

Five Good Ideas: Building Networks

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Before you start going about building a network, you should ask yourself: why? There are a number of reasons: it will help your personal development as well as that of your organization. It will help you achieve your mission. We operate in a complex environment and partners are essential. At its heart building a network is about developing trusting relationships and finding ways to collaborate. These are my five good ideas on how to build a network:

1. Have a clear purpose

Be clear on what you want and be prepared to listen more than you talk. There's an old First Nations saying: 'God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason.' So listen carefully to what a potential partner has to say, and if you think there's a fit – in other words, there is mutual benefit for you to work with this person – then be persistent. You may get the answer 'no' several times along the way but if you keep trying you will likely be rewarded.

I had the pleasure of being vice-president of Toronto's Olympic bid and one of my roles was to do community development and to engage all the diverse elements of the city. It was in fact one of the strengths of our bid – to try to deliver the Olympics 'with' the city of Toronto rather than 'to' it. So it was my job to go and talk to groups and try to get them involved. I was very mindful of avoiding simply asking for general support and goodwill. There had to be a tangible 'ask'. We decided to request volunteers for the Olympic Games. This may sound very simple but it meant that we had a very concrete proposal for these groups; we were clear in what we wanted. And it worked. The Sydney Olympics had 50,000 volunteers. In 2000, eight years before the games were due to begin, we had over 85,000 volunteers signed up. The reason it worked is because we had a clear objective in mind. Be wary of just asking for loose support, because that's exactly what you'll get.

2. The art of triangulation

Once you have a clear purpose its time to get networking! If you identify someone you would like to meet, I would advise not picking up the phone and making a cold call. A better way is for a third person, who already knows both you and the person you want to connect with, to make the introduction on your behalf. This is the 'art of triangulation' and it is more likely to lead to a positive response. It is far better to build your network slowly, relying on meeting new people through existing contacts, than it is to simply pick up the phone and start making calls.

To use another example from the Olympic bid, triangulation was crucial here – we had to create support amongst the International Olympic Committee (IOC) members as they were responsible for making the final decision. On my first day on the job I was given a 'no traction' list – in other words, a list of people in the international community with whom we had no relationship whatsoever, but from whom it was essential we received support. These were people I had never heard of and no-one in the organization knew them. So I went to my own network and began building it up slowly. It turned out that a person I know who runs a rug company in Thornhill is the brother of the sister-in-law of an IOC member! So I went out for dinner with the owner of the rug company and soon we were connected with the IOC member. It can take time to get to that position so be patient and persistent. I'm certain that had I just picked up the phone and started calling people, I wouldn't have got anywhere.

3. Treat everyone you meet as a potential partner

The person you meet today may not be a potential partner, but tomorrow they could be. Your reputation is your greatest asset so treat is as such. And, sorry to state the obvious – be nice! You



never know when you might want to go back to some-one and work with them in future, whether directly or in order to 'triangulate' with them to make a new contact; so work hard to build and protect your reputation.

When building a network, it is truly better to give than to receive. I am a big believer in karma - so help people in their work and give more than you receive. This is absolutely critical in the fundraising world – you need to 'friend-raise' before you can fund-raise.

When I was another organization we ran a major gift program. We considered anything more than \$5,000 to be a major gift and we would try to connect and develop a relationship with potential donors. A colleague of mine had been trying to contact a 'prospect' for some time. Unfortunately, a number of meetings had been cancelled and he was having difficulty getting hold of her. Finally, he arranged to go and see her at her house which is some distance out of the city in a rural area. He drove all the way out there only to discover that she wasn't there. At which point I got a phone call from this colleague, informing me not only of her absence, but that a truck load of frozen turkeys had just arrived at her house and the driver had asked him for help unloading them! He was a little uncertain what to do at first, but decided in the end to stay and help the delivery man. This led to a \$15,000 gift from that person. But even if no donation had been forthcoming, it wouldn't have mattered - we were out there to make friends first.

4. Keep your word and manage people's expectations

If you say you're going to do something, do it. If you don't think you can, say this upfront. People won't always remember that you said 'no' but they will remember if you say you're going to do something and then don't. It's important to remember that it's okay to say 'no,' especially if you're not sure you can deliver. People will respect you for this as long as you supply a cogent reason for doing so. But again, they are likely to respect you less if you renege on your promises.

One thing I have learnt from working on political campaigns is that the single most upsetting thing for people in the community is poor management of their expectations. If you have arranged a meeting, do not cancel it just because something more important has come up. Again, it's about keeping your word and earning respect for your reputation.

5. The 'Sandbox Rule'

Some say that everything you need to know about life you have learned by the age of five, playing in the sandbox, where you first discovered how to share and say 'thank you'. So remember these basic principles and always remember to thank people. Do this not for the results but because it's the right thing to do. It's surprising how many people neglect to do this. Sharing is harder. Are you comfortable sharing your ideas, opinions and knowledge? How about your contacts, which you may have spent many months building up? This is a sensitive area so try to be aware of when you feel people are asking too much of you and be careful about asking too much of others.