

Tapping In

How Leaders Can Become Effective Networkers



In today's organizations, networking is essential to effective leadership. Leaders who are skilled networkers have access to the people, information, and resources needed to solve problems and create opportunities. Leaders who neglect their networks are missing out on a critical component of their role as leaders.

Although some leaders may not even be aware of it or taking advantage of it, they are already members of a network—a set of interwoven relationships with people inside and outside their organizations on whom they depend to accomplish their work. Within their existing networks, leaders can share information, collaborate, and solve problems. Sometimes members of networks pitch in or cover for one another, make referrals, endorse, and support. At other times they may push back or offer criticism. Within a network there are inevitably differences of opinion, even cliques and conflict. The most important point for leaders to consider is that they both influence and respond to their networks.

Conventional wisdom often places networking solely in the context of

looking for a new job, chatting at parties and events, or working in sales. The ability to network is useful in these situations, but it is in the day-to-day work of leading that networking becomes an essential and indispensable skill. Leadership networking is not about collecting business cards or schmoozing; it is about building relationships and making alliances in service of others—customers, clients, constituents, peers, bosses, and employees—and in service of the organization's work and goals. A robust leadership network provides access to people, information, and resources. Leaders can use these connections to solve problems and create opportunities.

Intentionally developing, maintaining, and using contacts and alliances is at the heart of leadership

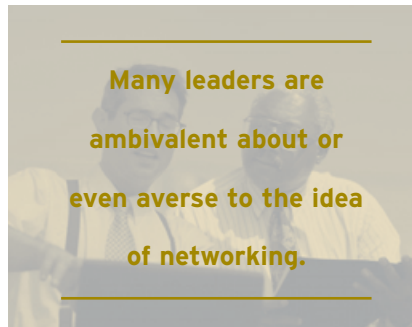
by **Curt Grayson and David Baldwin**

networking. Leaders who develop their skills in this three-part task build relationships throughout the organization and expand their pool of resources to include others outside the organization: customers, clients, vendors, members of the media, and industry experts, to name a few. Over time, these leaders create strong, broad-based networks that provide greater access to the information and resources they need to reach their goals. Through their networks, they can

- Increase effectiveness by deepening and broadening the communication channels between individuals and groups
- Remove political roadblocks by bridging distances that separate positions, work groups, teams, and business units
- Open new opportunities and uncover ideas by *cross-pollinating* with other groups and individuals who may connect in ways not readily apparent
- Strengthen their power base by delivering support and resources to groups and individuals in need, by locating necessary resources, and by broadcasting the availability of talent and resources found in their groups
- Gain exposure across their organizations by highlighting individual efforts and the work of their groups in achieving organizational goals.

Still, many leaders are ambivalent about or even averse to the idea of networking. They have seen colleagues aggressively network for personal gain. They may view networking as an uncomfortable or tedious process. Some leaders consider themselves too busy to give attention to networking, and even if they see its value, they think the organization should value their individual contri-

butions above such collaboration. But becoming a more effective leader requires not only developing individual skills and capabilities but also developing relationships with others. If leaders who struggle with either the concept or the practice of networking can set aside their precon-



ceived notions, they can develop the skills needed to take networking to a higher level.

TIME AND COMMITMENT

Improving your leadership network takes time, and it begins with assessing your current network—its strengths and its weaknesses. It also requires a personal commitment to act in ways that cultivate and strengthen the relationships in your network. Here are six actions that are required for effective leadership networking:

Being authentic. You will be most effective in building your leadership network if you maintain a genuine objective of building relationships, providing support, and accomplishing work for the benefit of the organization. Authenticity generates trust in others; people are drawn to leaders who are sincere and genuine. Networking is not a ploy for getting your way. People will see through attempts at networking that are self-

serving or manipulative. If you earn a reputation as someone who takes but doesn't give, who uses information inappropriately, or who breaks confidences, your network will shut you off. Regaining the trust and respect needed to rebuild your network is not easy.

