

CONFIRM

FREE GUIDE

The ONA Playbook

How to use Organizational Network Analysis to reveal hidden high performers, reduce bias, and make smarter talent decisions

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What Is ONA and Why It Matters

Every organization has two power structures. The first is the one you drew — clean boxes, clear reporting lines, logical hierarchy. It lives in your HR system and gets updated when someone gets promoted or leaves.

The second is the one that actually runs your company. It's informal, invisible, and far more powerful. It's the reason a mid-level engineer gets looped into every major product decision. It's why certain people's Slack messages get answered in minutes while others wait days.

Most leaders manage the first structure and wonder why the second one keeps causing problems. **Organizational Network Analysis (ONA) is how you make the second structure visible.**



How ONA Collects Data

Survey-Based ONA

Employees answer a brief set of questions during the review cycle: who they seek advice from, who is making outstanding impact, who needs support. 90 seconds per person — and generates rich network data across the organization, without any manager filter.

Passive ONA

Collaboration metadata from tools already in use — Slack, email, calendar, GitHub — analyzed at the network level. No content is read. Only patterns: who works with whom, how often, across what teams.

The Confirm approach uses survey-based ONA. Three research-tested questions, asked at the start of each review cycle. Anyone can nominate anyone — a junior engineer can surface a VP's impact, or flag that a colleague needs support. Data is anonymous and aggregated before managers see it.

Why Traditional Reviews Miss So Much

The 20% Problem

In modern organizations — remote, cross-functional, tool-distributed — managers typically observe 20% or less of what their direct reports actually do. The other 80% happens in meetings they're not in, Slack threads they're not watching, collaborations with teams they don't interface with.

But performance reviews are almost entirely built on manager observation. A single person, seeing a small slice of an employee's contribution, makes a judgment that determines promotions, raises, and career opportunities. This is a design flaw, not a people problem. Managers aren't bad at their jobs — they're being asked to do something structurally impossible: evaluate impact they can't see.

What Gets Missed

- **Cross-functional contribution:** The engineer who unblocked three teams they don't officially support
- **Quiet expertise:** The analyst everyone goes to for the real answer, who never speaks up in group settings
- **Mentorship impact:** The manager who made three people better, but those people report to someone else
- **Informal leadership:** The IC who shapes product decisions without a seat at the table

ONA doesn't replace manager observation. It completes it. The combination of what a manager sees plus what the organization's network reveals gives HR leaders a dramatically more accurate picture of who is actually making impact.

Hidden Influence Networks

Every organization has informal leaders — people with outsized influence who don't appear in the org chart at that level. ONA surfaces four distinct archetypes:



The Connector

Bridges multiple teams. When cross-functional projects stall, they unstick them quietly, without credit. High-centrality in ONA graphs. Often mid-level in the org chart.

Risk if they leave: Team performance drops for months. You may not know why.



The Informal Advisor

The person everyone goes to when they're stuck. Shapes decisions without being in the room. Low on the org chart, high in actual organizational influence.

Risk if overlooked: They leave, or stay and disengage. Their knowledge walks out the door.



The Quiet Contributor

Does exceptional work without self-promotion. Frequently nominated by peers as outstanding. Rarely nominated by managers because they don't perform their work for the manager's attention.

Risk if undervalued: They leave. They're exactly who you most need to retain.



The Isolated Node

Rarely nominated by anyone. Working alone. May be disengaged, struggling, or stuck in a team silo. ONA identifies them early — before a minor issue becomes a formal PIP or departure.

Risk if missed: Small performance issue becomes a big one. Or a quiet attrition you didn't see coming.

"With ONA data, not only did we identify our top performers, we retained 100% of them."

Julia Psitos, Head of People, Thoropass

Using ONA to Reduce Bias

Manager-only reviews concentrate bias at exactly the moment it matters most — when promotion and compensation decisions get made. ONA provides an objective data layer that counters four of the most common bias types:

Proximity Bias

Managers favor employees they interact with most. Remote workers lose. ONA measures contribution across the full organization, not just to the direct manager.

Affinity Bias

Managers rate employees who remind them of themselves more highly. ONA data doesn't know or care about shared backgrounds, alma maters, or communication styles.

Recency Bias

A strong final quarter can override a weak year. ONA data captures patterns across the full review period — not just what's memorable at review time.

