

Does your network bind (and blind) you?

Margaret Beaton 26 August 2012

Your networks are an important source of information and intelligence? *Right*. Family connections, friends, school and university mates and business associates are the most productive places to network? *Not necessarily*. Here's why.

The relationships you have built with others over the years reflect your current identity; they characterise who you are and what you do. The people in your close network hold up a mirror that reflects an image of how they see you, what makes you successful, and what they see as your options. This becomes an important part of your self-image. It is self-reinforcing and it fences you in.

Many in your network have a vested interest in keeping you as you are. Colleagues and clients want you to keep on keeping on. Your spouse doesn't necessarily welcome the prospect of a change in her or his lifestyle. Even your children may resist change out of fear of you becoming dependent on them. All of them have you in a pigeonhole, with a title and role that is understood and valued.

But change is inevitable in the 'letting go' stage of your career. You need—or you may even be forced—to change and to find ways to breakaway from the last 20, 30, even 40 years of sameness. That's hard because the habits of a lifetime have served you very well.

Three things are limiting—and wrong—about networking with your close friends and associates.

First is the limitation it automatically places on your thinking and imagination. The work of Mark **Granovetter** of Harvard showed that the best life-career opportunities come from networking with distant acquaintances; people with whom you have interacted only occasionally, often long ago. Hence the title of his now famous study "The strength of weak ties". The people in your close network—your strong ties—are too like you. There's no real diversity, too little challenge to your beliefs and assumptions about what you want and what you can achieve.

Second, your network friends and associates tend to pull you back to be like them, to view yourself and the world as they do. They are less likely to push you out of your comfort zone because it is theirs too. In other words, they actively—albeit unwittingly—help you remain the old you by reinforcing the merits of the status quo at worst, or small, incremental change at most.

Third, the information that flows from your close network lacks novelty and difference.

It's true, as Herminia **Ibarra** of INSEAD writes, that 'we cannot regenerate in isolation; we develop in and through our relationships with others'. But if these others are the people who know us best, then they more likely to hinder than help our exploration. You need to break out of the grip of your friends and associates. To venture to the periphery of your networks to canvass all the possibilities your skills, experience and energy offer you.

This is not to say your existing and close ties aren't useful. Rather, they shouldn't be the only places you look. They will bind and blind you, not magnify your ideas and multiply your opportunities.

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