Trading resources. Having resources such as information, services, access, and power that can be contributed to organizational projects builds a leadership network through give and take. Reciprocity is important in creating, keeping, and using a leadership network. Leaders who are skilled at this kind of bartering know their assets and share them appropriately. For example, a leader may assign an individual with excellent presentation skills to a team that seeks visibility with top executives, may routinely give a peer a preview of monthly sales reports, or may offer personal time to advocate another's

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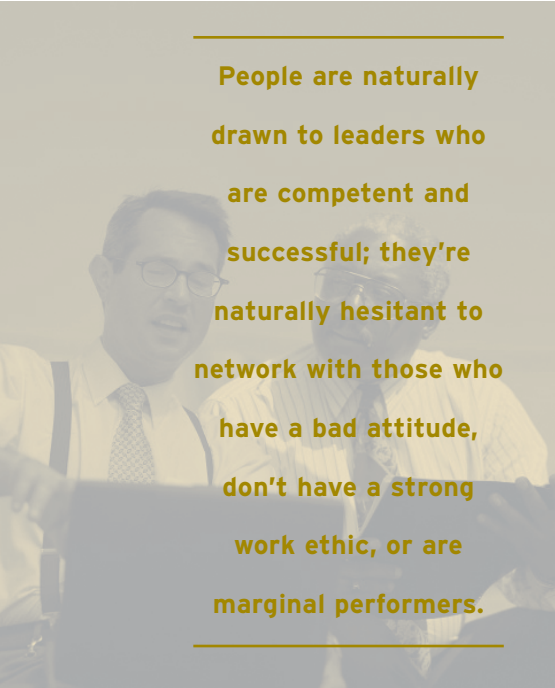
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cause. Consider how you and your network partners contribute to the organization's goals and how working together might make each of you more effective toward that end.

Using power wisely. A good definition of *power* in organizations is the ability to get things done. Some power—such as the ability to reward and punish—comes from your position. But that kind of power is impossible to use effectively in most net-



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working relationships. In the context of leadership networking, there are three sources of power:

- **Reputation.** Who you are, how you lead, and what you have accomplished determine your reputation in an organization. People are naturally drawn to leaders who are competent and successful; they're naturally hesitant to network with those who have a bad attitude, don't have a strong work ethic, or are marginal performers. If you are known as someone who gets results and who can be held

accountable, you gain power from your positive reputation.

- **Alliances.** The quality of your network affects others. If you have connections to other key influencers and decision makers, your perceived power increases.

- **Position.** The nature of your work generates power. If you are involved in the organization's greatest priorities or problems, your visibility and role add to your power.

Regardless of the source of your power, it's important to use that power wisely and in a way that maintains your authenticity and the trust of others.

Communicating skillfully. Much of the effectiveness of a leadership network depends on whether you can communicate in a way that builds awareness of your needs and assets. If you can't make others aware of what you can bring to the table on a problem or project and what you need to accomplish your own goals, your networking strategies will be largely ineffectual. Creating that awareness means disseminating information in an accurate, timely, and clear manner. It requires the listening skills to elicit and absorb information from others. And it requires that you know when to speak and when to listen. Consider a leader with excellent speaking skills who can clearly communicate a point of view or share information. If that same leader can't hear and understand the perspectives and needs of others, however, the relationships in his or her leadership network will be weakened because the communication channel works in only one direction.

Negotiating adroitly. Effective negotiators know when to push hard or back off, when to share or hold back information, when to swap resources, and when to trade short-term outcomes for long-term goals. This skill is linked closely to being aware of resources and needs—your

own and those of others. A leader who is known to always play hardball or who is viewed as a pushover has little room to negotiate in a network.

Managing conflict well. The very definition of *network* implies that conflicts in networks will rarely have win-lose outcomes. Seldom does a leader have enough power over peers, lateral subordinates, superiors, and external contacts to force them to act in ways that are not in their self-interest. You need skills for resolving conflicts with win-win or win-learn solutions. When conflict occurs in your network, work to appreciate the opposing point of view. Look for points of mutual agreement. Express your position in a way that draws on your influencing skills to help resolve the conflict.

