



HARVARD MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION LETTER

A NEWSLETTER FROM HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PUBLISHING

TOOLS, TECHNIQUES, AND IDEAS FOR THE ARTICULATE EXECUTIVE

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A Blueprint for Constructing a Personal and Professional Network

by Tom Krattenmaker



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A Blueprint for Constructing a Personal and Professional Network

Building a network is like building a house with many doors—you're giving opportunity a lot of ways to knock.

CAROL, THE COMPANY'S media relations director, had forged a friendly relationship with Lauren, the CEO's assistant. The two often exchanged laughs and a personal note when doing business with each other, and Carol had given Lauren a helpful lead when Lauren was looking for a new child-care center for her son. Consequently, whenever Carol needed a quick word with Lauren's boss about a fast-developing situation with the press, Lauren went the extra mile to fit Carol into the CEO's schedule, at times even calling to say, "She's about to head down the hall—you might catch her if you step out right now."

While Carol might not have realized it, she was tapping the power of her network to improve her work performance and make her professional life easier and more satisfying. As relationships become more important in the changing workplace, networking experts say it is now more important than ever to network—to connect, stay in touch, and exchange information with people both within and beyond your professional life. An economic downturn, they add, magnifies the importance of developing networking skills.

In some circles, "networking" has a bad reputation. It smacks of manipulation or insincerity, of worn-out lines like "Let's do lunch." Or it conjures pictures of network marketers who bring the hard sell to what was billed as a social meeting, or over-the-top name-droppers who foist business cards on everyone in sight and drop a conversation partner the instant they spot someone they think more important. That brand of networking is not only ethically questionable but ineffective, says Donna Fisher, a networking expert who has written four

books on the subject, including *Professional Networking for Dummies* and *Power Networking* (with Sandy Vilas). "Networking is about connecting with people and creating opportunities—opportunities for yourself and the others in your networks," she says.

Networking is the closest thing to a surefire method for finding and getting great jobs. According to Dale Jones, a managing partner at the executive recruiting firm Heidrick & Struggles (Chicago), many job-seekers mistakenly believe that a mailed résumé is the point of entry to a company. But as Jones tells the *New York Times*, "What many have failed to realize is that it's all about building relationships."

Of course, to network only when you're looking for work or have a specific need misses the point of the whole enterprise, says Ivan R. Misner, Ph.D., founder of the Los Angeles-based networking firm BNI, which operates 2,300 networking chapters in 12 countries. Staying in touch with colleagues and associates when times are good and making yourself available to others seeking your ideas and assistance makes it far more likely that your calls will be returned when you're seeking employment leads or information to solve a problem. "If you're going to be serious about networking, you do it all the time," says Misner, who is also the author, with Don Morgan, of *Masters of Networking*.

For professionals unsure of how to build and use their networks, here are some tips from several experts:

Identify your network

All people have a core network, Fisher says—their constellations of family

members and friends. Beyond that are the people you have come to know over the years through your work and community activities. All the people you are acquainted with—the person who runs the corner shop, the parents of the other kids on your daughter's soccer team, the regulars at the gym where you work out—are actual or potential members of your network.

Susan RoAne, a San Francisco-based speaker on networking and the author of *The Secrets of Savvy Networking*, suggests a list-making exercise to clarify the composition of your existing network. You might begin with people in your current and old address books and those on your holiday card lists. Then think of others you deal with on either a professional or personal level. Potential members can include your hairstylist, the other regulars at your pickup basketball game—even your mechanic.

Connect

Network building can be as formal as creating an advisory board or as informal as taking a minute to exchange friendly conversation with the secretary down the hall. Kathryn Mohrman took the former step when she became president of Colorado College. She asked eight trusted associates to serve as her confidential advisers. Mohrman, who describes the experience in a December article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, says, "They could often think clearly and creatively about an issue that seemed intractable to me because I was too close to it," she writes. "They could frame the issue in a new way that suddenly put additional options on the table."

