The Need for Networking Training in Academic Environments

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ABSTRACT

Economic growth, increased competition, and the emergence of global markets, as well as the increase and constant change of information and information sources, are making the need for networking of paramount importance. People need to learn how to network for both business success and personal gain. In many of the books and articles used to teach business leaders of tomorrow, reference is made to the need and the advantages of networking; however, scant information is given on how to network or detailed examples of why networking is important. This paper focuses on the importance of networking and why it is important for students to learn networking skills. It gives practical advice on how and when to network and gives examples of networking tasks that can be incorporated into the curriculum.

KEY EXPRESSIONS: networking, work-a-room, synergy, small talk, mentor.

Introduction

The benefits of networking and being able to "work a room" are enormous. But rarely do we teach these skills to our students. Today's managers must not only have business savvy, they must be able to communicate, not only with fellow colleagues and clients but also with 'strangers'. They must be able to make a good first impression and be able to gain timely and reliable information to succeed in today's business world. One way to do this is to develop a personal resource base. To do this one needs to network. Networking not only advertises individuals and businesses, it will enable students to:

- be perceived as powerful, in control, friendly and knowledgeable;
- establish communication links and rapport that last a lifetime;
- increase their base of friends and business contacts;
- gain knowledge and insight into changes in the business environment and career opportunities.

But more important than all of the above, it will enable students to make friends and enjoy themselves. Good networkers display enthusiasm, confidence and productivity. They focus not only on gaining information but also on making people feel comfortable. The old adage, "It is not only what you know, but who you know, that is important" has never been truer.

Networking: Identifying the need for inclusion in a business curriculum.

Fear is the first step that hinders networking. I teach in an international environment where teachers not only specialize in different fields of business but approximately half of them are from foreign countries ranging from Canada to Thailand to Bolivia. The student body is even more diversified, with representatives from over 60 countries. In many of my classes there is a good mix of students, both Japanese and international. However, many students, including Japanese and Korean students in particular, tend to sit with other members of the same ethnic group. This situation can be changed by group work, forcing partner change, and other interactive activities. Assignments, where students are forced to talk to other people outside the class environment, can be given. But is this enough? When I teach, I stress the importance of knowing people from a wide variety of fields and cultures. Everyone

agrees that this is a good thing, but when asked how many students they know from different fields or ethnic groups, many students' response is that they have few if any foreign friends. Students say they want to know more people but they just don't know how to talk to strangers, or how and when to network.

There will always be a few naturally gifted individuals who find networking easy, who enjoy meeting people, and who keep in touch with other individuals with similar interests. They recognize the value of personal contact. They understand that if you help others, they will help you. They see the advantages of synergistic relationships.

Networking is not just for social contacts; it is a business tool. By getting value-added contacts you can gain useful information regarding job, professional and market intelligence, business opportunities, how-to scenarios and valuable career information. Everyone can do it. It usually results in a win-win situation for all players at all levels. It has a pyramidal effect that can grow easily. Networking forms a sense of cooperation that is becoming more important in today's business world and is often one of the main reasons for economic success. Following are some examples of some of my own personal networking experiences:

- Old contacts - learned of career opportunities in Africa, Canada, Japan, Indonesia, all of which resulted in new employment opportunities
- Conference - learned how to negotiate a contract, gather factual information to make my business a success, deal with new clients and consulted co-workers
- School alumni - gained important market information, introduced to new overseas contacts, helped me adjust to living in a foreign country
- Unexpected encounters - learned about a new organization doing international work (on a plane), gained valuable research information (on a plane)

Networking can be done anytime, anywhere. My best example of a networking experience was on a subway train, where I met a retired university president coordinating a project in China. At the end of a 10 -15 minute ride we shared, I had learned about the project work he was doing, had given him a copy of my CV, and had made an appointment to see him later in the week. He later became one of my most active and supportive mentors.

Roadblock - Why networking is difficult

In Japan, it might be imagined that networking would not be a problem. Students are taught from an early age to work together, there is the tradition of guidance from senpai, and the relative importance of joining clubs and participating actively in alumni functions. All give experience and stress the importance of forming networks. But is appears that many students have not as yet formed what I would like to call a "mind-set for networking". When I ask why they do not know other students, they usually say, "It's because I am shy." What does this mean? I believe this feeling is complex and includes some or all of the following aspects:

- A fear of talking to strangers;
- A reluctance to take the first move to introduce oneself rather than being introduced;
- A reluctance to stand out or be perceived as pushy or aggressive. (It is better to wait quietly for things to develop);
- A fear of making a mistake. (It is better to do nothing than to make a mistake);
- A reluctance to speak. This includes three beliefs: a) I think it is better to stand and listen, especially to elders or people of perceived higher status; b) I don't have anything to say, c) I lack specific language and linguistic ability (speaking good Japanese or other languages);
- A general lack of self-confidence.

