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The Concentric Rings of Networking



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After every article I write it is not uncommon to get several emails from readers looking for advice on the subject matter or with general employment questions. But that is the whole idea of sharing and mutual support. I send my share of "can you assist me?" emails myself, and hope I never stop. To cease networking would be either to be convinced I know it all or to be dead. Neither outcome seems all that attractive to me.

Recently, however, the trend for networking requests has been significantly focused on job leads. Usually a resume is attached. It's a sign of the times. There is not a whole lot of "it" out there, but there are a lot of people looking for what there is of "it," and finding "it" can consume a lot of time.

The dawn of the age of electronic communications brought an exponential expansion of your ability to send messages. Yet it also diminished the quality of that communication, since it gave everybody else access to that same capability and the unlimited access for you meant unlimited access to somebody else as well. As we usually seek access to those who have what we need, and seeing as how our needs are common, most of us are trying to access the same people. In a good economy, where there are a number of people seeking "it" and having "it," that is not an issue. But in a weak or recession- based economy or industry segment, those seeking "it" far outweigh those having "it."

As I have discussed before, we have confused the ability to do a lot of communicating easily with doing any of it well. People who know a lot about email sometimes know precious little about networking. And often that failure starts with a general lack of knowledge of the "Concentric Rings of Networking."

Think of a rock thrown into a pond. Rings of displaced water circle out from the point of contact. The closer the rings are to the point of impact, or center of energy origination, the better defined and more powerful the rings tend to be. The further out they spread, the less defined and the less energy is exhibited.

Networking is in essence the sharing of energy, and that energy is in direct proportion to the "ring" in which you reside in someone's network. You may have the shared power of a nuclear

reactor or a "D" cell battery.

So what are these rings?

Levels of Concentric Rings Networking

- **First ring.** These are people with whom you have personal experience and knowledge. You have shared experiences and shared respect. However, there is an additional strength to this ring: you have shared leads, information, or confidences. You have open or long standing mutual "IOUs" from supporting and helping each other over the years. The level and frequency of exchange has long eliminated the tendency to "keep count" of favors extended and favors owed. You keep an "open tab" for the people in this level, as they do for you. The level of information exchanged is selfless in proportion and sharing is limited only by personal need.
- **Second ring.** All the elements of the above exist, but an opportunity has not yet presented itself to share knowledge in an instance where that knowledge benefited either. It will probably happen, but as of yet the opportunity has not occurred. But the efforts to share continue.
- **Third ring.** This comprises people of whom you have knowledge based on input from members of the previous two rings. Your willingness to help and share is based on a willingness to accept the opinion of others you respect.
- **Fourth ring.** This includes recent contacts who appear to be people of knowledge and quality. But since the contact is still new and untested, you do not have sufficient contact feedback from others in your network to confirm or refute your positive suspicions of their potential value to you and your networking. The level is still an issue to be resolved by time and further opportunities to network.
- **Fifth ring.** This ring includes general contacts with whom you will ask and answer questions of a general nature. But neither side share leads with significant financial potential.
- **Sixth ring.** These are prospects, leads, and people with whom you have not had enough contact to make a real determination of their ability to assist you in your networking as they wish you to assist them. Assisting this person is considered an act of "charity," and therefore it is doubtful you would share financially beneficial information if the information you have would benefit a "closer contact."
- **Seventh ring.** These are people who have no real place in your network due to a decision that you either do not respect them or do not trust them. You communicate in order to be pleasant and in order not to "burn bridges," but you only respond. instead of calling. and your

- responses are neutral, not "precious information."
- **Eighth ring.** Everybody else.

(Not everything comes in lists of ten.)

This is not meant to be an absolute "rule of eight" with the precise guidelines always attached. But it is an effort to try and assist in determining what some of the key points of importance are within the levels of your network. For example, I have "friends" who only call when they need something and who don't always call me back when I call them. Where am I on their list, and where do you suppose they are on mine?

