

Smarter Networking

Smarter networking extends the well-known maxim “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know”. While this is certainly sound advice, it’s incomplete.

Having 5,000+ connections on LinkedIn may impress some. Did you know there’s even a name for it in some quarters, LinkedIn envy? Being able to name-drop 50+ big corporate hitters as people you know may also seem impressive. But research shows network *size* doesn’t matter nearly as much a network *quality*. Knowing and being known to lots of people is a poor indicator of executive performance. Executives who rank in the top fifth of their companies in performance and resilience have *selective* networks. These comprise high-quality relationships with diverse people from many levels of the corporate hierarchy (see the work of [Robert Cross](#)).

Cross has shown these high performers rely on six types of connections to enhance their careers and lives in many ways. They are intimately networked in the real, not virtual, world with no more than 20 others who are:

1. “People who offer them new information or expertise, including internal or external clients, who increase their market awareness; peers in other functions, divisions, or geographies, who share best practices; and contacts in other industries, who inspire innovation.
2. Formally powerful people, who provide mentoring, sense-making, political support, and resources; and informally powerful people, who offer influence, help coordinating projects, and support among the rank and file.
3. People who give them developmental feedback, challenge their decisions and push them to be better. At an early career stage, an employee might get this from a boss or customers; later, it tends to come from coaches, trusted colleagues, or a spouse.
4. People who provide personal support, such as colleagues who help them get back on track when times are tough or friends with whom they can just be themselves and feel accepted.
5. People who add a sense of purpose or worth, such as bosses and customers who validate their work, and family members and other stakeholders who show them work has a broader meaning.
6. People who promote their work/life balance, holding them accountable for activities that improve their physical health (such as sports), mental engagement (such as hobbies or educational classes), or spiritual well-being (music, religion, art, or volunteer work).”

Four-step process to develop a selective network



In *Managing Yourself: A Smarter Way to Network* Rob Cross and Robert Thomas describe a four-step process to develop a selective network (1). With due acknowledgment, I summarise their practical approach.

1. Analyse

Who is in your network? Are they in your team, your company, or outside? What benefits do you derive from interacting with them? Are you energised by these interactions? The last question is an important one because ‘energisers’ bring out the best in those around them. And research shows having them in your network is a strong predictor of your success over time. They’re people who

see the opportunities, even in challenging situations and create room for others to participate. They are trustworthy and committed to more than their self-interest.

Next, classify your relationships by the benefits they provide in one of six categories: [1] information, [2] political support and influence, [3] personal development, [4] personal support and energy, [5] a sense of purpose or worth, and [6] work-life balance. It's important to have people who provide each kind of benefit in your network. In this way you'll see where you have gaps and redundancies, and on who you depend too much – or not enough.

2. De-layer

Once you've analysed your network, make hard decisions about from which relationships to back away. Eliminate or reduce contact with people who sap your energy. Do this by reshaping your role to avoid them and reframing your reactions so you don't dwell on the interactions.

Ask yourself in which of the six categories you have too many people. For example, in the early stage of your career you may focus too much on information and not enough on personal development. Think about who determined by function, hierarchy, or geography, has too much of you, and why. Do work procedures require you to be involved? Or is your own behaviour causing the imbalance? How can you change the situation?

3. Diversify

With space created in your network, fill it with the right people. I suggest you make a list of the six categories of relationships (above) and add colleagues who could fill the holes. Focus on positive, energetic, selfless people, and look inside and outside your network for ideas. Think about how to link your network to your professional and personal goals with exercise: Write down three specific business results you want to achieve, e.g. doubling sales and then list the people who could help you because of their expertise, access to resources, or ability to open doors and remove obstacles.

4. Capitalise

Last, ensure you're using your contacts effectively. Are there people you rely on in one sphere, such as political support, that you could also use to fill a need in another, like personal development? Could you get more out of some relationships if you put more into them? Remember, high performers at all levels use their information contacts to gain other benefits like new ideas. Reciprocal relationships also tend to be more fruitful; the most successful leaders always look for ways to give back.

Conclusion

Building your network using this four-point approach will become self-sustaining. Over time it will ensure the best opportunities, ideas and talent come your way.

Read more on this topic

✓ [How leaders create and use networks](#) by Herminia Ibarra and Mark Lee Hunter

✓ Other posts on [networking](#) written by me on Letting Go. Stepping Up.

(1) A version of *Managing Yourself: A Smarter Way to Network* appeared in the [July–August 2011](#) issue of *Harvard Business Review*.