

re: Networking

## **Why Bad Networking Has Everyone Peeved**

By Douglas B. Richardson

Networker: "Mr. Roper? You don't know me, but I got your name from."

Mr. Roper: "Oh, man, this isn't one of those networking calls, is it?"

Networker: [Pause. Sound of wheels frantically turning.] "Oh, ah, hey, no way. I hate those kinds of calls. I was just calling to see if I might call on you and maybe get your thoughts about the viability of a new broadband enterprise we're planning."

Mr. Roper: "No problem, but I'm busy until later this week. Any chance you could drop by on Friday morning?"

This actual phone conversation is evidence that, although the technique of networking remains a highly effective job-search and self-marketing tool, the word "networking" repels many people. It's trite, shopworn, overused, frequently abused, and may be crawling toward oblivion.

Nowadays, people often prefer the term "schmoozing" to networking. Others preach "connectivity." A few still use "informational interviewing." The label for the process of developing and building informal personal relationships probably shouldn't much matter -- a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet, right? Wrong. As Mr. Roper's reaction suggests, your choice of words may affect the reception you receive from contacts.

But you don't have to take the word seriously to take the technique seriously. While I use the word networking, I often poke fun at it: "Hey, Alf, any chance we might have one of these, ah, 'networking' meetings?" (accompanied by a double-handed finger-squiggle to indicate quotation marks around the "N" word).

We may rename the process periodically, but it's still age-old and incredibly powerful. In the job-search sense, it's using systematic gossip to build informal, low-stakes relationships that improve one's market visibility, provide the straight scoop about what's happening and identify still more potential contacts. The key words here are systematic, informal, low-stakes and relationships. When networking is done hit-or-miss, it's bound to miss something. If it's stilted and formal, contacts fear they've fallen into a high-stakes interaction -- an interview, even -- and get defensive. If the interaction isn't beneficial for both parties, a contact is likely to feel used or manipulated.

Humans always can be counted on to help other humans unless their efforts are demeaned or unreciprocated. Most people are remarkably generous with their time and attention. It's the people who package networking into a canned, impersonal and manipulative shtick who poison the well for those using the technique appropriately and constructively.

### **Basic Rules for Building Rapport**

Most networking abuses arise because people don't know how to create relationships. Good networking is about empathy, individualizing the process and understanding basic rules of human interaction. Here are some guidelines:

- a. A networking meeting is not a sales transaction; it's about exchanging information, building trust, being seen, gathering anecdotal information and creating a positive foundation for future interaction.
- b. When you ask for a networking meeting, you're asking for a favor. You want someone to share his or her knowledge and expertise with you. That means you must balance listening with talking. Talk too much, and your expert gets bummed. Maintain too much respectful silence, and you lose your chance to show your flag.
- c. Individuals you meet in a networking context need to feel they're respected, heard and getting, as well as giving, value.
- d. The stakes and risks must be kept low and the "fun factor," high. Lighten up; this isn't a world-peace discussion at Camp David.

### Blowing It Big Time

The most serious networking sin is to misrepresent your reason for making the contact. The networker in the opening example later created permanent damage by pulling the "Great Agenda Switch" on Mr. Roper. He asked for a low-stakes chat, but when the meeting started, threw a full-court press on Mr. Roper, badgering him for a job. Mr. Roper threw him out and vowed never to "network" again.

Skilled networkers know the importance of a credible "decompression" statement -- words that set the stage and take the heat off: Norma, I hope I made it clear when I called that I wasn't expecting you to have an opening or know someone who does. I really want your judgment and opinions on the barriers to entry I might face if I try to move from being a senior HR manager to taking on P&L responsibility for a regional operating group. What I need most is the perspective of experts who know the lay of the land.

It isn't immoral to ask if an opening exists at a certain company, but it's not networking. That's "direct contact" -- a legitimate but a relatively high-stakes job-search gambit: If the person says "yes" or even "maybe," machinery whirs into motion. The process becomes formal. An interview and a networking meeting are two entirely distinct animals.

You may wonder, "Isn't it dishonest to 'decompress' when I know there may be an opening?" You bet -- but you can cover both alleys without deceit: Ralph, the word is out that you folks may be looking for a director of quality for your new division. If that's true, I'd really like to throw my hat in the ring. If I'm misinformed and there isn't an opportunity, I'd still welcome the chance to sit down with you informally and get your thoughts about how to focus my efforts on landing a senior quality-management position. You simply must make your intentions clear.

