

Networking Know-How



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Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

Nonprofit leaders often wear multiple hats and many of us begin our workday with an impossible to-do list and a packed schedule. Once you have a clear schedule and routine, there may be little time left for workplace activities that aren't pre-arranged and scheduled into busy days.

One activity that is more informal in nature is networking. As an organizational leader, networking can inspire you to innovate, help you identify advisors to turn to when facing a difficult decision outside your expertise, and teach you to think in new ways. However, many people dread networking, and work to avoid it because of the perception that it is uncomfortable and unnatural.

A [recent article](#) from the *Harvard Business Review* explores five of the common misconceptions about networking, and provides some insights about overcoming these misconceptions for more effective network building.

Misconception #1: Networking is a waste of time. Many people put networking on the bottom of their to-do lists, and perceive it to be less important than mission-advancing work or even mundane work tasks. The perception of networking as a waste of time may be due to a leader's cynicism or pessimism about the potential value of making or nurturing professional connections.

Tip: Instead of simply responding to networking requests from others, identify people you would like to have in your network and proactively reach out to them. The yields from strategic networking are likely to be far more meaningful than the benefit of running into an interesting someone at a networking event.

Misconception #2: There are two kinds of people-natural networkers and non-networkers. It is commonly thought that extroverts are gifted networkers, and introverts really aren't.

Tip: Stop worrying that your introverted nature is a networking handicap. Recognize that networking is a skill that can be developed and honed over time. Be open to developing the skills you need to become a great networker, regardless of your innate inclination toward it.

Misconception #3: Organically formed relationships are more meaningful. Many people believe that networks will spontaneously form among people who naturally like one another. Going out of your way to make a connection with someone you're not sure you will even like may even feel unethical.

Tip: The main problem with spontaneous networks is that they are often too homogeneous, filled with similar

people who are convenient to get to know. Proactively and strategically building a diverse network can help you expand your knowledge base, make better decisions, and understand different viewpoints.

Misconception #4: Networks are inherently selfish. Networking is sometimes thought to be insincere or manipulative.

Tip: Step away from this conception and realize that you have something of value to offer to those with whom you are networking. Reflect back on how you felt to be introduced to the people you rely on in your current network. The simple act of being introduced to a new colleague is a gift you should cherish and learn to pass on. Be confident in knowing that you have something to offer others, and see networking as a reciprocal way to exchange helpful information and advance your organization's mission.

Misconception #5: The strongest ties are the most valuable. Many people believe that networks are of little value because only the opinions and information obtained from our closest connections are most valuable.

Tip: Underestimating the value of newer relationships artificially devalues those connections. Research shows that innovation and insights flow through weaker connections by providing access to people we don't currently know through those we do know.

Being a successful nonprofit leader is a difficult job when you have a never-ending list of challenging 'to do' items. Instead of viewing strategic networking as yet another 'to-do' item, think of networking as a way to more efficiently and thoughtfully tackle your toughest challenges. Remember to tap your network on days when you are grappling with a difficult decision or facing a fork in the road. Your network contacts might share perspectives you haven't already considered, valuable lessons learned, or even better—the name and contact information for someone you don't already know.

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