Networking is a request for information that has the potential of generating revenue for the requestor or receiver. It can be as benign and simple as a request for a name and phone number. But it can go all the way up the scale to a request to use your knowledge or influence to leverage a situation in favor of one of your network associates against someone else. Influence and favors are currency, developed and saved through work and effort. They are spent cautiously and carefully. Often those who participate in networking do not take into account the value of their request before making it and to whom they are asking.

I realize that to many this may sound callous and mercantile. But try this example to test your own willingness to be saint-like and selfless to all who come to you:

Your spouse/significant other, who is not in HR/staffing, calls you with a hot lead for a great opening for you or someone you may know in HR/Staffing. The person who told her said that they would keep this private for a few days to give you a chance to consider or share with your friends.

- Who would you call in your network?
- What if you needed or wanted a job?
- What if your best friend was out of work?
- What if you could make a fee?
- What if it is a good economy and there are few good candidates on the street?
- What if it is a poor economy and a lot of people are hurting, near and far from you?
- What if a friend's son just had a baby and lost his job?
- What if someone you barely know, who is in dire straights and really needs a job, just sent you a resume, but at the same time your company announced third quarter losses for the third consecutive quarter?
- What if you have a need for a contact in a place of importance at this company that you know will remember the favor, and you know of somebody. Like your brother-in-law. Meanwhile, you know of someone who needs a job

who may or may not have a good memory.

If you truly understand networking, then you know it is the exchange of information of value, and not merely the random passing of phone numbers and three-week-old leads. That value is relative to the closeness you feel to the person you are sharing with or the belief in your eventual benefiting from that sharing in monetary, informational, or continued good relations.

In addition, as the scarcity of gold makes it more precious than zinc, the scarcity of your information also drives its value and your willingness to share.

For example, with a fixed amount of money to spend this month:

- How much of it would you spend on your son or daughter's high school graduation present?
- How about a niece or nephew?
- How about the son or daughter of a close friend, or a neighbor who for some unknown reason invited you to the graduation party?
- How about the kid you do not know or have never met before, but who mailed you a letter asking if you would give it to his or her graduation fund?

When you ask for information or a favor from a network, you are asking for an item of value that may be limited (unless the information has no value, and then why you would possibly want it comes into question).

I share! I am not a stingy, selfish old codger who does not care about helping or mentoring fellow professionals. But it is important that I help those closest to me first with the most precious information I have in proportion to the relationship. Otherwise, when my niece expects a graduation present, I'll have to tell her I gave the laptop to the kid handing out brochures at the graduation because he needed one as well and he asked first.

You also need to understand the concentric rings for your own piece of mind and "expectation control."

The other day I ran into an acquaintance who was despondent, due to the fact that she had sent out over two hundred emails the week before looking for leads and only eight people had bothered to get back to her. I asked how many of the emails were to "known" friends or past network peers and how many were "blind" emails sent to whatever name she was able to develop. The answer was 8 and 192, respectively. So, rather than being despondent, I advised her that she should be pleased

that 100% of those whom she knows responded to her.

Don't measure the success of your networking efforts by volume alone, but instead by the volume of response in proportion to the levels of your network with which you are communicating.

Building and developing a network is like all endeavors of real value. It takes time and nurturing — even when you don't need it, otherwise it will not be there when you do need it. Share with those who can not only use your information, but who also will share with you as well. Analyze the people with whom you network and be more critical in the value you assign and the value you share based on the level of the relationship. Otherwise, you may well be working to get "water from a stone" rather than digging a well.

Networking is a significant skill in our business. But it is first and foremost a business relationship. Never hesitate to try to network and build relationships, just don't assume that effective networking only requires one participant, you, and will always conform to your timing and your needs. "Quid quo pro."

In "A Streetcar Named Desire" Blanche Dubois proclaims that she "always depended on the kindness of strangers." And she didn't turn out too well, did she? Too bad she didn't properly determine the concentric rings of networking in her life.

Have a great day recruiting!

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