrees though so you and Kevin Bacon are not influencing each other. Sorry.**

In a social network map, each person is a dot or a circle called a node. The connections between nodes are indicated by lines that vary by color or thickness to illustrate different types of connections. Nodes can also be colored and sized to indicate variations in data. When all the information about nodes and their connections are indicated on the map, behaviors and beliefs show up in clusters of similar nodes. We tend to gather with those who are like us.



There are different kinds of people within these clusters. Bridge people tend to be connected in more than one cluster. Their connections build connections between clusters, filling in gaps in the larger network made up of multiple clusters. There are central members. These are the most powerful influencers. As you can imagine, they are in the middle of clusters with lots of connections. Peripheral members are on the outside edges with fewer connections and isolates have few if any lines connecting them to other nodes.

Imagine surveying a community of people by asking them who they are connected to and then having them describe the nature of those connections. If we also asked them about their behavior and beliefs we could include that information on the map. For example, we might be interested in how often they exercised, whether they had pets, how much fast food they consumed and where they were on the spectrum of happiness. Then let's say we ask them for all that information every month for ten years. We would end up with 120 different versions of that map. People's connections and habits would change over time and the colors and lines of the map would shift every month. When a social network is mapped over time and animated, it looks like a living organism - shifting and growing or shrinking over time. It reveals something inescapable.

We are connected. We influence each other much more than we are probably aware of.

## Making Use of Social Network Theory

This science again demonstrates our need for healthy connection. It also shows us a way to get there. If we want to shift paradigms and create healthy norms in our communities, we can start by working within the natural interactions of existing social networks. We identify key influencers, empower them to create healthy change, and then support them in their efforts. Their efforts are two-fold: to believe and behave according to **healthy norms** and to invest in healthy, reciprocal **relationships for relationship's sake**. We are doing little more than adding intentionality to our participation in the way things work. Aligning with the natural rhythms and the collective wisdom of our communities is a powerful way to make change quickly *and* over the long term. It is sustainable because it utilizes who we already are and what we already do, and how we already influence each other. We just choose to be more conscious of our influence.

This doesn't make it easy. We are still resisting unhealthy norms and struggling with unhealthy paradigms. But doing so is the work. It's the battle. It will make a difference because we want, deep inside, with our most fundamental longings, to live according to our true identity, be valued for it, and receive what we need from those around us. We want to belong. We already do. This is how we experience it more fully.