

NETWORKING

The power of the tribe

Recognizing and realizing the value of business networks is crucial, writes entrepreneur and networker **Janine Garner**



IN THIS incredibly fast-paced business and economic landscape, we can no longer do it alone – realistically, we never could; we just thought we could. Building a powerful and diverse network, your own personal tribe, is a critical must-have within the new operating system of commercial collaboration. Moving from the isolated ‘me’ space to the collaborative ‘we’ space will future-proof careers, leadership and your own personal success.

A powerful and diverse network drives your success by:

- ✓ creating new opportunity for growth
- ✓ stretching, pushing, driving and inspiring you
- ✓ enabling you to contribute and influence more and leverage your position further

This ‘we’ space of commercial collabora-

tion requires courage, confidence and bravery, and is one in which networks of connected individuals, communities and businesses work together to drive success. We can bring our skills, strengths and talents to the table and together amplify and share expertise to create progressive, results-oriented solutions. Collective intelligence means we work smarter and quicker together. In fact, diversity and difference of opinion are actually the new competitive advantage.

Networking, connecting, meeting, doing coffee, lunch dates and even speed-connecting – all these terms are synonymous with meeting others to drive skill sets, contacts and ongoing business and personal growth. And however much you might want to hide under

the white tablecloths of a corporate breakfast, powerful and effective networking has evolved and is now a business must for all who want to forge ahead. It’s not simply about building up a Rolodex of business cards (or, more accurately, a smartphone full of virtual ones), a mass of LinkedIn contacts or a significant number of social media followers. It’s about a true meeting of minds and skill sets, and skilfully parlaying said meetings into successful long-range relationships.

Networking is a must-have for successful collaboration, and the diversity of that network is the tipping point between average connections and those that collaborate to create magic. The cross-fertilization of connections, skills and brainpower, and the ideas that are

openly discussed and shared through network creation, in their turn create new opportunities, innovation and new solutions to existing problems. It's a domino effect – the way your initial networks interact provides a guideline for the subsequent networks that spring up from these collaborations. They will only benefit from your experience and way of working together.

Building your network

The most innovative businesses and organizations are finding that effective and powerful networking is giving them an edge. So how do you find, build and manage a diverse network? How do you gain entry to a true circle of excellence that will work with you and not against you?

The critical element of a powerful network that can become your lifeline, and an absolute must-have for successful collaboration, is diversity. Building an effective and powerful network is so much more than finding a safe, like-minded tribe. It requires diversity, a width and breadth of contacts, a willingness to embrace the opportunity that exists in differences, and finally, an understanding that you may not always agree with or understand certain points of view, but that through the connection, you will build awareness and knowledge.

An effective network is a diverse network that consists of people who differ in expertise, age, gender and experience.

Powerful networks are those that are cross-functional and cross-industry. Think about it: a like-minded network limits the breadth of conversation. Lawyers sit in a room with lawyers, sharing their legal experience. CEOs play golf with CEOs; fashion industry PR experts mingle with other fashion industry PR experts. Now imagine the color of the conversation if instead you had lawyers, accountants, creatives, athletes, marketers and business owners discussing the various solutions to a problem. Imagine the different perspectives shared, the varying insights, the depth of conversation that would stretch thinking and push perspectives wider.

Diverse connections challenge thinking, drive further questions, push boundaries, increase awareness and open our eyes to another way. They also bring to the forefront

opportunities that were previously not in your direct line of vision, present solutions that weren't on your radar and create innovations that you once thought were not possible.

Who do you need to surround yourself with to inspire you and your business to achieve more? As Jim Rohn said, "You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with".

A powerful network is one that consists of people who have similar mindsets but diverse experience and will stretch thinking and push boundaries. Furthermore, those within a powerful network realize the power of sharing

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ideas and of coming together, and value-add to each other's businesses through the power of plural perspectives.

Those who are willing to be a part of a collaborative working environment are doing so because they want to be challenged. They want the opportunity to constantly learn from others and to share what they've learned, to engage on an intellectually challenging level with like-minded thinkers, to see their own business benefit from the knowledge of specialists, and to be happy knowing that they are on the edge of technological advancement, constantly pushing the 'what if' button – because, as a team, they feel secure enough to take risks.

Harnessing the network's power

The concept of commercial collaboration is not for the faint-hearted; it's for those who can see the far-reaching benefits of what the 'we' space is about – and yes, it is a gradual move that involves challenging thinking. But it is not something that one has to contemplate in solitude.

Understanding the power of your network and using its potential is intrinsic to the 'we' mentality. To care about the well-being of those who are connected to you through busi-

ness similarities or ethical focus, or a desire to advance the same cause – and expecting nothing in return – this creates a fantastic opportunity for collaborative relationships, and also for a true value exchange, where 'What's in it for me?' turns into 'What can I do for you?'.

The 'we' space is not a pipe dream. There are businesses and leaders who are clearly succeeding by operating within this framework. It is the center of discussion among academics, thought leaders and consulting groups. Those corporations and entrepreneurs who are using the space well are seeing procedures streamlined, the bottom line coming up,

and employees becoming more engaged and happier. Their 'communities' are becoming communities without the quotation marks.

It is not enough, in the words of Sheryl Sandberg, to 'lean in' to future-proof our success, our businesses and our careers. For leaders who are taking teams into an uncertain future, it's now about leaning out and collaborating with others. Because to lean out means to embrace and engage on an unforeseen aggregated level – where thinking bigger than ever before will bring rewards to a collective commercial mind.

The barriers between genders, between generations, between cultures, between the inventors and the investors, between the change-makers, the visionaries and those that make it happen – these all have to be broken down.

This is all a part of the evolution of 'me to 'we.' This is all a part of collaborative business. This is not about a revolution; it's about evolution. **CMP**

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