

Informal Networks Are Part of the Operating System

An executive standard for making cross-functional work move without creating hidden dependency on a few well-connected people

BOTTOM LINE

Complex organizations do not run through formal structure alone. Cross-functional work also moves through people who know where information sits, can translate between functions, connect the right expertise quickly, and have enough credibility to get cooperation before formal escalation is required.

Those people are valuable. They are also easy to overuse.

If the same few individuals repeatedly have to bridge functions, interpret handoffs, resolve ownership confusion, or connect people who should already be able to work together, the organization may be mistaking personal effectiveness for organizational capability. The work moves, but only because somebody keeps repairing the seam.

The answer is not to eliminate informal networks. It is to distinguish productive brokerage from hidden dependency. For recurring cross-functional work, identify where the route depends on a person rather than a durable operating connection, then decide whether that dependency should remain, be strengthened, or be designed out.

Cross-functional reliability is determined at the interfaces

Organization charts are good at showing accountability. They are much less useful at showing how work actually crosses boundaries.

A customer problem may require Operations, Technology, Finance, and Sales to interpret the same issue before anyone can act. A transformation may be formally owned by one function while the information needed to execute it sits in three others. A recurring exception may keep rising through management simply because the people doing the work have no direct way to resolve it.

That is where informal networks become part of the operating system.

Most senior teams can name the people who make these problems easier. They know who to call when ownership is unclear, who can find the right expert, who can translate between functions, or who can get two groups working directly without turning a routine issue into an executive escalation.

That value is real. The harder question is why the same person keeps being needed.

A strong operator may be compensating for a poor handoff. A respected executive may be translating between two functions whose language, incentives, or information do not line up. A long-tenured employee may know which expert or operating owner actually matters because the formal route is too slow to reveal it.

As long as the work gets done, the system can look healthy.

A person who repeatedly makes cross-functional work move can be evidence of organizational strength. Repeated dependence on that person can be evidence that the underlying route is weak.

That distinction is the executive problem.

Brokerage and dependency are not the same thing

The objective is not to force every interaction into process.

Some work genuinely benefits from brokers. Novel problems cross boundaries unpredictably. Sensitive issues require judgment about who should be involved. Large transformations need people who can translate between technical, commercial, financial, and operational perspectives. Trust matters because it lowers the cost of coordination.

Trying to eliminate all of that through formal workflow would make the organization slower, not stronger.

The question is whether the broker is creating a route or becoming the route.

A productive broker shortens the distance between a problem and the people capable of resolving it. They bring context, make the connection, clarify what matters, and then allow the work to continue without requiring permanent centrality.

Dependency looks different. The same issue keeps returning to the same intermediary. Teams cannot interpret one another without that person. Access to expertise depends on them. Information has to pass through them because nobody trusts or understands the direct route. When they are unavailable, work slows.

That creates hidden key-person risk while making the organization appear more connected than it actually is.

The leadership question is therefore not whether the company has strong relationships. It is which relationships are increasing organizational capacity and which are compensating for weak interfaces.

Put a Seam Reliability Review around recurring cross-functional work

Do not map every relationship in the company. That quickly becomes an exercise with little operating value.

Use a Seam Reliability Review where cross-functional dependency has material consequences: recurring escalation between functions; repeated handoff failure; critical work routinely requiring one individual to translate or connect the route; or major initiatives where several functions cannot coordinate reliably without informal intervention.

The operating leader who owns the outcome owns the review. A transformation office, chief of staff, process team, or functional leader can help identify patterns and maintain the record, but this is not a network-mapping exercise. It is an operating reliability question.

Each important cross-functional route should be understood in one of three states:

SELF-SUSTAINING	BROKER-ENABLED	BROKER-DEPENDENT
The relevant functions can exchange the information, decisions, and work they need without recurring intermediary dependence.	A broker adds legitimate value because the work is novel, ambiguous, sensitive, or unusually complex, but the broker improves the route rather than becoming a permanent requirement.	The work repeatedly requires a particular person to translate, connect, escalate, or grant access because the underlying route cannot function reliably without them.

Broker-Dependent is not a criticism of the person. In many cases, it identifies somebody whose judgment and relationships have been protecting the organization from a weakness it has not yet fixed.

The review should answer four questions.

1. Where does cross-functional work repeatedly slow, escalate, or require translation?

Start with recurring work, not personalities.

Look for handoffs that return incomplete, exceptions that consistently rise through managers, decisions that stall because each function believes another owns the next step, or problems that suddenly become easier only after a particular person becomes involved.

The evidence should be operational. Where does cycle time increase? Where does rework recur? Which issues repeatedly escalate? Where are teams reconstructing information the sending function believed was already complete? Which handoffs routinely require explanation outside the normal process?

The objective is not to catalogue every point of friction. It is to identify the seams where coordination failure has enough consequence to deserve attention.

