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A portrait of Beverley Aylott, a woman with short, light brown hair, wearing a blue ruffled blouse and a dark grey blazer. She is looking slightly to the right with a gentle smile.

Spotlight on... Beverley Aylott

*who explores what matters in
her learning and OD practice*

Consultancy | Change | Sustainability

Networking: the golden rules

Judith Perle offers some thoughts on effective networking

‘Networking’ is one of those terms that gets bandied about rather loosely. Many job advertisements contain a line saying something like ‘must have excellent networking skills’, and official data from the Office for National Statistics shows that 27 per cent of respondents got their last job through hearing from someone who worked there. Conference brochures routinely reassure potential attendees that there will be ‘ample time for networking’, and research undertaken by Rob Cross of the University of Virginia’s McIntire School of Commerce shows that “what really distinguishes high performers from the rest of the pack is their ability to maintain... personal networks”.

So, networking is important. But how many of us have actually been told how to do it or what it means? It’s assumed that by the time we start to climb the career ladder we have all the communication skills we need, and that these skills include the ability to network effectively. Yet everybody involved in management training knows that isn’t quite the case.

I’ve spent much of the past decade helping people find ways of networking more effectively and, crucially, helping them feel more comfortable

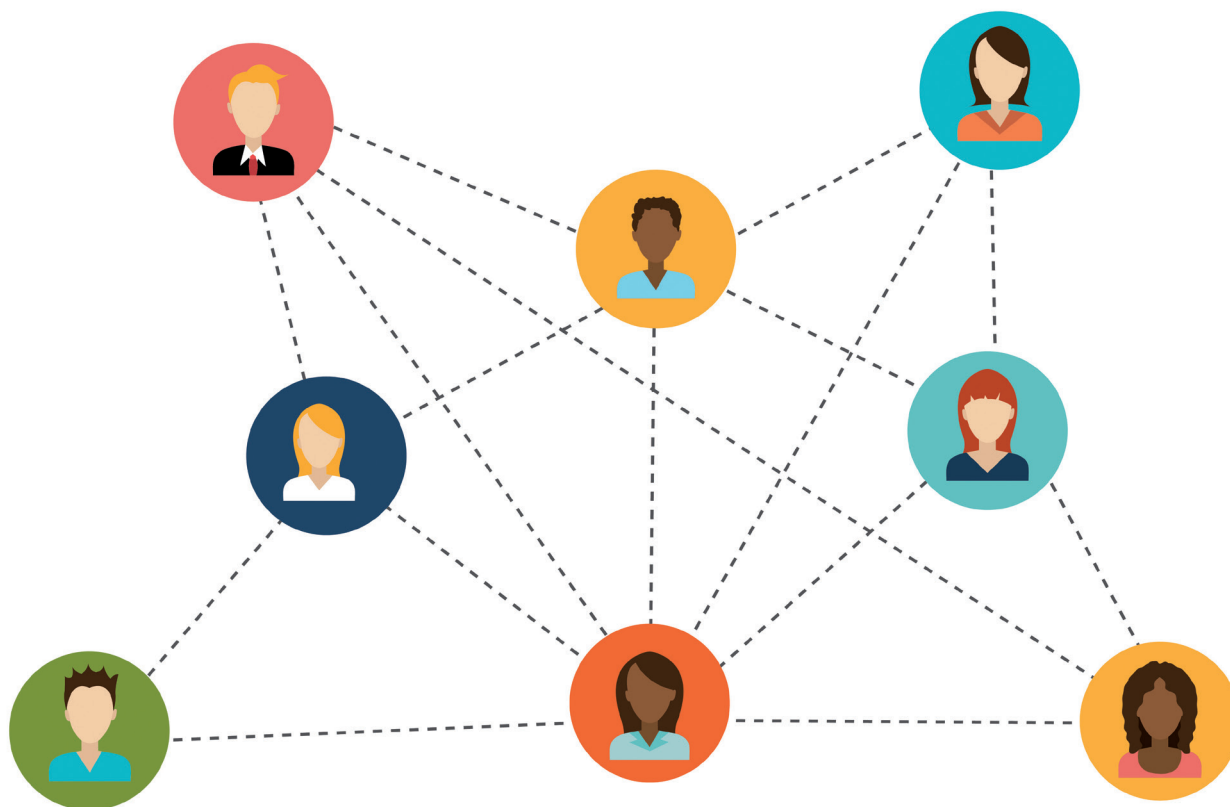
doing so. Every time I run a workshop (whether for a company, a professional organisation, a business school or a university), one or two people stand out from the crowd. What is it that makes those people memorable? It has nothing to do with their professional ability (about which I know nothing) and everything to do with the way in which they engage with the people around them. But don’t mistake that for meaning simply that these people are somehow just the ‘life and soul of the party’ types: that’s not what makes a good networker. Some years back, PricewaterhouseCoopers did some research into what made people good ‘rainmakers’ (generators of new business), and they discovered that it wasn’t a simple question of personality type. What they did find were certain shared attributes: their best rainmakers were optimistic, systematic, tenacious, good problem solvers and (most interesting) good listeners... all so-called ‘soft’ skills that people like me spend their working lives trying to impart to people whose mindset is often that the ‘hard’ skills are all they need to get their place in the sun.

