

Creating and Nurturing your Social Network

The Art of Building Long-term Mutually Beneficial Relationships

Most people network when they need something – jobs, financing, sales, donation to charity. This is not really networking. It is just part of the “sales” process. If you really need that something urgently, then it is probably too late for networking and this note will not help you.

Networking is the art of building long-term mutually beneficial relationships, and this note will describe what social networks can do, what networking is, and what it is not. Furthermore, we provide seven suggestions on how to begin the process of building your network.

The Operational, Personal and Strategic Networks of Successful Leaders

Herminia Ibarra and Mark Hunter in their 2007 HBR article “How Leaders Create and Use Networks” suggest that successful leaders typically develop, nurture and leverage the three types of social networks: operational, personal and strategic.

1. **Operational** - The people who help you get work done. This is generally the people on your team at work.
2. **Personal** - The people who help you grow and find better ways to get work done. This group will include friends from school, sport, hobbies and colleagues from work who have moved beyond a pure professional connection.
3. **Strategic** - The people who help you get the right work done. This network takes planning and effort to build, and does not develop “naturally.”

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The table below, adapted from their article, outlines the purpose, the value created and how to develop them.

Network	Operational	Personal	Strategic
Purpose	Get work done	Get work done right	Get right work done
Value to you	Get work done efficiently	Develop professional skills through coaching and mentoring; exchange important referrals and needed outside information	Figure out future priorities and challenges; get stakeholder support for them
How to find network members	Identify individuals who can block or support a project; people in your work teams, in your training classes.	Participate in professional associations, alumni groups, clubs and personal-interest communities; civic groups	Identify lateral and vertical relationships with people outside your immediate environment who can help you determine how your career and contribution fit into an overall picture

All three networks are key to successful development of a professional career and the development of your soft power and influence in organizations and society.

Many effective middle managers have strong operational networks. They are vital contributors to getting regular day-to-day work done. This network is often not under your control. It will depend on your role and projects you have been assigned. The operational network will allow you to get work done efficiently, but will not answer the questions “what work should we be doing?” or “is there a more effective way to get it done?”

You will have some form of existing personal network – even if just family members and one or two friends from school or university. The deliberate building of this network usually begins once you have identified a passion you wish to develop (a musical instrument, ballroom dancing, sport, a hobby such as gardening or blogging), a skill you wish to develop (Toastmasters for public speaking) or an industry in which you wish to build a career. The personal network is best if somewhat separate from the operational network so that it can be a safe space for personal development.

The aspiring leader will awaken to the importance of professional skills that are best developed with input and feedback from informal coaches, mentors and friends who wish to see you succeed. The deliberate building of this network will take place through professional associations, alumni and clubs. People in this network will provide new perspectives that allow you to grow as a person and advance in your career. Whereas the operational network is part of “work,” the personal network is not so clearly work-related. It will take disciplined effort to maintain. Josh Elboim, Vice President at Morgan Stanley, says that “the considered selection of appropriate mentors is critical.”



Career Health Warning

If you find yourself working in a large corporation under a direct boss who “has no time for politics” move to an area with another boss as soon as possible and work on your own strategic network. Make sure that you will have other influencers in promotions and careers meetings. Promotions and career progress are intensely political in even the most rational meritocratic systems. Do not bank on the system taking care of you if you just work hard. This attitude gets you As in school, but it may not in business.

The optimal strategic network includes people of diverse backgrounds, objectives and incentives. This network has people who have influence over promotions, client buying decisions and political processes. At the highest level, soft power is developed by actively working (lobbying) to place allies in key peer positions. This network can sometimes be called your “personal board of directors.”

It is Never Too Early to Start Networking

Networking is one of the most important success predictors of leadership. The transition and growth in your career from new graduate to employee to functional manager to business leader requires the ability to move your network from an “operational” network to a broad-based “strategic” network. You can get a head start by building the habit of using opportunities to give to and receive from people in your networks, whether you feel that you need help or not. Building a strong network takes work and time. Make it a priority and plan networking activities into your calendar.

Networking is like brushing your teeth. If you wait until you have a toothache, it is too late to start brushing. Is brushing your teeth natural? No. Is it fun? No. Do you do it? Yes. Why? Out of habit, as a matter of practice, because you see the need for it, as a result of being told by your parents enough times. As with brushing your teeth, networking is not a one-time effort. Brushing your teeth is only effective if you choose to do it every day. Networking is of no use if you only get into bursts of “networking” activity - it needs to be habitual and constant.

But Networking does not “Come Naturally” to Me

Deep and broad networking does not come naturally to most people. A beautiful garden is not natural - it is nature under a gardener’s discipline. The best gardeners do not fight nature, but they do weed out the plants that they do not want and plant and nurture the shrubs and trees that they do want. They don’t plant grass in a desert. They first irrigate the soil and create the conditions for growth for the plants they want.

Networking, for some, is a dirty American word. It can come across as formulaic and utilitarian. Done powerfully, it should come not boil down to “how will this benefit me” but “how can I add to this relationship/conversation/meeting.”

Reputation and trust are essential. Reputation is what others think of you. It starts with your first impression. It builds with follow-through on promises. We make snap judgments