## **Troubles With Technique**

Beware, too, of providing "mush" agendas. That is, many contacts are asked to give up precious time without understanding what's involved or expected of them. In your initial call or letter, you must provide a frame of reference or agenda telling your contact what she needs to know:

- a. Who are you?
- b. Why are you calling me?
- c. Who gave you my name -- and why?
- d. What kind of knowledge or information do you want from me?
- e. What do I need to know about your situation to provide appropriate advice?
- f. What are you asking me for? What are the stakes? Are there any risks?

Too many networking meetings commence without the "expert" knowing what she's supposed to be expert in, or what level of help to provide. The job seeker hasn't taken time to learn if the referral's level of expertise or sophistication is adequate. Instead, the networker merely invokes the name of a referral source ("Your friend Verona said you'd be great to talk to") without providing an agenda. The contact meets the networker as a favor to Verona but has nothing to offer. He or she is forced to say, "I don't know" or "I've never heard of that," which is demeaning or humiliating, then is understandably surly and more likely to take it out on the networker than on Verona.

Good networkers respect a contact's intelligence and wisdom and make an effort to allow the contact to display it. They don't talk down to them or use jargon that the contact doesn't understand.

## **This Isn't a Sales Call**

Communication and self-presentation issues also can dynamite a meeting. We may unintentionally signal that the interaction isn't genuine or spontaneous. This is the death knell of trust and rapport; the contact worries that he or she is being manipulated. Things cool off fast.

Contacts should never feel they're on the receiving end of a sales pitch. Tricks and gambits salespeople use to "close the sale" are inappropriate during a friendly, low-key conversation. Sales techniques for "overcoming objections" usually are easily recognizable. They tell contacts, "This isn't a real relationship; it's a manipulation."

It's wise to prepare for networking meetings, and evidence that you've done your homework is flattering. However, there's a distinction between preparing and rehearsing. Anything in your self-presentation that sounds canned or mechanical is a turn-off. Contacts expect to be seen and treated as unique individuals, and if you convey that this meeting is a stock song-and-dance, they'll resent and perhaps punish you.

During the networking meeting, slowdown. Slow your thinking, assumptions, responses and rate of speech. Give yourself time to think, or the contact time to interject. Good networkers practice active listening: They resist interrupting, and paraphrase what the other person says to test their understanding. They appear interested in the contact and reflect on the contact's comments, asking for elaboration or examples. They interact instead of presenting.

Poor networkers speak in ways that makes them sound nervous or pushy -- babbling or talking breathlessly. The contact thinks, "I wonder why she's nervous? Maybe she has something to be nervous about." They may talk too loudly, interrupt or try to trump their contact's examples ("You think that's amazing, I remember one time I."). They take and hold on to the microphone, creating the impression that they're control freaks, arrogant or opinionated.

### **Respect Their Time**

A frequent networking gaffe is lack of respect for the contact's time. The rule is: Don't use too much; don't ask for too little. Keep your eye on your watch. Not offering sincere thanks for referrals is another. Remember, a person has used up a favor to help you. Act promptly on contacts' suggestions. Speak warmly of them to others. Sadly, breaches of confidentiality are surprisingly common. You may assume what you're hearing is common knowledge, when the contact actually has trusted you with inside information. Assume any information provided is confidential unless you know otherwise. To be absolutely sure, ask.

But the most problematic networking lapse is lack of follow-up. Most networkers assume that the technique will pay off right now, in real time ("Gee, ABC has an opening."). Usually it doesn't. The best thing you can hope for is that your networking contact becomes a sensitive, positively motivated antenna tuned to your frequency, listening for information that might help you. But, while they may hear something juicy, don't expect them to call you. You have to follow up periodically. Stay in their line of sight. Send articles of interest. Let them know how your search is going. Be sure to send an updated resume. And remember True Life Axiom No. 1: "What goes around, comes around. You don't know when it will come around, but if you don't go around, nothing comes around."

Thoughtful, respectful and considerate networking goes beyond getting job-search help. It can spawn friendships that span years and pay diverse dividends. It's relationship building, which must stay anchored in the human dimension. Before every networking, informational, connectivity, or schmooze meeting, imagine the interaction from the contact's viewpoint. Will it be respectful, informative, relaxed, enjoyable and authentic? It's your job to deliver. If you deliver, networking will deliver.