

NETWORKING

FOSTERING BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Networking is about creating a fabric of personal contacts that will provide you with support, feedback, insight, resources and information when needed. Successful leaders do not become successful all on their own – they learn to rely on others to help them achieve their goals. In the words of the Harvard Business Review, *'Successful leaders have a nose for opportunity and a knack for knowing whom to tap to get things done. These qualities depend on a set of strategic networking skills that non-leaders rarely possess.'*

In today's professional and business circles, networking is an essential skill for successful leadership. Despite this, many managers still shy away from networking, claiming it is a waste of time that could be better spent on the operational part of their work, what they consider their "real job". Others simply believe that networking is a polite form of exploitation that lacks sincerity. They believe all their efforts should be focussed on "what they know" and not on "who they know" and find networking ethically distasteful thus want no part in it. Still others just can't be bothered and consider networking work they should best avoid.

The reality is that good leadership is not dependant on hard technical skills but on softer relational skills. It should be self-evident that all managers need to build good working relationships with the people who can help them do their jobs, and at its core this is exactly what networking is. According to *H Ibarra* and *M Hunter*, who followed the careers and behaviours of 30 emerging leaders, there are three distinct forms of networking:

OPERATIONAL NETWORKING is geared towards achieving current work goals more effectively and generally involves colleagues. Obviously the better your relationship with the people with whom you work, the more influence you will have over coordination and cooperation and the more likely you will be to get your work done well and on time. In operational networking, the participants and roles are clearly defined and thus this type of networking is perceived as easier and is more frequently practiced. Its value is so self-evident, it is sometimes not perceived as networking at all.

PERSONAL NETWORKING is much more extrovert and thus considered more difficult by many managers. It is more recognisable as networking and involves identifying and connecting with like minded individuals outside your organisation. Forums for this include professional bodies, church and social bodies as well as organisations such as Rotary, Toastmasters, etc. In personal networking, relationships are less clearly defined and individuals you need to get to know are not always easy to identify. However personal networks can be well worth the effort, providing huge opportunities to learn and grow both professionally and personally.

STRATEGIC NETWORKING is the most useful but least practiced of the three networking forms identified. This form of networking requires the structured development of relationships that provide opportunities to advance your professional/business goals. These relationships require careful planning as individuals are identified and selected to meet your specific strategic needs. In the aforementioned study, this was considered the most powerful form of networking yielding the highest returns in terms of business and professional growth.

The 3 forms of Networking extracted from Harvard Business Review

	OPERATIONAL	PERSONAL	STRATEGIC
purpose	Getting work done efficiently. Maintaining the capacities and functions required of the group.	Enhancing personal and professional development. Providing referrals to useful information and contacts.	Figuring out future priorities and challenges. Getting stakeholder support.
locations & temporal orientation	Contacts are mostly internal and oriented towards current demands.	Contacts are mostly external and oriented toward current interests and future potential.	Contacts are internal and external and oriented towards the future.
players & recruitment	Key contacts are relatively nondiscretionary. They are prescribed mostly by the task and organizational structure so it is very clear who is relevant.	Key contacts are mostly discretionary. It is not always clear who is relevant.	Key contacts follow from the strategic context and the organisational environment, but specific membership is discretionary. It is not always clear who is relevant.
network attributes & key behaviours	Depth. Building strong working relationships.	Breadth. Reaching out to contacts who can make referrals.	Leverage. Creating inside-outside links.

Successful networking is not easy and requires work. You want to make sure the following types of relationships are represented in your network:

ROLE MODELS: People who have the qualities, abilities or styles you admire. They may already have influenced who you are and where you want to go.

MENTORS: People who share their knowledge and techniques with you. These should be valued advisors with whom you share a special bond. Studies indicate that successful people have, on average, three mentors during their careers.

DEVIL’S ADVOCATES: With their ability to challenge the status quo, these people force you to reconsider your ideas and attitudes. Even though you may sometimes detest them, they stimulate your thinking and help you achieve your best.

CONTACTS: The essence of networking is interacting successfully with all types of contacts in an organised, purposeful manner.

Being organised and purposeful in your networking starts with a few simple steps:

- ❑ The first step is to develop a positive attitude towards networking, appreciating its necessity and legitimacy.
- ❑ The second step is to make time to network. Understand the value it can deliver and allocate time accordingly.
- ❑ Next you must establish the 4W's: why, who, where, when. Consider what you want to achieve and what you have to offer in return.
- ❑ Thereafter it is necessary to create opportunities to meet the right people and then to follow-up, turning contacts into relationships.

Remember though, that networking is a two-way commitment. It is not simply about getting what you need from your contacts. You must be willing and prepared to reciprocate. To get the most from your network you need to provide a reasonable level of help and support to the people within your network, particularly the ones who can or do help you the most.

The ability to build and exploit strategic networks is considered a key test of leadership. For managers to successfully move into leadership roles, they must reorient their network focus from the internal/current to the external/future. They must actively seek out contacts that build their businesses/careers and help them meet their professional goals. All three forms of networking are necessary to build and develop your career and meet your business goals but it is important not to shy away from strategic networking since this form signals the difference between managers and leaders.

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