



If Your Networking Is Not Working

Don't reach out to someone just because you think he or she could help you. Instead, allow a network to form around you with the following actions:

- **Regularly reach out** to people who are doing things you admire.
- Offer them specific help. **Be creative.**
- **Your intent is key.** Offer help because you believe in what they are doing, not to add them to your Rolodex.
- **Over-deliver on your offer** if it is accepted. In short order, you will be at the center of a web of long-lasting relationships.

The New Networking

Forget the traditional advice you've been given about networking, says an executive coach and business professor. The best way to build a network of deep and powerful relationships, he says, is not to try. / By Srikumar S. Rao / Photography by Mark Wagoner

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE A NETWORK of very strong relationships around you—people who'll return your phone calls, answer your e-mail, and actively help you in ways that you cannot even begin to imagine?

And what if you could form such a network without feeling uncomfortable at the thought of approaching a stranger, without feeling artificial or self-serving? Further, what if you could do this effortlessly, without spending enormous amounts of time in such potentially dreary venues as cocktail parties, receptions, conferences, trade shows, and the like?

The good news is that you *can*, and there's an easy way to learn how. There is no bad news—you just have to be sincere and conscientious in your effort.

For many years, I have taught a course called Creativity and Personal Mastery. It was developed at Long Island University, and I've presented the course at Columbia Business School, London Business School, and various executive forums. Hundreds of participants have told me that they found the networking method I advocate simple and highly effective.

Every upwardly mobile professional knows that contacts are important. Politicians know it better than anyone else. Experienced stockbrokers get signing bonuses because they can bring a book of business. Lawyers and lobbyists get hired because of the

thickness of their Rolodexes. There are an untold number of books, programs, and seminars on how to reach out and expand those contacts.

But I have always had a problem with the notion that you should cultivate a person based on his or her position and the help that you might receive in the future. And I am not alone. Many people feel uncomfortable with traditional "networking." Some are very good at it but still feel queasy about it.

There is good reason for believing that traditional networking methods are self-serving: They *are* self-serving. And, although we all want to advance ourselves, many people want to be less blatant about it.

Traditional networking advice suggests that you identify a person who could help you and find creative ways to ingratiate yourself. Much has been written on

how to make the approach, how to cultivate the relationship, and so on. Many trainers exhort you to "be of service" to your contacts. Some stress that you should cultivate relationships

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with everyone you meet because you never know who could be helpful to you. They relate moving tales of how such relatively low-level functionaries as administrative assistants and messengers helped some star greatly at some important point in his or her career.

But the emphasis is generally the same. Do this because it will help *you*. And that is exactly what makes many people uncomfortable. They don't like reaching out to others while harboring the thought that those people—somehow, somewhere, sometime—may be useful to them. It diminishes them and devalues the not-yet-formed relationship.

I advocate a different method. The best way to form a network is *not* to try. Don't try to form a network or create one or build one. Instead, allow a network to spring up around you. And such a network will inevitably form around you if you conscientiously follow certain steps.

There are many, many times when we learn about people who touch us intensely with their words or actions. We may read about them in magazines or newspapers, see them operate in company settings, watch them on TV news, run across them in blogs or elsewhere on the Internet, or hear about them from friends. What they do appeals to us. We admire their actions. Knowing about them makes us feel better about ourselves and the world.

It could be an executive in another division or company who is trying innovative ways of developing her staff; it could be a colleague who is coaching inner-city, at-risk kids in chess; it could be a journalist who is persistently breaking stories about corporate malfeasance; it could be a taxi driver who is helping support a school in a distant country. The possibilities are endless. You know who the people are who touch you in that way.

Odds are that you let the warm feeling envelop you for a few minutes or an hour, and then it dissipates and you go on with your life. Don't let this happen. The next time you find yourself in such a glow, contact the person immediately. Send a sincere note explaining what moved you,

and express your admiration. Then follow with a specific offer of help. Be fully prepared to deliver if your offer is accepted.

Your intent is the key. The reason you are reaching out is not because you want to form a relationship with the person. You are reaching out because, if your offer of help is accepted, then you will do something that will engage someone who motivates your better self and might even leave the world a tiny bit better off.

If you do this earnestly and consistently, you will be surprised at how often your offer is accepted. And you will discover that, without your ever trying, a very powerful network has formed around you.

Sincerity is crucial. If you don't completely and honestly mean what you say, don't reach out. It will not work. And you will feel smaller. Harvard-trained David Brown, a former vice president and in-house attorney at Goldman Sachs, deeply admired New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer's war on unethical practices in the financial-services industry. He sensed the zeal in the prosecutor and started rooting for him. He wanted to find the same meaning in his own life.

The admiration grew until one day he set up a meeting and asked to join Spitzer's team in any capacity, with the proviso that he work out of Albany. "Just let me be a part of the 'Band of Brothers,'" he pleaded. He was a securities lawyer but was willing to work in any field, in any capacity. He was prepared to handle immigration issues or labor matters or family court disputes. Spitzer sensed Brown's eagerness and set him to work in Albany on a mutual-fund case. Brown traveled to New York as needed and rapidly proved his mettle.

A few months later, the head of the division departed and Brown became chief of the Investment Protection Bureau. He has helped launch landmark cases that have made headlines around the world—Marsh & McLennan, AIG, and many others. But what really drives Brown is the impact his work is having on society. "Because of our actions, millions of retirees will have more money in their pension funds and a ►

better retirement,” he says. That is what keeps him going.

That intent to be of service is what makes this method so powerful. Traditional networking is based on direct reciprocity. I “help” you and thus place an “ob” on you. I expect you to discharge this ob by helping me in turn. This expectation is sometimes fulfilled, sometimes not. It frequently leads to frustration and is toxic to relationships.

Sever this link. Help people as an outward expression of the kind of person you are. This becomes easy if you only reach out to people who already touch you at a “values” level. The funny thing is that if you consistently do this, help will come to you from unexpected sources. Sometimes it will be from the person you assisted, but more often it will be from left field.

Marshall Goldsmith is a leading executive coach, a heavyweight in his field. Back when he was less well-known, Richard Schubert, then the president of the American Red Cross, asked for his help. Goldsmith conducted training programs at dozens of Red Cross chapters and freely gave away proprietary material he had developed. He was anointed national volunteer of the year in recognition of his work, but his real reward was the sense of helping a worthy cause.

Schubert also casually introduced Goldsmith to Frances Hesselbein, then the national executive director of the Girl

Scouts of America. Goldsmith offered his programs to the Scouts, and a fruitful association began that resulted in *Leader of the Future*, a bestseller that was translated into dozens of languages and that propelled Goldsmith into the upper echelons of his industry. Hesselbein also introduced Goldsmith to Peter Drucker, whose endorsement gave him enormous credibility. Goldsmith did not plan any of this, nor did he have an inkling of what would happen when he gave away so much of his time.

When you feel passionate enough about something to reach out to someone from that same place of passion, self-doubt and nervousness drop away. And if your sincere intent is to do something that will serve the greater community, that intent communicates itself in subtle and indescribable ways. It is picked up and reflected back on you. Do this consistently and you will never have to give the first manipulative thought to networking. One day you’ll look around and discover that a strong network, full of people who want you to succeed, has sprung up right around you. ▀

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