Attribution Bias

In collaborative work, credit flows to the most visible person. ONA shows the actual collaboration network, making it harder to systematically take credit for others' work.

Using ONA in Calibration

The most powerful application: show managers where their ratings diverge significantly from what ONA data suggests. A systematic gap — where a manager consistently rates certain employees lower than the network data indicates — is worth a calibration conversation. This isn't about overriding manager judgment. It's about giving managers a second data source and asking them to engage with it.

"ONA gives us a check on our own biases. When my ratings diverge significantly from what the network says, that's worth understanding — not ignoring."

Joe Bast, VP People

ONA in Practice: The Confirm Approach

Confirm integrates ONA natively into every performance review cycle — not as a separate tool or one-off survey, but as a built-in data layer that runs every time.

1 ONA Questions at Cycle Start

Every employee answers three research-tested questions. 90 seconds. No manager filter. Anyone can nominate anyone — a junior engineer can surface a VP's impact, or flag that a colleague needs support.

2 Network Data Analyzed

Confirm maps nominations across the organization, identifying informal leaders, frequently nominated high performers, and employees flagged for support — including cross-functional connections managers couldn't see.

3 Managers Write Assessments

Managers complete their reviews before seeing ONA data — preventing anchoring bias in the other direction. Their genuine assessment is captured first.

4 ONA Enriches Calibration

In calibration, HR and managers see where ratings align or diverge from network data. Systematic gaps are surfaced. Conversations are anchored in evidence. Quiet contributors get their moment.

5 Decisions Backed by Data

Promotions, PIPs, retention moves, and succession plans are made with the full picture — manager observation plus network evidence. Not just who was visible. Who actually drove impact.

"Confirm is the first tool that lets me see the behavioral side with holistic evidence — not just what managers report."

Joanna Yeoh, VP People

ONA Use Cases by Role

For CHROs

- **Succession planning:** Identify informal leaders ready for formal roles before they leave for a title elsewhere
- **Retention risk:** Spot high-impact employees who are undervalued before they leave
- **Bias audit:** Detect systematic rating disparities across demographic groups with an objective data source
- **Culture health:** Track whether cross-functional collaboration is growing or siloing over time

For HRBPs

- **Calibration support:** Bring ONA data into sessions where manager ratings feel off — and have evidence to back the conversation
- **High-potential identification:** Surface names that never make it to HiPo lists but consistently receive high peer nominations
- **Team health:** Identify isolated nodes before they become performance or attrition issues

For Managers

- **See what you're missing:** Understand how your reports are perceived across the organization, not just through your lens
- **Development conversations:** Use network data to have specific, evidence-based growth discussions
- **Team building:** Identify your connectors and make sure they're recognized before someone else does

Is ONA the same as 360-degree feedback? No. 360 collects qualitative assessments from a pre-selected group. ONA collects network-level nomination patterns from the full organization — without pre-selection. The insight comes from the structure of the network, not individual reviews. ONA is also significantly faster and generates far less feedback fatigue.

30-Day Action Plan

Here's how to run your first ONA cycle — from zero to calibration-ready in 30 days.

WEEK 1**Baseline & Alignment**

- Audit your current review process: where is performance data actually coming from?
- Identify one team or department to pilot ONA with
- Draft the three ONA questions (or use Confirm's research-tested defaults)
- Get buy-in from one CHRO or VP People sponsor before proceeding

WEEK 2**Process Design**

- Define how ONA data will feed into calibration — supplement manager input, not replace it
- Communicate to employees: what ONA is, why you're using it, what it is not (not surveillance)
- Set up data collection (Confirm, survey tool, or manual)
- Brief managers on how to interpret ONA data before calibration sessions

WEEK 3**Pilot Run**

- Run ONA data collection with your pilot team
- Analyze results: who are the connectors, advisors, quiet contributors, isolated nodes?
- Compare to current manager ratings — where are the material gaps?
- Prepare calibration talking points for each significant gap found

WEEK 4**Calibration & Learning**

- Run calibration with ONA data as a supplementary input
- Document where ONA changed decisions that wouldn't have surfaced otherwise
- Gather manager feedback: what worked? What would you change?
- Plan full organizational rollout for the next review cycle

See ONA in action at your company

Book a 30-minute ONA Workshop. We'll show you exactly how ONA works with your data, your org structure, and your review process. Free. No commitment required.

confirm.com/request-a-demo