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COVID-19 doesn’t care about bureaucracy. It is a network problem, and will follow network rules. State and local governments must adopt aspects of network methodology if they hope to keep pace with the network-spread of this disease.

Fusion Cells were originally designed to combine US military, intelligence and law enforcement resources into a unified network to beat the Al Qaeda network, first in Afghanistan, then Iraq, and then globally. Like Al Qaeda, COVID-19 is an opportunistic enemy - it attacks ruthlessly and without warning. It doesn’t respect city, county, state or international boundaries and doesn’t care whether we are at work or play. A network-response will require reaching across jurisdictional and agency boundaries, coordination between non-standard partners, and the willingness to employ creative tools to be successful.

A Fusion Cell can, with a very small footprint, connect key organizations to share information and co-develop decision support for government leaders at a local, metropolitan, region or state-level. Connecting these fusion cells into a national network can create a nervous system for information flow that is unhampered by bureaucracy or state boundaries, and able to keep pace with the network spread of COVID-19.

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We Need to Link Local Leaders Directly to One Another

A strategy that helped Americans defeat al-Qaeda could be the key to stopping the coronavirus.

This article was originally published on TheAtlantic.com.
Image: Andrew Caballero-Reynolds / AFP / Getty

BY: CHRISTOPHER FUSSELL
What is a Fusion Cell?

A Fusion Cell is a collaborative, cross-functional team intended to rapidly acquire, interpret, and distribute actionable information to organizations, units, or personnel closest to the problem. They are meant to turn raw data into effective action as quickly as possible. By combining personnel, resources, and information from multiple organizations/agencies, the Fusion Cell can achieve far more, at far greater speeds, than its individual member organizations would be able to accomplish alone.

Fusion Cells offer governmental leaders at the federal, state, and local level a hub to coalesce information, interpret raw intelligence, and drive action. They are able to share data, clarify resourcing requirements, and exchange best practices across government bureaucracies. An interdisciplinary fusion cell can interpret information through the lens of multiple stakeholders, and quickly push insights to those elements with the greatest needs or opportunities.

Fusion Cells also provide a unique brand of decision support. They serve as an incubator for unique ideas and recommendations that germinate at the intersection of mid-level managers from both inside and outside the government—catalyzed around the response to COVID-19.

Fusion Cells do not circumvent or duplicate the work of the Governor’s or Mayor’s regular staff, but rather remain laser-focused on, in this case, the COVID-19 spread. This allows for specific lanes of coordination, while freeing bandwidth for the many other parts of government to receive necessary and adequate attention.

How Do Fusion Cells Work?

“If it’s against the rules but it works, change the rules.” Fusion Cells are wise to adapt this mantra. They should be fast, light, and highly adaptable. They should be given clear intent about what they’re expected to accomplish. And they should be empowered with a “find a way” mentality.

A Fusion Cell is a small, ad hoc group filled with representatives of larger departments, agencies or organizations. They must be empowered by their home organizations to collaborate, innovate, and quickly share their insights across traditional bureaucratic lines. They’re expected to leverage their combined capabilities and perspectives to fuse raw data into actionable insights, then push those insights to frontline elements as quickly as possible.

Fusion Cells can be physically co-located or virtually connected with equal returns. No two Fusion Cells will look the same, as they are purpose-built for the crisis, and further, for the particular region of a larger fight. Their composition will vary from crisis to crisis, and by geography.

Membership should include key influencers from relevant organizations. This could be as small as one-person representing an agency, or as large as several personnel if there is a requirement to work on 24-hour cycles. These individuals must be empowered to share information with other members of the Fusion Cell, deepen relationships within the Cell, and push collective solutions to outside entities. Fusion Cell membership should err on the side of inclusion, but must not grow so large as to be unwieldy. Membership selection must focus on value each organization selected brings to the effort. A Fusion Cell is no place for spectators or wallflowers. It should feel like a team, not a division.
Key Tenets of Success:

There are four key drivers to making a Fusion Cell successful. Some organizations will be drawn toward the flashier aspects of technology or spatial design. In fact, an effective Fusion Cell boils down to critical human factors. Selecting the right people, clearly defining their goal, giving them access to outside decision makers, and empowering them to share across boundaries will far outstrip any other factors in defining the success of a Fusion Cell.

