

Chapter 6:

Strategic networking – learning to identify, connect, and benefit your network

By Debbie Epstein Henry, founder, DEH Consulting, Speaking, Writing; and co-founder, Bliss Lawyers

Do you worry that your network has gone stale? That you've let it lapse for too many years? Do you think you need to step up your networking – but you don't know where to start? Do you feel you've exhausted your networking efforts but you haven't had the success you want or need? If the answer is “yes” to one or more of these questions, then you need a new framework to mine your network and unearth your contacts. By getting organized, conducting outreach, applying discipline, and extending yourself generously, you can tap into your network in a way you never could have imagined. You will also help others, finding great reward in reconnecting with old contacts and developing new ones too. Here's how.

Identifying your network

People often tell me they've increased their networking efforts, yet they are still not effective at connecting with the people they want to reach. When I ask them what they are doing to expand their network, I'm often struck by how their networking is based on instinct and episodic efforts. To succeed in networking, you must approach it with the same strategic thought and methodology as you would any other professional goal.

The first step is creating a networking spreadsheet with four or five tabs to ensure you have identified your network. For each tab, list all of the people who fall into the designated category and err on the side of being over-inclusive.

First tab

Childhood friends and family. These include your friends from your schooling through high school, sports, music, summer camp, and any other activities in which you were engaged. This grouping also

includes people up until college from your religious institutions and volunteer work.

Second tab

College and graduate school contacts. This list extends to friends from college and any graduate school(s) you attended as well as professors and people you interacted with during those years in the activities in which you were involved.

Third tab

Former colleagues and professional contacts. These include everyone you worked with or met in the past in a professional context, whether they were colleagues at your workplace as well as competitors and people you knew through professional organizations, industry conferences and networks.

Fourth tab

Current social network and community, as well as your former, post college, or post graduate school social network and community. This may include your current or former neighbors, people you know through volunteering or through your children, religious organizations, etc.

Fifth tab

Current professional colleagues and contacts (for those of you currently employed). This list includes everyone you are currently working with or that you are currently interacting with in a professional context.

Connecting with your network

The next step is finding out where your contacts are and who are doing things of interest to you. The best tool for this is LinkedIn. Before doing any research or outreach, be sure your own LinkedIn profile is updated. Take your bio offline and complete all of the dimensions to your profile. Once you have uploaded your current and complete bio, as well as a current professional photo, begin your research and outreach. In terms of priorities, go through your current and former professional and personal (tabs three, four, and five) networks first. These people are the most likely to be able to vouch for you professionally, personally, or both. They are also your more current networks. There will be others from your childhood friends, family, or schooling who you may want to prioritize too, based on reasons that may be unique to you.

When you look your contacts up on LinkedIn, record their titles, affiliations, and geographies in your spreadsheet. When you identify contacts on LinkedIn who you want to connect to, don't wait. To maximize your efficiency, connect with them right away and record the date and type of outreach in your networking spreadsheet. When you connect with someone on LinkedIn, be sure to do so with a personal note to customize the invitation rather than just sending the default invitation. The personal note is a way to reconnect, remind your contact how you're connected, and inquire about getting together or scheduling a call. It also creates more accountability for the recipient to respond.

Often, people will want to switch to email once they're connected but it's helpful to use the initial LinkedIn outreach to connect, share your background, and assess interest for follow-up. Also, once you're connected, you typically have access to your connection's contact information. If you have your contact's email address and you haven't received a response, it's often better to follow-up by email since it's another medium and one the recipient may be more comfortable responding to than LinkedIn. If you've recorded on your networking spreadsheet the date of initial outreach and someone has accepted your connection but not responded to your inquiry about a call or get together, follow-up about two weeks later. It's also helpful to set up calendar reminders at the initial date of outreach so you can more easily track the best timing for follow-up if you haven't received a response.

Benefiting your network

In addition to the framework above, here are some additional tips that will help you give to, and benefit from, your network.

Like with any other goals you have, set aside time each week to focus on your networking and track your efforts. Establish a target number of hours for research and outreach as well as for in-person and video/phone meetings each week. Also, where possible, integrate your networking into activities you are otherwise interested in attending or pursuing.

In-person meetings are preferable, where possible. When you have the opportunity to set up in-person meetings, make it easy and convenient for your contacts and be flexible and pick up the tab. When scheduling calls, similarly, do it at the convenience and preference of the person you are asking.

In advance of a meeting or call, do your research on the background of the person with whom you're meeting or speaking. Think about how you and those you know can be a resource to your contact and reflect

on how you can help the person you're meeting with, not just how that person can help you. Also, think about commonalities that you can highlight to otherwise make yourself more familiar at the outset. Look into the connections of your contact to see who you have in common as that often serves as helpful credibility and a way to establish a bond. However, if a person you have in common may be complicated or controversial, use your discretion as to whether to raise the name. You also want to be familiar with your contact's connections in case you want to request any introductions.

