

March 2008

The Desired Outcome This Month: Who Can Influence your Success?

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YOUR BUSINESS

Authentic Networking

When I teach seminars to rooms full of executives or middle managers I always ask: Raise your hand if you are a "Natural Networker."

I was surprised to find that every time, the vast majority of hands stayed down. In fact the ratio to date is about 2 in 15.

I spent most of my career thinking that mostly everyone except me was a natural networker -- so I was disadvantaged.

But now, I have good news for you if you are not a natural networker:

1. You are in the majority. (whew!)
2. There are systems you can use to be good at it (I will tell you about them.)
3. It doesn't need to be unpleasant. (I speak from personal experience.)

The problems:

Most people who are not natural networkers have at least one of the following issues with networking, if not all five.

1. Discomfort approaching people you don't know.
2. Don't like talking to someone without a specific purpose to the conversation
3. Seems ugly, self-serving
4. Don't get around to doing it regularly
5. Fear it will take too much time to maintain the relationship.

The principals of what I call Authentic Networking solve all these problems, and I will discuss them throughout this month's column:

1. Have a real reason to connect with people.
2. Giving vs. Getting.
3. Stay in touch when you don't need anything.
4. Connect people with each other.
5. Use systems and crutches.
6. Stay in touch with people you like.

I have used these techniques over the past 10 years to build a very strong personal and professional network -- even though I am not personally a natural networker.

1. Have a real reason to meet people.

Effective networking is not just about talking to strangers at cocktail parties. It is about building connections with people that you have a genuine interest in meeting.

I have built my network by reaching out to people who have done something really interesting or who have inspired me, and telling them that they had done so.

Here's how this goes:

- ✦ I [read an article, saw a panel discussion, listened to a webcast]
- ✦ where you [did something, said something].
- ✦ I was very interested in [a comment about something you were actually interested in].
- ✦ The reason I was so impressed was [insert a real reason].
- ✦ I thought I would connect with you and let you know you had [some sort of positive impact].

This solves at least 3 of the 4 networking problems. The person is not a complete stranger, you have a specific reason to connect, and you are not asking them for anything.

You are connecting for an authentic reason. You actually were interested or impressed. You have made a connection based on something real and specific which will mean something to both of you.

You can then close the comment with "If there is ever any way I can be of service to you, please let me know." (This language should be authentic and true to your Personal Brand, of course.)

This gets to the next point:

2. Authentic Networking is about what you can GIVE, not what you can GET.

By offering to be of service to someone, you have set up the relationship without asking them to do anything for you. This solves the self-serving issue.

And it creates an even more authentic connection.

Most people won't take you up on it, but the approach sets up the right dynamic of your doing something for them. If they do take you up on it and you follow through, you will have made an even stronger connection.

If you ever do need that person for something, it will be very natural and appropriate to ask.

Then think of other things you can do for them.

I was coaching an executive who wanted to break into a new technology area and I suggested he use his special expertise to **write a few short articles** about how his current clients would most easily adopt this new technology.

This was information that was of genuine value to his target audience.

He can use these articles to introduce himself and give something of real value to people he wants to connect with in the new space.

Keep on the lookout for things that key people in your network might be interested in and **send them brief notes and pointers** to the content as it comes up.

Just keep the concept of Giving vs. Taking clear in your mind when you reach out to people, and this will solve the self-serving issue.

3. Stay in touch when you don't need anything

There are actually two key points to make here.

- ✦ Especially if meeting new people is hard for you, don't forget to stay in touch with the ones you already know! Many people forget this part. Later, I will discuss systems to make this easier.
- ✦ Communicate when you don't need anything. It is very unpleasant to be faced with the situation where you need to reach out to your network – people who can actually help you something, but the first thing they hear from you in five years is that you need something from them.

Keeping your connections current over time will ensure that you never have to feel uncomfortable when you reach out, and that when you do, it will feel natural, and be received well.

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YOUR PEOPLE

Making connections for your high performers

4. Connect people with each other

People with strong networks perform better and get more done. It is a critical aspect of the development of your top performers. As roles become more senior, the context for the role becomes broader, and having a personal network becomes more important.

Connecting people with each other provides value to the parties involved. You need to make sure that you are helping create a broad support structure for your top performers so that they will have the built in support they will need when they step into bigger jobs.

Here are some ideas:

Connect them with the level above.

Your top employees need to have a connection and some amount of relationship with your boss.