All of these result in the feeling that students won't understand what is being said and that they will look foolish. Although I make special reference to Japanese students, this phenomenon is present in all students from all countries. All students need to become more aware of the importance of networking. They must learn where to do it, how to do it, and why it is important. They

have to be taught how to search for a 'common ground' that will link them to other people, so that they are not strangers but members of the same group.

The ideal net-worker

What are the attributes of an ideal net-worker? He must have a degree of charm to captivate and delight others. He must have the ability to attract and the power to gain affection or interest. He must have a good nature, a positive attitude, and an inquisitive mind. These all sound very noble and few of us would admit to having these traits, but we all do to a greater or lesser degree. Let me clarify. A good net-worker must:

- be willing to give something (knowledge, information, even time) away for free and willing to give a little, to get a little, and if lucky a lot;
- have the ability to make people feel comfortable, and like and respect people;
- have interest in other people and be willing to listen, by focusing on the other person and what they have to say;
- have courage to express himself, to ask what he wants to know and to risk rejection.

Be distinctive - How to make people remember you

In networking, it is not only important to get to know new people, it is also important for them to remember who made the contact. In some situations this is quite easy - there are name cards, badges, or one is introduced. In business it is common to have a business card that contains important information regarding the work situation and how to contact the individual, maybe not today, or tomorrow or next week, but maybe next year or ten years from now. Why don't all students have business cards and why aren't they taught how to use them?

- Business cards could create a favorable impression for students who will, in the not to distant future, begin their job search. They could practice using them and expand their network during regular school times, while doing research, at job fairs and interviews and during conferences or short-term work assignments.
- They could practice record keeping by noting important information of the back of their cards (date, where met, personal information), and using mnemonic devices to remember names and pertinent information.
- They could begin to form record banks, either by organizing the cards in specific ways or by developing contact lists.
- They could learn tricks like carrying blank business cards to make short notes or to use when someone does not have their own card.
- They could learn to control the flow of cards by using one pocket (or card folder) for incoming cards and another for outgoing cards.

Students also need to learn how to dress for success. I and many of my colleagues require students to dress in business attire when they give presentations or engage in other formal activities. Connected with this is how to dress to facilitate memory and develop a personal signature. For example, I teach my students the advantage of wearing school pins or rings and how to dress for recognition, such as the techniques used by two Canadian politicians. Pierre Trudeau used a rose in his lapel. Kim Campbell used a signature lapel pin. Fortunately, one of the professors at APU is quite well known for wearing vibrant ties so my lesson is really quite easy to illustrate.

The practical aspects of networking

Students need to obtain practice and proficiency in the game of networking. This includes the five following steps:

1. Setting the stage
2. Taking initiative

3. Knowing their message

4. Leveraging contacts, and

5. Following through

Setting the stage.

The first thing students must learn to do is to set goals. They must determine what they wish to accomplish on a professional and personal level. The aim is not just to collect a lot of names. Goal setting must be done with an overall focus (" I want to know more people in the field of IT in Taiwan", for example) as well as a situational base (" I must find a student, who can proofread my essay" or "At this conference, I will meet five new people and I will make a plan to meet one of them tomorrow.") They must learn to be discriminating. They must learn to identify people who are willing and able to help, people who share similar interests, and people who can support and inform them; this kind of support may lead to future business relationships. They must also learn who is who. I remember during one of my classes at the American Graduate School of International Business, we were asked to make groups of five students. There was a moment of bedlam when about ten people rushed up to one student in an attempt to get into his group. I later learned that his father was one of the Vice-Presidents of Ford. I lost a golden opportunity to network - Why wasn't I sitting beside him? I use this as an example of the value of knowing people's names listed at conferences, on organizational charts or even country clubs.

To sum up: Prior planning will reduce stress levels and create a positive attitude to networking. It will encourage students to attend more conferences and become both interactive and proactive.

Taking initiative.

This includes a lot of practice. It includes deciding who to meet and for what purpose. ("I will find someone from China and ask him or her about . . . ", "I will introduce myself to three people I haven't met before and see what we have in common"). It also forces students to control their behavior ("I will talk to my old friends but I will also meet five new people from different classes", " I will not talk to any one person more than eight to ten minutes and I will practice my handshake"). Hopefully students will learn that once they are experienced in knowing others, others will approach them and their network will grow. This will give them practice in making the first move. It also gives them an opportunity to practice their conversational openers.

Introducing yourself and small talk.

It is of course better if someone can introduce you, but this rarely happens. Students must learn how to introduce themselves in a professional manner. They should plan and practice making a thirty-second commentary about themselves, that will include such information as: name, what they do and, if possible, something interesting. They should be able to deliver this with ease and enthusiasm. They should practice opening gambits such as: "Excuse me, but do you work for..? Could I ask you a question about..?", " I didn't expect so many people here, did you?" or "Excuse me, but are you ..? Didn't you give a presentation on ..?". I also caution my students that a self-introduction should be learned and practiced but it must also be flexible in order to suit the situation.