If appropriate, be prepared to make any Asks (or at least lay the foundation to make any Asks) at the meeting or during the call when you have your contact's attention. A quick re-cap at the end of a meeting or call of what follow-up you will pursue is often a helpful way to solidify a request. Also, if you ask at the end of a meeting or call if there is any additional follow-up that would be helpful or any others who you should contact, it can be another way to anchor a request and ensure that you have made all of the relevant inquiries. Following-up with requests not already introduced during a meeting or call will often result in opportunities lost.

Balance any Asks with being patient. If you are reconnecting with someone you have not been in touch with for a long time or you are meeting someone new through a trusted contact's introduction, take it slow. Invest in the relationship and be careful not to overstep and make requests that would potentially make your contact uncomfortable. Instead, let your contact know what you do and how you can be a resource, giving your contact enough information to inquire should a need arise where you can assist.

Push through the awkwardness of tapping into your personal contacts for professional opportunities. The lines between the personal and professional have become blurred – particularly due to technology – and if you don't consider your personal contacts in a professional context, you will forego lots of opportunities. In my experience, women are particularly loath to think of their personal relationships for professional opportunities. Given that women are often more engaged in their community and volunteerism outside of work, the potential negative professional impact is acute, making it that much more important for women to find ways to get comfortable blurring the lines. This issue can be even more complicated for a woman when, for example, her girlfriend is working in a less relevant field or her girlfriend is a stay-at-home mom while her girlfriend's husband is a strong professional contact. In such cases, a

woman seeking the professional opportunity should be sensitive, transparent, and inclusive to be sure her girlfriend doesn't feel diminished, resentful, or excluded in any way. Also, it is helpful to keep in mind that good personal relationships are based on trust, and trust is the same foundation that makes up strong professional relationships.

Be sure to express gratitude to the people you speak and meet with and to those who introduce you to others. Follow-up with the people who help you and update them to let them know which of their efforts were especially helpful. Handwritten thank you cards are a way to distinguish yourself.

If you are comfortable being active on social media, post relevant content or comment on others' content. I see social media and networking as analogous to the "Rule of Seven" in advertising that typically a consumer needs to see a product seven times before making a purchase. Social media can be a way for your contacts to gain exposure to your profile and your impact on a more frequent basis. Like with many things, though, use discretion and be careful not to over-share or inundate your contacts with content or commentary that is not advancing the conversation or is too self-promotional.

Remember that networking can happen anywhere. Certainly golf courses, cocktail receptions, spectator sporting events, industry conferences, and the like, are typical. However, networking can also happen in other networking settings that have become especially popular for women's professional groups, e.g., workplace book clubs, wine tastings, retreats, spa outings, etc. But, remember that networking also can take place on the playground, at the gym, at your kids' schools, at dinner parties, and countless other venues.

Once you've had a successful initial meeting or call, follow-up promptly and then keep in touch. Send your contacts an invite to an event that is relevant to their interests or an article or book that is apropos of a conversation that you had. You may want to also develop an annual ritual of outreach with a gift or donation that is not at holiday time when your efforts may get lost in the barrage of other people's efforts.

Be careful that your actions are not misconstrued. Some people think that networking can feel like dating and at times, it leads to romantic relationships. If that is not your intention, it is important to be aware of this potential risk, which may be particularly challenging for women. To avoid this sort of awkwardness, it may be helpful to bring a colleague along for an initial meeting. Also, be thoughtful about the time of day and venues of the meetings you are proposing, e.g., breakfast or lunch

instead of drinks or dinner and meetings at the office or well-lit restaurants and public places.

Be responsive to the Asks made of you by your contacts. Be mindful and proactive of bringing value to your contacts in both professional and personal contexts where you may be able to assist.

Take credit where credit is due. While no one likes an obnoxious self-promoter, it is important that you demonstrate your value and are comfortable communicating that you are a contributor. Networking often requires people to vouch for you and if they are not aware of or confident in your abilities, they will be less likely to do so. Many women are uneasy about seeking recognition for their role. This reticence is heightened because women are often judged more harshly when they do take credit. Being creative about demonstrating your contribution and garnering the recognition you both need and deserve is important. To do so effectively, it helps to align your own self-promotion with that of your employer and/or other laudable initiatives. Also, be sure to benefit and credit others along the way, wherever possible.

Get involved and be a leader. If you devote yourself to volunteer work in a professional and/or personal context, it is a great way to give back and also meet interesting people. When you get involved, be selective and devote your time to organizations that are meaningful to you where you can make an impact and ideally seek a leadership role.

Evaluate and track your success and what networking contacts and efforts have been most fruitful. Based on the information you gather, assess whether you should pursue new directions. When appropriate, continue to adjust and improve for the future.

Promise yourself you will not allow your network to lapse again. Be an ongoing resource to your contacts who are in transition or seeking you out for advice or otherwise.

If you follow these suggestions, you will develop your own variation of identifying, connecting, and benefiting your network. If you customize this process, it will be that much more valuable to you. Most important is that you pursue networking with a framework and strategic mindset in the same way you would any other priority in your life. If you do, you will maximize the relationships you have and give back to others, including those who have given to you.