BLOCKING THE WAY

The nature of networking—working with and through others over whom you have no direct control—means that building and using networks can be difficult. Identifying the people and groups with whom you should connect is often the easiest part. It is during the process of building and maintaining relationships that leaders are likely to face a number of barriers. Any one barrier can pose a challenge to effective networking; often a number of factors conspire to prevent good networks from developing. Here are some typical barriers:

Operational differences. Valuable networking relationships may be thwarted because of the operations of the organization. Working in different functions, departments, or divisions can make networking seem too unnatural or out of the way to people. Having different bosses, goals, and objectives may set up competitive or even adversarial relationships rather than collaborative ones.

Level differences. The structure of the organization can make building

and maintaining important network relationships harder. When leaders try to network with someone higher or lower on the organizational chart, issues of power, access, and agendas can get in the way. For example, it is often your boss's boss who is critical in defining your agenda and providing the resources you need, yet he or she is not always accessible. The stronger the hierarchy of an organization and the more people believe in following the chain of command, the more impassable this level difference becomes.

Demographic differences. People more readily and easily make connections with others they view as similar to themselves. Networking with people who differ from you in race, gender, age, country of origin, and socioeconomic status may require greater effort. A leader who is in a demographic minority in the organization may have to overcome his or her relative isolation in order to network. Conversely, a leader who is in the demographic mainstream must not mistake familiar networks for effective networks.

Personal preferences. Personality and patterns of behavior can make the process of effective networking more or less challenging. Leaders who are outgoing or collaborative usually network more readily than leaders who are reserved or independent. Networking will be more of a stretch for someone who is introverted than for someone who is extroverted and thrives on interaction with colleagues. This is not to say that if you fall into the more introverted camp, for instance, you must change your personality before you can be an effective leadership networker. It simply means that you will have to go against the grain somewhat to find, maintain, and effectively use your network.

Lack of clarity on the big picture. Effective networking may be blocked by a lack of understanding of your

and others' role in helping the organization succeed. Without an understanding of the big picture that your organization is working toward, you will find it hard to connect with others.

Perceived lack of time. Already pressed for time, leaders may see the investment in networking as too time consuming.

Different locations. Working with colleagues in other locations—often in different countries or time zones—can become a barrier to building effective two-way relationships. Even seemingly innocuous circumstances, such as working on a different floor or in a different building, can contribute to making interactions—and therefore relationships—more difficult.

Previous relationship history. A positive experience or relationship is a boost to building effective networks. A negative experience or perception, however, can be difficult to overcome.

Organizational changes. Restructuring, new management, and shifting work roles can throw a wrench into well-functioning networks and relationships. Such changes may alter the organization's goals—and individuals' roles in meeting those goals.

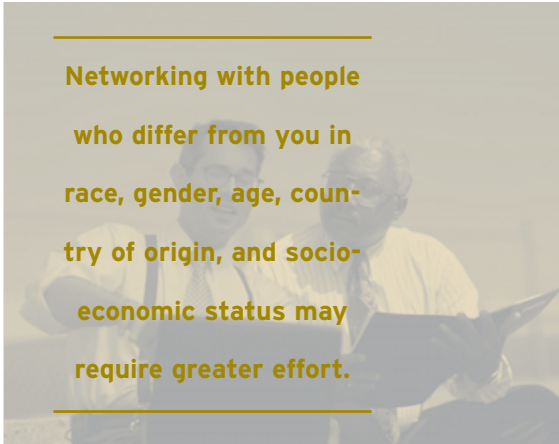
GOING FORWARD

A strong and vibrant leadership network requires time and effort. But the work and understanding involved don't have to overwhelm you. Once you understand how your present network is structured, who is involved, and where you can push your network to the next level, you can take action using the following strategies.

