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THREE: NETWORKING

We talk about networking as though it is something which comes naturally to some people. 'Are you a good networker?' is a question people often ask. But like many things it is a skill which can be developed. Often people think of networking as being all about how we build up contacts and make best use of them. This is like thinking of a car as a place to put petrol. It sort of misses the point!

So, here are a few ideas / questions about networking to push the thinking into some of the mechanics and principles of the activity:

Who is in your network?

Think broadly about this. Not just people who are close friends or colleagues. Improve your skills at collecting contact details for people. To get you started, use a mind map (or spider diagram) to set out the people who you are in contact with. Each arm of the map reaching out from you at the centre can be a domain or area of your life e.g. family, friends, work colleagues, people with common interests etc. Work on this for at least 30 minutes. If there aren't at least a hundred people on this mind map you haven't thought deeply enough!

Do you have an effective network planning tool? Is it backed up effectively?

There are many ways of managing a network. I use Microsoft Outlook's Contact Database to capture my network contacts. It means that I have details with me at all times as I use a blackberry. It's a great way to capture people's contact details as well as snippets of useful information about them if like me you have a poor memory. The database should be backed up so that system failure (i.e. your computer dies) doesn't mean that you lose all your contacts.

Do you review your network regularly?

I go through my network at least once a month, looking for people who I need to get in touch with to ensure that I am keeping regular contact. It takes maybe five minutes to just skim through all of the names A-Z and check for anything that jumps out at me. I usually come away from this with a few people I should drop an email to, or phone. And I may see someone in there whose details need updating.



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Do you archive dormant contacts, and do you capture all contacts no matter how fleeting?

A network needs to be up to date. The regular review helps you to keep it current. It's also worth looking for people in the network who you haven't been in contact with for some time. If there is no good reason to make contact now, archive the contact. Don't delete it – you don't know what is just into the future. You may have a reason to contact them which you are not aware of now. Try to capture contact details whenever you can. A business card, a phone number or email address. I input them into the database as soon as I can. If possible, follow this up with a quick contact if that is appropriate.

Who else should be in your network?

Take regular opportunities to review your network and think about potential gaps. Then take proactive steps to fill those gaps.

Do you have a worthwhile contact to make?

As I implied in the opening paragraph, effective networking is not about what you can get out of people, it is about what you can give. People are naturally suspicious of the “salesman” type approach to marketing where there is a pitch either explicitly there or implied. For effective networking it helps to begin by thinking about what you have to offer before you make the contact. That helps to maintain integrity in relationship building.

A key skill

It's difficult to overstate the importance of networking. Relationships between us are what makes the world go round. The process of networking is at the heart of this. The first step of making the initial contact is something I used to find really difficult, particularly at networking events, conferences, seminars etc. I found a way round this by introducing myself and asking a quick question about the other person to get them talking about themselves. After a few goes at this it felt more and more natural. It has helped me to really enjoy the networking event.

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