1. **Choose the Right People:** Fusion Cells need individuals who can immediately speak on behalf of their department and who can manage cross-departmental relationships. Individual members must thus have deep operational familiarity with their home organizations—this will give them the ability to collect and evaluate information, identify risks, assess the viability of proposed actions, and connect new insights to current operations. They must also have access to their home organization’s senior leaders that will allow them to operate as effective representatives in the Fusion Cell. A successful Fusion Cell drives fast-paced, focused activity only if comprised of well-informed, well-connected and action-oriented personnel.

2. **Define Success:** Fusion Cells must be given a clear mission. It is critical that the Executive (Governor / Mayor) defines what they expect of the Fusion Cell and clearly relays those expectations to the Fusion Cell Director. The Fusion Cell Director, in turn, then makes it clear to every member of the Fusion Cell what his or her role is in supporting the Fusion Cell’s mission. Without clear guidance on goals and expectations, the Fusion Cell will be unable to determine metrics of success, and will pivot toward a repository of information versus an action-oriented team.

3. **Access to the Chief Executive:** Fusion Cell members need to get key insights to frontline decision makers with immediacy, and without fear of bureaucratic repercussions. The purpose of a Fusion Cell is to make the city or state faster and more responsive in a time of crisis; this can only be achieved if members are able to cut across normal bureaucratic lanes and communicate directly with frontline leaders.

4. **Make Information-Sharing the Priority:** A Fusion Cell ‘fuses’ information. Fusion requires the liberal sharing of pertinent information and an honest exchange about each organization’s capabilities, resources, disposition and perspective. The reticence of even a single member can reduce a Fusion Cell’s effectiveness. All members must be aligned to the norm of full and transparent information sharing. Reluctance to share or trepidation is often caused by team members who believe that they must ask their parent organization for clarity or permission; every member of the Fusion Cell must be fully empowered to speak on behalf of their department, agency or organization.
Setting Up a Fusion Cell

Now, we’ll pivot to very tactical steps in the building of a Fusion Cell. As mentioned, no two will ever be exactly the same, but below you’ll find critical variables that must be in place for a Fusion Cell to thrive.

1. **Identify the Mission:** Any municipality establishing a Fusion Cell must first ensure they are clear on the mission. When we built these during combat operations, a fusion cell was tasked with pushing actionable intelligence to front line units, that would then execute operations based on those new insights. If a fusion cell wasn’t driving effective missions in the field, it was considered ineffective. For the COVID-19 fight, leaders will need to give equally specific guidance to Fusion Cells.

2. **Establish Priorities** to execute on the mission. With COVID-19, these lines of effort may be related to testing, availability and/or distribution of PPE to hospitals staff or first responders; establishing backup treatment facilities; economic loss mitigation; continuity of government; synchronized, daily intelligence updates; sharing of best practices; etc.

3. **Identify Core Members** (organizational and individual) for the Fusion Cell
   - The Convening Executive should identify critical organizations in the COVID-19 fight and invite them to send participants into the Fusion Cell. Note that some functional areas (such as finance and legal) may not initially come to mind as members but may prove vital to operational success.
   - Individual members must have a strong knowledge base. Such personnel can quickly evaluate information, identify risks, and craft/assess recommendations.
   - Individual members must have good standing in their home organization. Such personnel can quickly access the leadership in their home organization to turn new insights into effective actions.

4. **Establish the Cell**
   - **Location:** COVID-19’s social distancing constraints likely require virtual connectivity. Members will likely need to establish virtual rooms where they can maintain 24-7 connectivity and have a common repository for planning, dissemination, and knowledge capture.
   - **Communications** – robust, redundant and real-time. For many organizations, completely virtual operations will be a challenge, from both a technical and behavioral standpoint. It is worth staffing significant up-front effort to get the technology right, so that it does not distract from crucial interactions moving forward.
     i. **Robust:** Internet bandwidth (and WiFi, optimally) must be sufficient to handle voice, video, and data for a large group (~100+) simultaneously.
     ii. **Redundant:** Fusion Cells exist to share information. Members need access to telephone, email, video teleconferencing (VTC) systems such as Skype or Teams that include a chat feature. End-to-end encryption will likely prove a necessity.
     iii. **Real-time:** Members will require a shared portal page and/or data repository where information can be shared, posted and updated in real-time. in order to maintain a “Common Operational Picture” (see paragraph 6, below).
   - **Establish ownership of the lines of effort (LOE)** – each LOE must be owned by a Fusion Cell member. Usually, ownership is assigned to the Fusion Cell member whose home organization has the greatest equity in the LOE. Progress in these LOEs must be tracked daily, at a minimum, and their owners held accountable for progress. Daily sync meetings to track progress are critical.
   - **Procedures** – Protocols need to be fast and agile. Set simple rules to structure progress but avoid over-engineering. At a minimum, Fusion Cells will need clarity on:
     i. How new information is to be shared. How often is the portal page / slide is to be updated.
     ii. What constitutes a noteworthy event, and how and how quickly that information is shared across the Fusion Cell. Establish “Critical Information Requirements” (information that must be shared immediately across the Cell) and review regularly.
5. Establish an Operating Rhythm (OR)
   • The Fusion Cell should convene, formally, at least twice daily to share information. These can be short “around the horn” virtual meetings.
   • The Fusion Cell’s operating rhythm should be synchronized with the incident command center or applicable crisis response meeting schedule and support information sharing and decision-making within it.