If this makes you uncomfortable to the point of "forbidding this", you will be reading about yourself in an upcoming issue on "Surviving a stupid boss". But if you have read this far, you are likely not in that category...

Connecting your top performers with your boss helps everyone involved.

1. It creates positive visibility for your employee
2. It gives your boss a necessary connection to information about what happens in his organization from a high quality, trustworthy source.
3. It benefits you by giving your boss the clear view that:

- ✦ You have attracted and are grooming such a star.
 - ✦ You have provided him this direct source of real information.
4. It also benefits you because when your boss learns to trust your top employee you can delegate big things with far less scrutiny and explanation. When your boss asks you, "how are you doing on [that critical, big issue], when you say "Lee is on it", you need the response be "great" - full stop vs. "Who is Lee?" -- and several hundred other questions.

You don't do this for your low performers, because the benefits and the necessary trust are not there to make it work, but there is no downside to creating a relationship for your top performers with your boss.

(For completeness it must be said that if you are afraid that your boss will like your star employee better than you, and you will ultimately lose your job to them, I can tell you that preventing this relationship will not make your situation any better.)

Encourage them to connect with peers in other organizations.

You should also encourage your top performers to connect with peers in other groups -- Their peers and your peers.

You can ask them to create, as part of their development plan, a list of which connections would best serve their current and future job ambitions, and support them by making introductions.

You should look into your external personal network for good connections that will serve the development plans of your top employees. Again you should never feel uncomfortable about introducing really smart people to each other. They all know the value of making good connections.

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YOUR VISIBILITY

Hope and tools for non-natural networkers

Idea #5 . Use systems and crutches:

This is about the "staying in touch with people" part of networking vs. the "meeting new people part", and also solves the fourth "don't get around to doing it regularly" issue.

I am a big believer in crutches. Going through life being disciplined, directed, and diligent with constant focus and willpower is unrealistic (and probably not much fun!)

I have found that understanding what crutches work for me, then creating them and using them, is a much more realistic and effective way to go.

With regard to networking I have created a very simple by systematic way to stay in touch with people, and this system serves as my crutch to make sure that I keep up with my Network.

1. Create categories of types of contacts you have: friends, clients, mentors, close colleagues, distant colleagues, met once, etc. These categories should be formed with the thought that each group will require a different type and schedule of contact.
2. Then go through your contact database and sort your contacts into these categories to form lists.
3. Then consider how often you want to contact the people on each list, and what the nature of the contact will be and start putting names on your calendar.

This gets to the last point of concern --Too much time required to maintain a relationship. I have found that this does not happen. Everyone is busy. The brief "hello-connect" works well for both parties.

Remember, the important part is keeping the connection fresh, not keeping the relationship up to date on every detail.

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YOUR LIFE

Spend time with people you like!

Finally, this one should be a no brainer, but it's easy to get busy and distracted and forget to do this.

6. Stay in touch with people you like:

It seems that our work often results in needing to spend a lot of time with people we don't like very much.

The people that we like are the relationships that do take time to maintain, but that's the whole point. Spending the time is a good thing.

It seems a little forced, I admit, (but it's a good crutch!) so one of my categories is a list of people that I genuinely want to spend time with. I make sure that each month, I do something to connect with at least one of them.

Another thing I do is when I travel I keep some personalized stationery in my briefcase, and write an hand-written note to someone while on the plane.

Maintaining these connections is one of the things that makes life good, and is one of the things that often gets squeezed out by work.

Find a way to remind yourself to do this. This is also one of those things I talk about to make more energy for yourself, because staying in touch with people you like makes your life feel better and makes you more effective all around.

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I hope you have found a few useful ideas that you can apply right away to start building value in your career and business.

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About Patty

Patty Azzarello was the youngest general manager at HP ever at the age of 33. She ran a \$1B software business at the age of 35 and was a CEO for the first time at the age of 38. Patty is known for her personal leadership qualities, her straightforward and practical manner, and her genuine interest in making a real connection with people to help them to advance their career and business, and to find ways to enjoy their life more.

[More About Patty >>](#)

Today Patty Azzarello is the CEO of Azzarello Group, www.AzzarelloGroup.com a unique services organization focused on helping companies develop and motivate their top performers and grow their business.

Azzarello Group delivers practical, experience-based tools, through products and services including, executive coaching, public speaking, leadership workshops, online programs, and consulting with teams on business execution.

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Good suggestions! I had attended class over a year ago and you had discussed some of these there. The tips have been useful. This is a great refresher.

Submitted on Thu, 03/06/2008 - 23:44.

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