Of course, with innumerable organizations already in existence, it's often unnecessary to form your own group as Mohrman did. Becoming active in alumni associations, chambers of commerce, professional groups, and similar organizations builds your network quickly.

Mingle effectively

Showing up at meetings at least starts

the process, but you probably won't gain anything but weight if you squander meet-and-greet time by standing in the corner enjoying the hors d'oeuvres. RoAne has a comforting message for introverts who tremble at the thought of mingling with strangers at a networking event: Many of the others share your discomfort.

RoAne's Web site, www.howtoworkaroom.com, suggests several steps to prepare for the event. Peruse the sponsoring organization's Web site to understand its mission and learn something about the issues of the day. Read the newspaper to ready yourself to make the small talk that starts conversations. And prepare a brief introduction—no more than seven to nine seconds long—of yourself and your work. That's not a lot of time, so feature what's most relevant to the occasion.

While it can be both compassionate and smart to approach the person off to the side alone, it's often necessary to join circles where the conversation is already rolling. Stand at the periphery, RoAne advises; someone will likely notice and create a space for you. Equally important is the timely exit. Staying glued to one person throughout an entire event does little good for you or your partner, so move on after 10 minutes with a tactful closer such as, "I know you're looking forward to meeting some of the others here." If the person has indicated an interest in you or your business—and only if she has—offer your business card as you part.

Listen and help

Activating your growing network is as simple as contacting people. If you've recently learned something useful, ask yourself who else might appreciate knowing it and pass it along.

Listening is a much underrated networking skill. "Good networkers have two ears and one mouth and use them proportionately. Pay attention to what people have to say. Find out what their needs are. Help meet those needs or at

least refer them to someone who can," says Misner, who got off to a great start in a former job by making appointments with many of his new associates, learning about their jobs and figuring out ways to assist them. His mantra: "Givers gain."

Don't keep score. Has anyone ever agreed to help you but added, "You owe me one now"? This, Fisher says, is not

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how to treat people in your network. "That's an old style of networking, a style that was based on manipulation and obligation," she says. "Build relationships, and people help one another because they want to."

"Networking is as simple as friendship," Fisher adds. "You won't necessarily socialize with all your professional contacts, but you should treat the people in your network with the same respect and kindness that you extend to your friends." Savvy networkers "treat people as people, not as prospects," says RoAne. "Stay in touch," she says, "even when you need nothing from them."

Ask for help

Operating in a network often revolves around offering or requesting help. Many are loath to do the latter. That's understandable in a society that has long proclaimed the virtues of self-reliance. But asking for help is smart and effective. And others often appreciate having the opportunity to lend a hand.

The kind of help one usually seeks from the network—leads, ideas, names, and contact information—is granted with minimal time and effort. Most important to the person you're approaching is whether you can be trusted to use the information appropriately and treat well the people to whom you're being

referred. "Simply knowing someone doesn't mean you're entitled to their contacts," RoAne says. "Whether it's your cousin or your coworker, you have to earn access to others' networks."

Follow up

You've just scored a major coup at your company. Someone in your network got you started with a key lead six months ago. Before that friend or associate hears about your triumph from someone else—and wonders when you forgot about the concept of appreciation—follow up and send thanks. The same principle holds true after networking events. You might have made promising first contact with someone, but the relationship has no chance to develop if you don't follow up with a call or a note.

Call it organic networking. In the final analysis, networking is about more than one's work, says Fisher. "People can use networking in all areas of life—when they're facing health issues, when they're changing careers, when they're in school, and when they're entering retirement," Fisher says. "Yes, it's an important career-management tool, but I think of it as a life-enhancement tool." □

—**Tom Krattenmaker** is a Philadelphia-area author and the director of news and information at Swarthmore College. He can be reached at hmcl@hbsp.harvard.edu

FURTHER READING

Masters of Networking
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