6. Create a Common Operational Picture
   • All members must be aligned on the Fusion Cell’s mission and priorities.
   • Members should spend most of their time asking how they can add value to the other organizations and stakeholders, not how the Fusion Cell can provide insights back to their parent-organization.
   • All members need constant access to a shared portal.
   • A small number of key metric visualization tools should be placed on the common operating portal, and regularly updated. A Fusion Cell may need to build out their own dashboards.
     i. Data stream availability and integrity is crucial. Many flows key to addressing the crisis may not exist. If so, the Fusion Cell will need to spend precious time and resources to gather and deconflict these in real time—breaking down previous barriers or traditional firewalls between systems.
     ii. A key Fusion Cell contribution is often data analysis and guidance on the information’s operational impact on various member organizations and activities.
   • Regularly updated chat-channels on key and/or evolving topics can help declutter common-portal areas.
   • All documents used for updates should have an “as of” or “last updated” time/date depicted to ensure timeliness of data is understood.

7. Connect with outside entities
   • Identify outside actors that can learn from your lessons in fighting the network spread. States should connect with other states, particularly those on their immediate borders. Likewise, counties and major metropolitan cities should do the same.
   • Establish contact
     i. Seek ways to push your insights to other entities that could benefit from the Fusion Cell work.
     ii. Invite these entities to receive regular updates, listen in on sync calls, etc.
     iii. A Fusion Cell must have a give-mentality, and no pride in ownership.
     iv. Constantly improve the FC’s ability to share data, trends, and lessons learned with any outside entities that might benefit.

8. Align & Refine – Continue to refine each of the following factors daily. As the COVID-19 crisis evolves, the lines of effort needed to address the challenge will likely change, which may require adjustments in Fusion Cell membership. Tracking progress against its mission, the Fusion Cell will adjust accordingly. On a daily cycle, Fusion Cell directors must ensure the team remains properly focused on:
   • Priorities: lines of effort that are accomplished or fail to gain traction, should be eliminated. New needs critical to addressing the mission may arise and should be added.
   • Membership: Fusion Cell membership must be consistently aligned to progress on the mission. As the crisis evolves, members should be added and retired as needed to retain this alignment.
   • Operating Rhythm: as the crisis evolves, the Fusion Cell’s operating rhythm may need to change to match.
   • Procedures: keep things that work, adapt or scrap those that do not.
   • Relationships with outside entities: as the crisis progresses, outside entities and relevant points of reference may also shift.

A Fusion Cell is built to fight a fluid problem. It should never be complacent or static.
Who Needs to be a Part?

At its core, a State-level Fusion Cell focused on combatting the spread of COVID-19 should include membership from the following (or the equivalents at the city / county or municipal level):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier 1 (Immediate Need)</th>
<th>Tier 2 (As Required)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Office of the Chief Executive (Mayor, Governor)</td>
<td>• Department of Labor</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Department of Social Services (or equivalent)</td>
<td>• Department of Transportation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Department of Health</td>
<td>• Department of Agriculture</td>
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<td>• Department of Public Safety</td>
<td>• Department of Natural Resources</td>
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<td>• Department of Emergency Management</td>
<td>• Department of Revenue</td>
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<td>• State National Guard Bureau</td>
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<td>• Department of Corrections</td>
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<td>• Department of Mental Health</td>
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<td>• Department of Economic Development</td>
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<td>• Department of Commerce</td>
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<td>• Office of Administration</td>
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<td>• Department of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Healthcare Stakeholders</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Infectious Disease clinicians / advisors</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• An entity with Data Analytics capacity</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Major Community / Corporate stakeholders (possessing resources)</td>
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</table>
Guiding Principles of a Fusion Cell

The following four principles should be the “North Star” for all members of the Fusion Cell and should influence all aspects of interaction that members have with each other and their parent organization.

