



Smart Networking for Busy People

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I coach contributors at all levels of organizations-from small non-profits to global corporations. In my practice, I have found that many coaches fall short of their expectation to build a strong alliance of mentors, friends and acquaintances. One big reason this happens are the obvious time limitations that they all live within. Another is not knowing how to do this. Still another is simply not thinking strategically about doing at work what we all already do on LinkedIn. It makes good sense to link with people across your organization-so that you reach within and beyond your own functional areas.

I have written about Karen Stephenson in previous posts. Dr. Stephenson is a corporate anthropologist who focuses her work on helping organizations map trust and information flow patterns. According to Dr. Stephenson, it is imperative to build a culture of trust in organizations that drives the development of sustainable innovation. It is the informal networks of people, she contends, who brainstorm, share, explore novel, untested ideas and discuss how to overcome obstacles, fix what's broken and generally improve the way things get done.

Dr. Stephenson offers the following as proof that informal network operate to achieve the bulk of knowledge transfer, the tacit knowledge" held by what she calls an organization's "social capital":

1. **80% of human knowledge** is not written down in policies or procedures but held in the tacit knowledge shared among colleagues.
2. **It is the interaction of people** - - their connection on teams and tasks - - that contributes as much to mission success as individual people and their talents.
3. **Social capital** – is the advantage created by a person's location in a structure of relationships. It explains how some people gain more success in a particular setting through their critical connections to others.

Optimizing your own informal networks can be accomplished by first thinking strategically about what areas of information or support you need to give or receive. I find it helpful as a coach to ask people to think short, mid-and loner term about their connection needs. Who or what do you need now, to improve performance and functions?

As you grow in your career, what information/knowledge or support are you likely to need? And finally, thinking backwards from a long time from now, who can you connect with to optimize your long-term career aims.

Dr. Stephenson breaks networks down into four broad categories:

1. **Decision making.** Whom do you seek out when you need to get a timely, non-routine decision made?
2. **Social.** Who do you talk to when you want to find out what's really going on in your organization?
3. **Strategy.** With whom do you discuss your organization's vision and strategy for your business area?
4. **Career Advice.** With whom do you discuss your career options and where you see yourself going in the organization?

To this list I would add one more item-**Functional Skill Building**, because so many people rely on informal on-the-job ways to expedite learning when they most need it.

Typically, the first step-identifying who to contact, and why, is easy enough, to do, but I often hear people complaining that they don't know where to start, how to ask prospective contact to meet, and what to say. I have surveyed coaches and found some best practice tips for approaching someone, and adding them to your network.

A Best Practice Approach for Adding People to your Informal Network

After choosing people to populate the networks above, or creating your own useful list, consider the following steps:

1. **Ask to Meet. Be yourself, approach the person if possible face to face.** Offer some information about your intentions: "I am building a network of savvy, smart people that I can tap into when I need to, and I think you are one. I will reciprocate and not waste a lot of your time. Can we set up a time to meet or call so I can ask a few questions I have?"
2. **Before the meeting, develop a short list of questions** to ask.
3. **Make sure you offer reciprocal support-and say,** "Please feel free to reach out to me when you need information or support."
4. **Thank the person, add them to your network,** and don't "overuse" them. Be sure, though, to contact them from time to time to offer *them* updates or useful information.

I have created a worksheet to use for recording possible candidates for each area, located on the resources page of my organization's website. **You can access the worksheet by clicking on the link below.**

<http://corplearning.com/images/flyers/Personal%20Networking%20Worksheet.pdf?nodeid=29953>

However you do it, get going. Connect with the right people for the right reasons, and and you-and your career, will benefit.

Dr. Susan Cain is a corporate coach, expert in training and meeting facilitation, and mom to four children, three dogs and a horse. Find out more about her blog at <http://corpdaily.com/>.

The Corporate Learning Institute is based in Chicago but travels the globe helping people in organizations exceed their performance expectations. Visit CLI at www.corplearning.com.

Now that you know a lot more about the informal power of networking, visit the following sites to learn more:

Karen Stephenson, Netform, Inc.,

<http://www.drkaren.us/>

<http://www.netform.com/>