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“Practicing Networking Etiquette ”

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You have likely read numerous articles about why networking is not only important but a critical career management strategy. You have likely also read numerous articles sharing tips for how to network effectively (some of which I have written in the past). Regardless of your field, industry, discipline or level, it is essential to embrace networking, get comfortable with it, and develop the "art of networking". I refer to it as an "art" because every individual will make it their own and create a landscape that is unique and appropriate for them. I often suggest even replacing the term "networking" with the term "relationship building". It really is all about having meaningful conversations and building productive connections with the goal of establishing, building and nurturing strong long-lasting relationships through many venues. When we are able to shift our mindset to see this as the objective, we are able to do so with confidence and ease. What I'd like to focus on this time, however, is a critical ingredient that doesn't always get discussed which is proper networking etiquette for ensuring a mutually rewarding relationship.

Part One: Establishing the Relationship

Here's the thing...it's really about the other person. It is just as much about, if not all about, giving back and being a resource to others as it is about gaining support. It's wise to even approach it as a way of focusing on other people's needs and interests. It's not about us but about the other person! Remember, it is a two-way street and is a constant give and take. Every time we engage, it should be a partnership that is viewed as mutually beneficial. Both sides should regard the relationship as a rewarding one. One person should not always be the recipient, so be sure to not forget the people who have helped you when you needed their assistance.

Take an interest in their current success, challenges, concerns and goals. Be curious to learn as much as you can about their needs before, during and after your meeting and/or discussion. Pay attention to their body language in addition to what they are saying. Maintain eye contact and stay attentive throughout the conversation. Be highly observant and empathic to their thoughts, feelings and needs. How can we help them be successful? Where are there similarities that we can leverage with one another? What are the differences where we might be able to complement one another and fill in some gaps. That is the beauty of having a solid network! We can really tap into each other's experiences, backgrounds, knowledge, skills, resources and interests.

Most importantly, it's not about reaching out only when we need something. There will be times when we do need help and when those times occur, always be open, honest, genuine and transparent with your delivery and agenda. Make it a reciprocal request or suggestion so that they see you are invested in the relationship. Even if our contacts don't reach out to us, we want to initiate ways we can be of help to them as a way of thanking them for being helpful to us. Remember, no one wants to feel used or that their efforts were not recognized or appreciated.

Part Two: Building the Relationship

Etiquette goes a long way, especially in the world of networking! Be sure to thank those who have helped you by displaying your appreciation in special ways, at the very least with a personal hand-written note or sincere email. I always look for ways to reciprocate their kindness. A few examples I use are to treat them to a meal, invite them to an event, and/or identify a key opportunity that provides value to them. Also, it's important to keep them posted on your progress. People really like to hear feedback on how their efforts have contributed to your success and feel like an on-going partner in your success.

The common mistake that many people make is resurrecting their network when they are out of work or thinking of transitioning out of their company and searching for a new role. Of course it happens and you will want to reach out to your network when it does but don't wait for that occasion to plan your networking efforts. The fact is having a solid network and strong relationships will make you more impactful in your job as well. Networking is absolutely the top source for finding a job, however, it is also the top source for business development, resource referrals, vendor selection, market data, industry trends, as well as a vital source of relevant information for your business and personal career. Be disciplined about building and nurturing those relationships throughout your career. Take the time to be a resource, help others out and think of ways you can be a valuable asset to them.

A very typical result of networking is the introduction to other people. I am always introducing and connecting people as a way of helping my contacts and being a sought-after resource within my network. People in my network do the same for me as well. As people do this for us, another etiquette practice is to keep the person who made the introduction in the loop and/or updated on our progress with each other. Again, people really like to hear feedback on how their efforts have contributed to our success and feel included as an on-going partner in our success. As mentioned

earlier, we want to make sure our colleagues don't feel used, left out, unappreciated or not recognized.

Part Three: Nurturing the Relationship

An essential networking etiquette practice is replying in a timely manner as well as on-going follow up and staying in touch with our contacts. Taking the time to respond to emails, phone calls and/or texts even when things get busy makes all the difference in what kind of impression we leave behind with our network. Obviously, how we treat people in our network is crucial for how successful we are in nurturing those relationships.

Another important etiquette practice is to help people help you. One example of what I mean by that is if you are looking for resources on a particular subject, be sure to do some research first and tell them what you have done and what specific areas you seek additional information. Another example of helping your contacts help you is when you are looking for a job, be specific about companies you have interest where they may be able to make an introduction for you rather than giving them your resume and asking do you know of any openings out there that would be suited for me. By being specific and targeted, you are doing much of the work and make it a lot easier for your contacts to be able to help you instead of placing that legwork on them. People really do want to help but have a lot of demands and pressures placed on them. The more information we can provide and offer, the higher the chance they will be able to help. The same can be said for helping others. If we feel we need more information to be able to provide the value they are seeing from us, ask the targeted questions that will allow us to do so effectively.

When we build our network, focusing on quality versus quantity is key. Building true, long lasting relationships is different than having hundreds and hundreds of contacts on social media. Create your own formula that fits your style, approach and needs. Having deep relationships where there is mutual trust, respect and admiration makes all the difference. This creates a dynamic where we want to help each other by initiating acts of kindness and support to one another. Their success is rewarding for us and mutually satisfying to have been able to contribute in even the smallest way.

Be mindful of who is in your network and practice networking etiquette to ensure you continue to enrich your network. In addition, stay true to your personal brand and remember that how you engage is a reflection of that brand. Happy Networking!

Ask Rita: Do you have a career question and/or a career story to share? Email your questions or stories to rita@ritaballenassociates.com

Rita Balian Allen is the president of Rita B. Allen Associates, a career management firm specializing in executive coaching, leadership development, management training and career development. She is a lecturer at Boston-area universities, a sought-after speaker and presenter, the author of numerous articles, blogs and the newly released book, "*Personal Branding and Marketing Yourself: The Three Ps Marketing Technique as a Guide to Career Empowerment*". Rita was voted one of the top ten executive coaches by the Boston Women's Business Journal .