They should also learn to engage in 'small talk'. This does not mean talking about the weather, as people attend business functions for a purpose. Sometimes "small talk" may be quite direct and focus on gathering information. Students need to learn how to articulate what they are looking for as well as what they can offer. In this regard, they should pay particular attention to cultural studies, for what is accepted in one culture may be frowned on in another. They should learn how and when to ask questions and learn how to initiate "conversational starters". By this I mean comments or information that will attract the listener's attention and encourage the listener to talk. For this I warn my students that they must be prepared not only to initiate 'small talk ' but also to keep it going. To do this, they should read a newspaper everyday and listen to the news or special news programs given by the

BBC or CNC. I also encourage them to read a magazine on a totally different subject than business.

Small talk is also about listening. Students must learn to be active listeners. They must learn to concentrate on the speaker by keeping eye contact (a particularly difficult skill for many Asian students), nodding and smiling. They must practice asking relevant questions, making viable statements that reflect understanding, and be attuned to their own and others' body language.

I stress that 'small talk' is difficult but there are tricks that make it easier. First, I suggest getting the person to talk about himself or herself. I usually do this by asking a question or for advice. Second, I ask students to try to find a 'common core'. This is something that will join the two people together so they are part of a group. It could be a common experience (they both graduated from the same school, or traveled to China), they know the same person, or they feel the same way ("These conferences always make me nervous"). Small talk should also remind the listener about your name (try to repeat it at least once) and give them an idea of what can be offered (for a student: "There is Professor... I took his class last term. He is very hard. I couldn't believe it when he gave me an A"). I caution my students that small talk should first focus on creating rapport, finding common interests, and making people feel comfortable, before talking about business.

Leveraging contacts and opportunities.

Networking has one very great advantage. The number of contacts can grow easily. Students must learn to create a human asset base of individuals who are willing to introduce them to new people. (I was taught to get two new names every time I met an old contact.) Again caution regarding cultural traditions must be stressed. In some countries, like China, introducing someone may include hidden expectations and obligations (guanxi).

Following through.

One of the biggest mistakes business people make is that they don't follow through. I tell my students to keep in mind another old adage "Out of sight out of mind". If possible, try to find a reason to contact them the next day ("I'll send you a copy of the article we have been talking about.", " If I called you tomorrow could you give me . . . address?"). At the very least students should learn the habit of making notes after a networking encounter (see business cards - earlier) and a mailing list. They should try to find a reason to keep in touch (" If I hear of any information on . . . I'll call you" The secret is to find some information). I encourage my students to be innovative giving the example of a friend who never sent Christmas or New Years cards (We get so many, do we really look at them?) Rather she picks one day a year when she sends everyone a card. It is her special day to keep in contact.

One last caveat. Remember your network. I give an example from the classroom. Yes, I know all the students in my class. But if a student came and gave me a recent article on a subject I mentioned in class, I would REMEMBER that student. Now what could an employee do to keep the boss' attention?

Conclusion

The ability to network is critical to all business endeavors. Students should not only be taught the importance but also given practical advice and given experience in how to network while they are participating in campus life. They must be introduced to the "critical mind set" of networking and recognize its importance. They must learn the six rules of networking:

1. Networking is important because you can't do everything on your own. There is too much information, too much competition, and not enough time. Everyone needs a little help.

2. Avoid the tendency to meet too many people and keep records of those whom you meet and always follow through.

3. Network with others continuously, anywhere, any time, and with anybody.

4. Networking means both listening and talking, The aim is to both give and receive information.

5. Networking is a win-win situation; both must gain and both have expectations. Think about what you want from this partnership and what you can give back

6.   The time to act is now. The important thing is to make the effort and take the chance.

It is critical for managers of today not only to know about business theory but also to react to rapid change and uncertainty present in today's economy. If we look at the list of skills now needed by today's managers, we see an emphasis on human factors: leading as a learner, intuiting the future, caring for individuals, facilitating the vision of others, using power and facilitation, being part of an executive team, being multicultural, and inspiring the trust of owners, customers, and employees (Lane & DiSefano,1992, p. 50).

I often close my lecture with the story of one of my best examples of networking. Much of what I have learned about networking was taught to me by example. In Indonesia, I had the opportunity to work with the President of the University of Gaga Mada. He taught me that everyone should network, even the boss. He told me that he knew a lot about what was happening at the university and the feelings of the staff and students because he rode a bicycle. Everyday, at the same time, he left his house and rode (on campus) to his office. He left alone and arrived alone, but students on the way often joined him. Just for a little chat. He also had the habit of taking a ride around the campus. You know, for exercise, and if chance had it, just for a little chat with the professors on the weekend.

References

Lane, H.W. and DiStefano, J. J. (1992). *International Management Behavior*. Boston: PWS Kent Publishers.