Learn from others. Individuals who learn by accessing others seek advice, examples, support, or instruction from people who have met a challenge similar to the one they face, or they learn how to do some-

thing by watching someone else do it. Who networks well in your organization or in your community? What exactly do they do, and what do they say? Try similar tactics or approaches. Ask them to talk to you about their view of networking and how they build and use relationships.

Invite others. Bring others into your world. Invite them to lunch. Find time for a fifteen- or thirty-minute conversation to find out what is happening in their world and to tell them what you and your group are



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doing. Invite others to your meetings and ask them to contribute their expertise and their perspective or to explore possible connections between their work and yours.

Invite yourself. Ask to sit in on another group's meeting or planning session. Join a committee or group outside your own area.

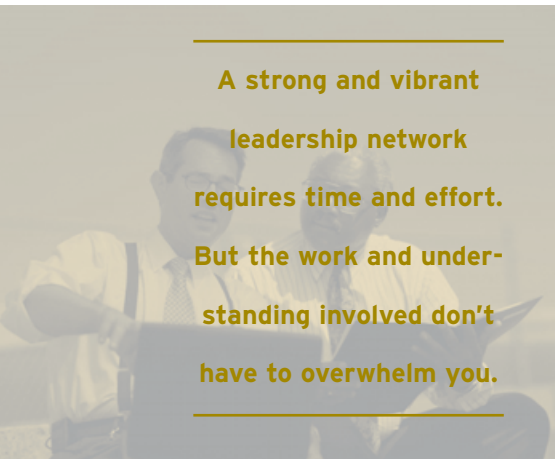
Ask for feedback. Seek honest answers from peers, direct reports, and superiors to gain a clear picture of how you and your group function and what effect you have on others. Feedback engages others in a constructive way by adding depth to existing relationships.

Work with others. Volunteer for assignments or projects that give you an opportunity to work across functions. One of the best ways to build

connections with others is to work together on something. A fringe benefit is the visibility you will gain among people outside your department.

Be direct. Let people know what you are doing, why it matters, and how it relates to their work or goals. By communicating clearly, you can help others see how they can connect to you and your work to achieve their own goals.

Be an information hub. Develop and offer yourself as a source of information about people, processes,



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and facts. Develop your ability to connect with strategic information about your organization.

Make allies. You may be able to develop your networking skills by working with a mentor, colleague, or coach. For sources of coaching or mentoring, look to those whom you

see as successful leadership networkers.

DON'T MISS OUT

What can and will you do to build and improve important work relationships? A good way to start is by thinking about what you can do differently to be more effective at leadership networking.

Many of the roles and skills expected and required of leaders today are connected to networking. If you aren't currently using your network to the fullest extent, you're missing out on benefits that can support your efforts to manage projects and lead people toward common goals. To build, maintain, and use your networks, you need to invest yourself in the process. You can't rely on other people to bring you into their networks.


Leadership networks require time and effort to develop. Using them to your advantage often requires that you break out of your routine and leave behind your usual way of doing things.

If you are a talented individual contributor, for example, you may need to learn to put more trust in the talent and contributions of peers, direct reports, and superiors so you can work collaboratively to reach goals you can't reach by yourself or in your own work group.

By seeing networking as an integral part of your role as a leader and

by taking action to develop and nurture related skills, you can begin to create benefits for yourself, your group, and your organization.

Many participants in CCL's educational programs ask for advice on how to network more effectively. They see the ability to network as a means of accomplishing their leadership tasks and goals. Some of them have received feedback about their need to improve the ways they work with others, their ability to build and manage cross-functional teams, and their capacity to broaden their influence beyond the authority of their position. To help leaders at all levels and in all kinds of organizations answer these kinds of challenges, CCL's faculty are increasingly making their tacit understanding of the ties between networking and effective leadership more explicit.

Several streams of CCL research also support this approach to developing leadership networking skills. In essence, the ability to build, maintain, and use a network of people and resources is associated with several essential leadership competencies, including resourcefulness, building and mending relationships, doing whatever it takes, and employing a participative management style. CCL's research shows that these four competencies are likely to remain important to the development of leaders' talent and the practice of leadership. 

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