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Are You Working Without a Net?

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A big part of the secret to success for the most accomplished people and leaders is their ability to develop strong professional and social networks. Networking is the practice of expanding your sphere of influence while serving as a resource to others. A recent article in the *Academy of Management Journal* claims that successful managers are skilled networkers and spend 70 percent more time networking than their less-successful counterparts. Networking leaders know how to access the people, information and resources to create solutions and opportunities. They are skilled at choosing and using the right networking tools to achieve a competitive advantage and business results.

Professional meetings and events, whether internal or external, are some of the best places to grow a network. However, if you attend meetings without a clear strategy, you might end up merely watching other people network and wondering why you gave up your valuable time. Before attending your next social or professional meeting, answer the following five questions:

What Are Your Goals?

One of the first and most common mistakes that people make when entering a networking situation (planned or otherwise) is to fail to have a goal in mind. Think about if your goal is to acquire prospects, meet colleagues for possible collaborations, create a mutual referral partnership, increase name recognition, find funding, or just shop around for interesting news and trends you can use. Take time to determine what your goals are for attending the event. For example, if an event is made up primarily of others in your industry, and you want to find out the latest, greatest technology in the field, then you're in the right place.

Consider who will attend the event and how many contacts you want to make. Think quality rather than quantity. If this is a planned event, find out who will be attending and identify a few key people you want to meet. Avoid going in blind and winging it. It is best to identify who will be at the meeting and ask why they

are there. Answering this question will give you ideas about topics to discuss.

What Is Your Story?

Do you have an elevator speech, or 15-second introduction that is clear, concise, to the point and compelling, or do people's eyes glaze over before you get to the end? Networking events are not the time to give dry and deadly dull job descriptions. When someone asks about you and your work, you are being given a golden, but brief, opportunity to express yourself, make a good impression, and leave them wanting more. Avoid turning your introduction into a sales pitch. Networking is networking, and sales are sales.

Are You Prepared?

Make sure that you have everything you need to make a good impression. Check to see if you have business cards easily accessible, and double-check the time, date and venue. Nothing is more irritating than showing up only to find that you're too early, too late or unable to find a parking space.

How Will You Initiate Conversations?

One of your first considerations should be when and how you will enter the event. Arrive early, observe for a few minutes and begin mingling with your goals in mind. Depending on the meeting, you might have an opportunity to talk with five to 10 people.

- Ask good questions.
- Listen more than you talk.
- Get the other person talking.
- Remember that generally you get what you ask for. "Question" comes from the Latin word "to search for." You are seeking out good information and memorable moments.
- Make note of key points and ideas.
- Set up a filing system for future reference.
- Write notes on the back of business cards.
- Circulate; avoid getting stuck with one person.

Encourage others to:

- See your thinking.
- Share more of who they are (good information to catalog for later use).

Engage others by:

- Planting new ideas or perspectives.
- Affirming the value of others and their ideas.
- Having fun.

- Asking a question, voicing an opinion, or stating a fact about the event, the other person or yourself.
- Making note of what you can offer of value, such as referrals, articles and information.

How Will You Follow Up?

The most important part of networking happens after the initial contact. No matter who said what about who's calling whom, always follow up promptly and in a manner designed to strengthen the relationship and add value for the other person. The follow-up message can be an e-mail, phone call or note. Keep in mind that you want the follow-up to:

- Refer to your original conversation, restating any key points and reaffirming any agreements that were made.
- Follow through on any promises you made to deliver information, provide samples, initiate a meeting or put through a request.

Be a prompt responder but avoid turning into a pest. Think of ways you can add value to the relationship through your skills, influence, position, connections or information. Unless it is clear that no further relationship is warranted or desired, make sure that there is some agreement on a next step to continue the conversation.

Etiquette Principles You Should Keep in Mind

Many business professionals are concerned about the lost art of social etiquette. Useful reminders and ideas are available at sites such as: www.iVillage.com; www.wildwe.com; www.BellaOnline.com; www.quintcareers.com/womens_networking_organizations.html. As you network, consider the following suggestions:

- Be genuine.
- Listen, listen and listen some more. People are valued when they are heard. Follow-up on topics they introduce. Demonstrate interest in others.
- Be impeccably polite online and off.
- Express gratitude and appreciation for follow-up attempts.
- Show genuine interest in others. A simple "How are your kids?" or "How was your vacation?" will go a long way in laying a foundation for a wonderful business networking relationship.
- Never speak badly of others—even if everyone else is doing it.
- Think about how to help the other graciously, and live up to your promises. Make note of what you can provide of value.
- Ask if you can include the person on your networking list.
- Give a short elevator speech.

Summary

The best networkers know how to access people, information and resources to create solutions and opportunities. Supervisors and managers play an important role in helping develop networking skills and capabilities in those with whom they work. Use these principles to build capability in yourself and your team.

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