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## Ten tips for working the network

Rita Marcella

We all have networks – they are natural phenomena that we encounter from our earliest days, membership of which begins in early childhood and is nurtured (though also sometimes damaged) through participation in nursery, at dance classes, in Brownies and team sports.

Equally we all have different levels of facility in networking and engaging with others and a natural inclination towards gregarious interaction or indeed, on the other end of the spectrum, towards isolation and self-reflection. And over time we learn how to interact with our networks and how best to build them and build upon them.

We will have multiple different networks too for different purposes and to support different types of activity. And today of course we will have virtual online networks as well as face to face opportunities to meet and exchange with others.

And similarly, a network can be understood as a simple concept of horizontally and vertically intersecting lines – and it can be the lines of intersection of people and/or organisations that cross our lives. So if we stop and think about all of our networks what are they? They are our family first and foremost; our longstanding friends; our schoolmates; our university peers; our colleagues; the fellow members of a professional body, of an industry body, an interest group; our fellow academics/entrepreneurs/professors/neurosurgeons etc.

In all of these there is a thread of community of interest, of knowledge, of memory that we share with others in the network. If we do not hold that thread of mutuality then our membership of that network is void and invalid.

As business author Margaret Morford noted: “businesspeople generally think of networking as a mutually beneficial meeting for both parties”. However, if we have only joined the network for personal advantage, then the gain is likely to be superficial and evanescent. For there are huge advantages to be gained through membership of networks – advantages that can be hugely powerful if we are able to recognise and exploit them fully.

I’ve been very lucky in being able to rely on a fantastic network of contacts in the north-east. I have various factors to thank for this. As Dean of a Faculty representing business, law and media I had access to many colleagues with their own extensive networks, to say nothing of the thousands of graduates who have gone on to populate business, media and the legal profession and facilitated access to their contacts as a result.

However, having inherited this excellent base it fell to me to value, develop and add to the network over the years. This takes time, effort and commitment but also builds real value and at best a sense of fellowship with others on whom we can rely. I’ve also emphasised to students the importance of having an excellent network and spoken to them about how to do so.

My rules for networking, evolved through experience over the years, include:

1. Understand that every event or activity you participate in is an opportunity to meet someone new and interesting or to find out something that you did not previously know but you have to participate with an open and receptive way;
2. Make an effort to go, to participate, to offer your views, to volunteer, to give your time and your efforts to the network – and then, of course, deliver;
3. Do not neglect your network even when your time and attention is taken by some other priority or you feel you have moved to a new phase or position in life. For it is often at the times of greatest challenge that you genuinely appreciate the benefits of fellowship and collegiality that your network can provide;
4. Speak – while you might want to observe at first until you have established the etiquette of the network (and there always is one), don't just be a lurker be a participant with a voice and a point of view and something to offer;
5. Listen – in contradistinction to 4 above however there is nothing more tiresome and off putting to other members of a network than someone who doesn't listen, who isn't interested. For it is the case that listening is the greatest skill of the most appreciated and valued networkers – listen, ask questions, care about the answers and worst sin of all don't be one of those individuals who are constantly looking over your shoulder to see if there is someone more important on the horizon while notionally listening to you!
6. Remember people's names – you don't really need to remember a whole lot more than that but remember names if you possibly can and if you don't remember just say so. None of us can remember everyone and it's quite endearing when people actually say I think I know you but I can't think from where;
7. Understand what others want to get from the network and be clear and upfront about what you can and can't or won't do;
8. Understand that it's never about just what you can get from a network but also about what you give back to it. As Ms Morford advises, observe the basic rules of reciprocal courtesy, of give and take, to avoid being a “networking leech”; when asking for advice or help from a fellow member of your network – and to do so is absolutely acceptable – think about how you can help them too and if you make a commitment deliver;
9. Remember you are just one line on the network; it can and does and will exist without you – however important a role you've played, however important you consider your contribution to be, including setting it up and running it; and
10. Engage at times of stress and challenge, for then networks are hugely important possibly more important than at any other time. Ultimately peer support networks exist to help members to thrive and they can equally fulfil a really important function for members when times are tough.

And of course you can translate all of these rules into virtual networks too but that's perhaps a topic for a whole other future column.

It is the case that the phrase “working the network” has come to have something of a negative connotation – in the same way as exploit has come to convey something vaguely improper, when these terms can be used in a simple and descriptive way.

There is nothing improper in working your networks – to keep them alive you have to work at their maintenance and good health and you have to respect the other members of the network.

Those of us with good networks have done precisely that – we have not taken them for granted, we have appreciated their value and supported our networks and we have respected their members and the (sometimes invisible) rules of proper behaviour.

We commit to good fellowship with others, for in the words of CS Lewis: “The next best thing to being wise oneself is to live in a circle of those who are.”