Order qualifier or order winner?

In the late 1990s, I signed up for the Sloan Masters Fellowship programme at London Business School. One of the core modules was entitled ‘Operations Management’, the key lesson of which remains with me and which I’d like to share with you. In any new business ‘pitch’ whether formal or informal, there are ‘order qualifiers’ and ‘order winners’. An ‘order qualifier’ is a feature of your product or service of which you might justly be very proud, but which ultimately only gets you as far as the beauty parade. The ‘order winner’ is that unique attribute which gets you the business, the job, the funding or the promotion.

The fun starts when individuals and businesses mistake their ‘order qualifiers’ for ‘order winners’. Think about it: every accountancy firm pitching for new business has near identical ‘hard skills’ in their ability to conduct an audit, for example.

“What really distinguishes high performers from the rest of the pack is their ability to maintain... personal networks”



Every firm of solicitors needs to be able to decipher what is actually meant by ‘the party of the first part’ and ‘the party of the third part’. Every job-seeker must have the necessary qualifications to do the job.

So what is the ‘order winner’ in these cases? The answer is that it’s often the so-called ‘soft skills’ – the interpersonal skills – which are supremely important in differentiating one candidate, proposal or service from another. Networking is paramount among those soft skills. And we know that it can be taught – and learnt. Here’s what Professor Herminia Ibarra (an expert on leadership and professional development at INSEAD business school near Paris) and Mark Hunter (also at INSEAD) had to say in the prestigious business publication *Harvard Business Review*:

“We have seen over and over again that people who work at networking can learn not only how to do it well but also how to enjoy it. And they tend to be more successful in their careers.”

One of the other lessons I took away from my year at business school is that skills which are intuitive and second nature to one person

can be a real challenge to another by reason of personality, upbringing or culture. Even on the Sloan programme in a class full of supposed high-achievers, I was surprised at how many networking opportunities were being missed by classmates just because they failed to follow some basic, common sense and easy to apply rules. In the years since, I have been repeatedly amazed at how bad most people are at making easy connections, or indeed just ‘making the call’.

A shift of mindset

Most of us know who we want to meet and why, we may know where and when we want to meet them, and what we might gain by doing so. Where so many people fall down is on the how. And here lies the second problem. Networking is also viewed by some as being first cousin to social climbing, or a close relative of the smooth ‘worker of rooms’, intent on using and manipulating people to their own advantage. They fail to see the crucial point of networking – that it is as much about helping others as helping yourself, that you should only network if you see it as a long-term process, and that nowhere is that old (but true) cliché more applicable: What goes around, comes around.

