

Six degrees of separation: the art and science of effective networking

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Networking is one of those terms that gets bandied about nowadays. We're told at business school (if we didn't realise it before) that it's important both professionally and socially, but we're generally not told how to do it, or how to do it well. It's assumed that by the time we open our chequebooks to pay for our MBA, we have all the social skills we need, and that these skills encompass the ability to network effectively. But there's a definite problem here. What do we understand by the term? For many, their idea of successful networking is to emerge from an event clutching a handful of business cards to file – but that misses the crucial point that effective networking involves a series of transactions, that ultimately involve creating, building and nurturing relationships with a wide variety of people. So the key question is: What are you actually going to do with that business card (and the person it represents, of course) to make your contact feel that you are a worthwhile person to have expended valuable time on? You cannot expect always to be the recipient of names, information or other valuable data, so what can you give in return?

Networking is also viewed by some as being first cousin to social climbing, or a close relative of the smooth 'worker of rooms', intent on using and manipulating people to their own advantage. They fail to see the crucial point of networking – that it is as much about helping others as helping yourself, that you should only network if you see it as a long-term process, and that nowhere is that old (but true) cliché more applicable: 'What goes around, comes around.'

If you take this attitude as your starting point, then the questions you need to answer become very simple. They are Rudyard Kipling's

famous serving men: who, what, when, where, why and how.

Most of us know who we want to meet and why, we may know where and when we want to meet them, and what we might gain by doing so. Where so many people fall down is on the how. Having trained originally in publishing, I am constantly amazed at how bad most people are at making the easy connections, or indeed just making the call. Even on the Sloan Masters Programme at London Business School, in a class full of high-achievers, I was surprised at how many networking opportunities were being missed by classmates just because they failed to follow some basic, common sense and easy to apply rules. And rule number one is that if you don't ask, you don't get!

My fellow classmate (and now business colleague) Tony Newton has had similar experiences: "As someone who has made a rather more dramatic career change than most, I can testify to the fact that building a whole new network of contacts in a completely new environment is something that most people don't do very often, or very well. It's got very little to do with being an introvert or extrovert, sociable or a loner, but it's certainly a set of skills which can be learnt, and which are as applicable to personal as to business life."

So, ultimately, becoming a better networker involves, first and foremost, a change of attitude. Away from 'What can I get from you?' and towards 'What might I be able to do for you?'. Secondly, there are the social skills that need polishing. The challenges that each



of us face, in the skills arena, will be different. Some people find it hard to start up conversations at networking events; others find they run out of things to say, or can't develop rapport with the person they're talking to. Other people are fine in face-to-face situations, but find the telephone a real challenge, whether they are making initial calls to set up a meeting, or following up on a meeting that has past. And talking about following up, almost everybody could do with a reminder about the importance of making contact quickly and effectively after an initial meeting or phone call. After all, relationships aren't created overnight. They take time to develop, and trust needs to be built up brick by brick.

Research shows that there is no single, correct method which will guarantee that you reach networking heaven! Each person has to find their own way of getting there, bearing in mind, of course, the principles outlined in this article. Networking, can be fun..... honestly!

Judith Perle is a director of Management Advantage. To find out more about their workshops (in effective networking and other allied areas), visit www.manadvan.com

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