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A Formula for Networking Success: 1 Healthy Mindset + 3 Basic Facts + 5 Simple Tips

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Most people acknowledge that networking is an essential competency for business success. And yet many cringe at the very thought of a room full of strangers engaging in small talk, glad-handing with feigned interest. But that image, and that mindset, is a very limited perspective of only one stereotypical networking activity.

Networking is about connecting to information, resources, and to other people through relationships. For example, think about the different steps and stages throughout your career—starting as early as a recommendation of which college to attend, to that first job out of college, to an internal promotion. Networking played a part in the opportunities that were presented to you and where you got the information that affected your choices and, ultimately, your decisions. Simply defined, networking is *friends helping friends*. And in a broader sense, *people helping people*.

So what's the formula for networking success? It starts with a healthy mindset, a few facts and some simple networking tips.

ONE HEALTHY MINDSET

How you think about networking will directly affect your results. If you think it's hard to do, you will make it hard for yourself. If you think it's a waste of time, it will be. However, if you change your perspective and think that you can learn something from everyone you meet, you will. You will engage in conversations that are interesting to you and you will develop meaningful relationships along the way.

THREE BASIC FACTS

Fact #1: You already have an established network—in fact, many of them. Your family is a network; your co-workers, your college friends, and your children's parents are all networks. The people you see at church and any event that you attend on a fairly consistent basis are all in your network. Start by asking your closest friends for introductions to people who you're interested in meeting. They'll be honored that you asked.

Fact #2: No matter how uncomfortable you feel, someone in the room is more uncomfortable than you are. Pause and look around. Notice others who are standing alone, looking bored or out of place. Engage in conversation with them, starting with "What brings you to this event?" or "How do you know the host?" Be prepared with quality questions for a more meaningful conversation. (See tip #5 below.)

Fact #3: When you meet someone new, you both already know someone in common. In 2011, Facebook scientists determined that the 1967 study of six degrees of separation is now globally 4.74 degrees of separation. In the United States alone, it's less than three degrees.

FIVE SIMPLE TIPS

- 1. Be purposeful: Know your why.** Why do you feel you need to network? What are the benefits of developing new relationships at this stage of your life? What information or resource would be invaluable to you at this time? The answers to these questions will help you prioritize where to spend your networking time and energy.
- 2. Be aware: Create your comfort zone.** What is your networking style preference? One on one? Small groups or larger functions? What type of events do you enjoy most? Structured with a facilitator or unstructured networking where you're on your own? Choose events that fit your style. Attend events where you'll feel comfortable and the people who attend are the people whom you need to meet. This can easily be accomplished by calling the event organizers or by replying to the email invitation you received. Another option is to attend events with someone you know.
- 3. Be intentional: Do your research.** Who do you want to meet? Who has the information that you need to know? Go where they go. If you want to meet bankers, then attend the Banker's Association events. CPAs have a state organization with many local chapters. If you



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want to meet business people, then your local chamber is a good place to start. Chambers also sponsor specialized events for target audiences such as business leaders, small businesses and women's events. And don't forget about networking internally and developing relationships within your organization as well.

4. Be prepared: Call ahead. Increase your comfort zone by knowing more about what you're walking into. This can be easily accomplished by calling the event organizer to learn more about the event. How many people do they expect to attend? Is it a stand-up cocktail event or will there be tables? Is there a speaker? If so, plan to stay a few minutes after the presentation as often the speaker's topic creates great conversation. You may even choose to introduce yourself to the speaker after the event

as they are typically subject matter experts who might be of value to you.

5. Be meaningful: Engage in quality small talk. Create a short list of questions that align with what you need and what you're interested in talking about. Ask questions such as "What are the current trends in your industry?" "How does technology affect the way you do business?" "What key data points drive your business?" This will create meaningful conversations wherever you go.

Everyone's style and comfort zone are different when it comes to networking. Adapt the tips above to fit your personal style. Developing quality relationships through networking will be invaluable to you throughout your career. ●

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