Ultimately, becoming a better networker





involves, first and foremost, a change of attitude. Away from ‘What can I get from you?’ and towards ‘What might I be able to do for you?’ Away from promoting yourself, and towards a genuine interest in other people. Closely allied to this are the social skills that need polishing. The challenges that each of us face, in the skills arena, will be different. Some people find it hard to start up conversations at networking events; others find they run out of things to say, or struggle to develop rapport with the person they’re talking to. Other people are fine in face-to-face situations, but find the telephone a real trial, whether they are making initial calls to set up a meeting, or following up on a meeting that has past. And talking about following up, almost everybody could do with a reminder about the importance of making contact quickly and effectively after an initial meeting or phone call. After all, relationships aren’t created overnight. They take time to develop, and trust needs to be built up slowly but surely, brick by brick.

It’s amazing what a change of attitude can

achieve. Here’s a real life case study, Neil a budding entrepreneur who came to a workshop we ran at Leeds University Business School, got in touch a day or two later. “I went to an evening ‘do’ straight after the training session. It went well. In the three hours after we finished:

- I met some undergraduates in sports science who want to set up an outdoor activity centre.
- I met a guy from Leeds Metropolitan University who runs lots of start-up business support functions and workshops. He has contacts galore, I’m sure.
- I met the new guy at Leeds Uni who is supporting business start-ups in conjunction with three other regional universities – good for intellectual property advice.
- I found out about an incubator cell – 18 free desks for one year for new businesses – sponsored by the Uni.
- I found out about small-scale VC funding up to £250k through local enterprise funding.
- I learnt that I can submit a business plan I’m doing at Leeds to a competition for £10k. Win

- or lose I get support to implement it.
- I met and swapped business cards and email addresses with the MD of a new company and first to use incubator facility. I've followed up today – gave him details of the guy who is designing my company logo.
 - I met a young guy who is trying to get into sports journalism. I know a guy who writes footy reports for *The Guardian* – his dad runs a manufacturing company up the road from where my old factory premises were in Manchester. Seems like a fair contact swap. I will meet him at the business school to sort it out.

“So, as you can see it was a successful evening... I'll continue to put the theory into practice and see what happens. As they say, the 'big man' helps those who help themselves.”

I chose this particular case study because I was impressed by the way Neil grasped the nettle with both hands, talked to lots of different people, and didn't discount any of the contacts he made.

Research may show that there's no single, correct method which will guarantee that you reach networking heaven. But there are a few golden rules to set you on the right track. Here are my top 10.

Networking top ten

1. Make time to network

Don't network only when you're in a fix – make networking a habit so that you gradually build a rich and diverse resource that you can call on when in need.

2. Understand that giving is better than getting

One-sided relationships where they give and you take eventually turn sour. Flip the coin and find things you can give – information, an introduction, a quick phone call – that's easy (for you) yet valuable (to them).

3. Connect people

Make a point of introducing people in your network who have shared interests. The more you are known as someone who knows interesting people, the more people will want to be linked to you, and the more effective your network becomes.

4. Value your acquaintances and friends

Although friends are vital for our wellbeing, they often don't have access to new information. So don't disregard 'mere' acquaintances who can often point out opportunities that you hadn't heard about on the grapevine.

The 'order winner' is that unique attribute which gets you the business, the job, the funding or the promotion

5. Appreciate the iceberg

Most people's networks are largely invisible to all but their closest friends. Remove your blinkers and connect with lots of different people. You can never, ever predict who knows who, and who will be able to introduce you to someone who could move your career in a new direction.

6. Build rapport

If someone doesn't warm to you, they're unlikely to help, even when asked. So build rapport with your contacts – by listening to what they have to say, seeking common ground that can connect you, and helping out where possible.

7. Nurture your network

Even the most superficial relationships are based on trust, and that takes time to build. So make an effort to stay in touch, and gradually strengthen the tie.

8. Network internally

Don't stay stuck behind your desk, working away diligently but anonymously. Make a point of chatting to people internally – in the lift, at the water cooler – so that when your name comes up, you'll always have an advocate.

9. Raise your profile

Blow your own trumpet, gently! Attend professional meetings, lectures and conferences, and get involved where you can. That way, your name will ring a bell, and people are more likely to think of you when an opportunity arises.

10. Practice makes perfect

If you find aren't comfortable chatting to strangers, practice in an unthreatening environment: at the post office, in the supermarket check-out queue. After a while, you'll be able to start a conversation with almost anybody, anywhere. **TJ**

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