2. Who currently makes the route work, and what are they actually contributing?

When the same person repeatedly appears at one of those seams, do not stop at “they have a strong network.” Identify what they are actually doing.

They may know where expertise sits. They may have enough credibility to bring two groups together. They may translate terminology between functions. They may understand which issue is material and which can safely be ignored. They may carry historical context the formal process does not preserve. They may simply know how to make an introduction with enough context that neither side has to start from zero.

The remedy depends on the contribution.

If the value is translation, the organization may need a better shared definition or handoff. If the value is access, the route may need to be opened. If the value is judgment about whom to involve, ongoing brokerage may be exactly what the work needs. If the person is carrying non-transferable contextual knowledge, that may represent a genuine continuity risk.

Do not ask only who the connector is.

Ask what organizational capability is currently living inside that person.

3. Can the work continue when the broker steps out?

This is the critical test.

A healthy connection should usually become easier to use after the broker has made it. Two teams that now understand one another should not need the same person translating every exchange. Two specialists who should work directly should be able to do so once the relationship and context are established.

If the route collapses when the intermediary leaves, determine why. The functions may lack a direct relationship. The handoff may be poorly designed. One side may not receive the information it actually needs. Decision rights may remain unclear. Terminology may be inconsistent. Trust may still be attached to the person rather than the route.

A broker increases capacity when the connection survives their involvement. It becomes dependency when the connection cannot.

Evaluate what happens after the intervention. Do the right people now work directly? Does the next similar issue move faster? Has the handoff improved? Can the broker step out without reducing performance?

Some complex work legitimately requires ongoing orchestration. The question is whether continued involvement is adding judgment the work still needs or merely compensating for a seam the organization has never repaired.

4. What should remain relational, and what should become organizational capability?

Not every useful informal connection should be formalized.

If a senior operator occasionally brings the right people together around an unusual problem, leave room for judgment. If a complex transformation benefits from someone who can translate across several disciplines, preserve that brokerage capability.

Recurring work deserves a stronger standard.

When the same handoff repeatedly needs translation, improve the handoff. When two functions consistently need a manager to connect people who should work directly, establish the direct route. When critical expertise can be reached only through one person, broaden access appropriately. When the same ambiguity keeps producing escalation, clarify decision rights or information requirements.

The test is whether institutionalizing the route will make normal work more reliable without replacing useful human judgment with bureaucracy.

The goal is not to formalize relationships.

It is to prevent the organization from requiring exceptional relationships to make ordinary work function.

Make the review produce a Cross-Functional Route Map

For material seams, maintain a one-page Cross-Functional Route Map as part of the relevant operating or transformation review.

For each route, record the business outcome or handoff involved; the functions that must interact; its status as Self-Sustaining, Broker-Enabled, or Broker-Dependent; the person currently providing brokerage where relevant; the capability that person is supplying; the action required if the dependency should be reduced; and the next review date or trigger.

The accountable operating leader signs the Map. Review it when recurring escalation appears, when a key broker changes roles or leaves, or when the business materially changes the work flowing across that seam.

If the Map identifies a person as central to a material route, that person should be part of the conversation about what happens next. Reducing dependency should not quietly reduce the broker's standing. If the organization is institutionalizing a capability that person built through judgment, trust, and repeated successful coordination, that should be recognized explicitly as evidence of their value.

A broker whose status depends on remaining indispensable has a rational reason to protect centrality.

A broker whose standing increases when they leave stronger connections behind has a reason to help the organization become less dependent on them.

A Broker-Dependent route should not remain that way indefinitely without a reason. If the dependency persists, require an explicit decision: preserve the broker because continuing judgment genuinely adds value, strengthen the direct operating route, or accept the dependency as a conscious key-person risk.

That keeps informal coordination from becoming invisible infrastructure.

Know when informal coordination is exactly what you want

Sometimes the normal organization already works. The relevant people know one another, the handoff is clear, and direct contact is faster than adding another intermediary.

Leave it alone.

Other times, a novel or sensitive issue genuinely benefits from somebody with unusual reach, credibility, or judgment. Do not force that work into a permanent workflow simply because the organization has learned to examine informal networks.

The purpose of the review is not to eliminate brokerage or make every relationship procedural.

It is to distinguish useful human coordination from recurring organizational dependence on one person's relationships.

The decision

Add a Seam Reliability Review to operating discussions where cross-functional problems repeatedly escalate, handoffs routinely fail, or the same individuals continually have to make the route work. Classify the critical connections as Self-Sustaining, Broker-Enabled, or Broker-Dependent, and require every material Broker-Dependent route to have an explicit decision about whether the dependency should be preserved, reduced, or consciously accepted.

Then test the standard against your own organization. Identify the last three cross-functional problems that suddenly became easier after one particular person entered the situation.

Ask what that person contributed, and then ask the harder question:

Did they reveal the strength of your network, or did they reveal the seam your organization has been asking them to repair?