1. Trust
   - The fastest way to earn trust is to give trust. To take a leap of faith that the other members of the Fusion Cell are there for the same reason you are – to help flatten the curve and to save lives. The first step is to always “assume noble intent” in others. Give voice to this intent, every day, with a FC team.
   - Remember, this may be the first time that people from different organizations are connected. They’ll have different organizational cultures, operating norms, and views on collaboration. They’ll be from different political parties. Opportunities for misunderstandings abound. Give the benefit of the doubt, work through missteps and stay focused on the mission of helping people.

2. Transparency
   - Be clear, concise and forthright in all things.
   - If there is information that simply cannot be shared, state as much to your fellow FC members.
   - Share until you’re uncomfortable.

3. Communication
   - Sharing is power in a network-fight.
   - This is how we will win. We will share information with each other, with our parent agencies and departments and across boundaries seamlessly.

4. Community
   - We are all in this together. We cannot let any previous organizational biases cloud our judgment.
   - Our work will help to protect the health and save the lives of our family, friends and neighbors.
   - We’ll come through this better informed, more closely connected and part of a stronger community.
Necessary Behaviors for Fusion Cell Leaders

Most, but not all, Fusion Cells will fall under the direction of a Fusion Cell Leader. This person will not have direct chain of command authority over the members, but will serve as an anchor point for the previous mentioned points around structure and action, as well as the tether to leadership in outside organizations. The personality and approach of the FC Leader is critical.

Critical areas of focus and responsibility include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. **Articulate the mission:** Clearly state the mission and the personnel requirements for members of the Fusion Cell in terms of training, experience, and access. This must be revisited on a near-daily basis.

2. **Break down interagency dynamics:** Understand and appreciate what all Fusion Cell members bring to the mission. The leader’s ability to leave behind the biases and norms of their own culture and adapt to the wide array of perspectives in the Fusion Cell is key to success. The leader must personify the give-first, low-ego model that is critical to a successful Fusion Cell. Regularly remind members that organizational parochialism will impede trust, slow information flow, and ultimately cost lives. A “department” is not a living thing; a FC Leader must remind members that they are there to connect and trust **real people**, not inanimate departments.

3. **Connect to contributing entities:** Contributing organizations must have agreement on the Fusion Cell’s mission, clarity on what each organization brings to the mission, and on what the Fusion Cell provides to them. The FC Leader must communicate the cell’s mission with any contributing organization so that there is no disappointment once a member is committed.

4. **Connect the Fusion Cell with outside leadership:** The Fusion Cell’s ability to influence and generate action depends on its leader’s willingness and ability to respond directly and rapidly to outside leadership—often bypassing layers of bureaucracy. The leader’s credibility with Fusion Cell members depends on their ability to relay information to external decisionmakers clearly and quickly.

5. **Drive accountability:** Fusion Cell members must each own one or more Lines of Effort. If a member proves incapable of executing their positional requirements, the FC Leader must be prepared to raise these concerns and seek a new member from the contributing entity. You will find that there are **highly** competent professionals who do not have the personality capable of succeeding in a FC environment.
A fusion cell is a powerful tool for a State or City executive, but the true power is realized when the fusion cell of a city or state becomes just one node in a network of fusion centers that span the country, or even the globe. No single city or state will house all of the best ideas. Network threats emerge in an unpredictable fashion, and so too must networked solutions emerge by connecting leaders and fusion cells in an equally networked fashion.

A network of fusion cells linking cities and states across the country or globe could serve to connect each of these government entities and provide a clearing house for lessons learned, best practices, or even more importantly, data sharing. Even absent an overarching node at the federal level, the network would connect organically and meet virtually on a regular cadence and create a central data depository to share contact information, facilitate more direct consultation and interaction, maximize opportunities and where possible level-set resources.

**WATCH NOW**

**Fusion Cell Overview**

In this whiteboarding session, Chris Fussell gives a high level overview as to why applying a network methodology is critical when dealing with a network spread.
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