

FORWARD THINKING

The Power of Informal Networks

The impact of forming a cozy klatch is vast



by MICHELE C. WIERZGAC

NETWORKING IS RECOGNIZED AS A major influence on one's ability to achieve great success, and the most successful people in the world possess the capability to influence and shape the opinions of others. However, there now is a greater emphasis on the type of network one participates in.

Much has been written about successful executives and leaders and how they participate in formal networks, but very little is known about the substantial amount of time they spend within their informal networks. What is known, however, is that the impact is vast.

It is imprudent for the meeting professional to underestimate the power of informal networks by saying they are merely "nice-to-have." These types of networks are increasingly having a major impact on organizational effectiveness. More importantly, these types of networks provide major business advantages for the participants and thus are known to advance many careers.

The main difference between informal and formal networks is the effort of the individuals to create and maintain them.

The formal network often has an organizational culture attached to it, such as a formal philosophy, mission, structure, leadership, membership, eligibility, and funding.

Informal networks are based on the objective of achieving a reciprocal exchange of information and favors—with no rules—share advice freely, expand the network at will, inspire each other, achieve personal goals, and help each other obtain business and career advantages. The "old boys network" is based on the informal network system, hence the phrase, "It's a man's world." Again, the emphasis is on a one-to-one networking effort, as opposed to an organizational system that characterizes the formal network.

The formal networks are easily identifiable: boards of directors, economic clubs, affinity groups set up by corporations, executive talent pools, online discussion groups, management groups, professional conferences, and associations.

Informal networks are hidden. The network may be a group of industry colleagues with a common interest or a shared philosophy getting together for a casual gathering away from the office. Other networks may be created through people you meet while traveling, attending church functions or simply completing errands.

The most effective informal network contains high-functioning people who are extremely skilled, knowledgeable, powerful, and who have strong personal networks. Research indicates that extroverts are the element that drives a successful network. People who are friendly, courteous, tolerant of differences, and respectful of different cultures and perspectives achieve the most success. The informal network without the hierarchy and bureaucracy encourages the most interaction and achieves the most positive results.

On the other hand, there are many skills the meeting professional must possess before being invited to an informal network. The most important skill to acquire is to not treat everyone like a mass market, a machine or a cold call. The success of this most-prized network depends on respecting the commonality among one another and to help each other achieve their goals.

When you have the privilege of being invited to an informal network, you must be prepared. Here are some tips for developing your networking skills:

- Do not treat your informal network like a mass market, machine or cold call.
- Do you have a great attitude? Are you positive? Do you see the big picture? Successful networkers have a strong belief in themselves and in what they are pursuing. Triumphant leaders are passionate.

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- Who makes up the network? What are their needs, company and interests?
- Who makes up your network? How can you connect your network with this network?
- Do not be a name-dropper unless you have permission.
- Successful people have the ability to give back. Listen to the needs of the network. Share information and opportunities with others.
- Identify key people you can relate to. Do they share the same philosophy about career, business, friendship, or family?
- You must educate the network on exactly what you do. Know your goals, strengths and career direction backwards and forwards.
- What is your personal brand? Are you unique? How will people remember you? Remember that generic brands encourage generic attention. Are you believable and credible? Be a marketer and demonstrate leadership. Write a 30-word brand statement of how you want to be described. A personal brand statement is a method of controlling what others are saying about you. Next, write a list of the behaviors required for you to achieve the items in your brand statement. List the actions you must complete to make it happen. Eliminate your deficiencies.
- Identify and communicate the types of gifts you can share with those within the network.
- Write and call on a regular basis each person within the network and exchange information; successful leaders are organized.
- Ask for direction, opinions or ways to get around obstacles.
- Ask for honest feedback and take the criticism as an opportunity to improve.
- Use strategic vocabulary and develop the ability to ask the right questions.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate; be proactive in initiating conversation. Do not give the perception of being in a clique or an exclusive group; be sure to mix and mingle.
- Training in and respect for etiquette, protocol and cultural awareness is mandatory. Poor manners and ignorance immediately damages your personal brand and reputation.
- Handwritten thank you notes are essential.

Networking has always been an essential social skill founded on the interdependence of people. We all rely on the support and cooperation of others to achieve our goals. Informal networking involves bonding, sharing expertise and investing time and effort into others. People have always had the need to build and maintain a network that involves trust and respect for others; the informal network connects people who perhaps otherwise would not have met.

Chip away at this detailed list; informal networks are filled with the power and potential to result in you arriving at your destination. 🌟

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