Article from

The Stepping Stone

March 2019

Issue 71

CHAIRPERSON'S CORNER

It's a Small World, After All

By Mitchell Stephenson

It's a thrill to be the new Chairperson of the Leadership & Development (L&D) Section Council. As I work with the newly elected section council members and friends of the council, I'm constantly reminded of what a small world the actuarial community really is. I have known some of these volunteers from previous Society of Actuaries (SOA) initiatives, others I've worked with at prior employers, and the rest I will soon have the privilege to work with and get to know.

The realization that this is a small community really registered with me when I changed companies a few years back. I interviewed at the company's headquarters, which was a few states away from where I lived, not expecting to know or to be known by any of the interviewers. As it turns out, four of the five interviewers had a first- or second-degree connection with me, including having worked with my colleagues at a previous employer. One interviewer turned out to be a college classmate who was instrumental in convincing me to pursue a career in actuarial science.

> The point is, it *is* a small world, especially for actuaries.

This new employer was in the same building in which I had worked many years before. My new workstation was on the same floor as the group of actuaries with whom I'd had the privilege to work when I left the prior company 12 years earlier. And of the three other actuaries on that floor, I knew one from a prior employer, another was the spouse of a former colleague, and I recognized the third from local actuarial club meetings.

The point is, it *is* a small world, especially for actuaries. One of our key themes for the L&D Section in 2019 will be how to network effectively, especially in a digital age. Having learned firsthand how important it is to build, maintain and grow productive professional relationships—including those individuals with whom you no longer work—here are a few tips that I've used over the years to establish my own professional network.

- **Create a "to-who" list.** In her March 2018 *The Stepping Stone* article, "Go Beyond Your to-dos: Create a 'to-who' List," Aisha Faleeldeen describes learning about the concept of a to-who list from psychologist Gary Bradt, and her experience with creating such a list. This was a familiar concept to me because I've done this before.

  Whether a colleague leaves, if I myself change jobs or when I simply want to build a deeper professional relationship with someone, I make reminders to stay in touch. Checking in at least once or twice a year is good goal, if you manage to have quality interactions when doing so. Set a date and time, stick to the schedule, and try to pick up where you left off at your last meeting.

I like to ask some in my network for advice and guidance about issues or challenges I face at work. With others, I simply enjoy the opportunity to reconnect and learn more about their professional and personal lives. I've also learned that while in-person meetings are most effective, it's also not difficult to reach across state lines with a phone call. Social media and email are helpful tools to get in touch with others quickly and easily, but they are no substitute for the experience of talking on the phone or meeting up for lunch.

- **Put the relationship over the situation.** This is basically a lead-in to the ever-popular phrase "Don't burn bridges." In my opinion, it's not smart to create tension and discord among your colleagues over minor or trivial matters.

  When it comes to matters of principle and value, it's best to find the most effective way to discuss and stand behind your position. But if you feel your blood rising in a meeting or begin to grow frustrated with a colleague over a relatively minor issue, check yourself. Your next move may cause some permanent damage to the relationship, especially if it is someone with whom you may need to work closely in the future, or even work for. Heed the words of poet Maya Angelou: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

  It pays to keep an even keel and place the relationship above the situation wherever possible. In digital communications—including email—this is especially important. One of the best pieces of advice I received is to hit the draft button before sending an email in haste, especially if the circumstance has triggered some strong emotions. I find I rarely go back and send the email as originally drafted, and I am usually grateful for that.

- **Do a walk-around.** Abraham Lincoln is said to have been one of the first to employ this method of management. While visiting Civil War armies, he walked around the camps, speaking with both soldiers and officers, trying to understand how people were thinking and feeling.

  I try to make myself available for chance meetings with others, whether in the breakroom, in the hallways, or by walking around and popping in occasionally to speak with colleagues at their desks. This can be a good way to establish an ongoing presence with colleagues while spending time to catch up. The challenge with the walk-around is to find the right balance, so that you can still get your own work done. Walking around the office a couple of times a week is usually a good goal. This is also a method by which actuaries, who are often more introverted in nature, can challenge themselves to work on their networking skills.

  The equivalent of a walk-around in the digital age is to send out an occasional note or two, using email or social media. Recently, I ran into a cousin of a former colleague of mine and followed up with a quick note to let him know about the chance meeting. This kind of interaction always helps to keep professional relationships going over the longer term.

I also want to welcome the new council members to the L&D Section—Amanda Hug, Scott Haglund, David Ruiz and Michelle Young. I look forward to working with them, as well as with our other council members, friends of the council, authors, moderators and presenters. These volunteers will continue to bring relevant information about the topics of leadership and development—critical to an actuary's success—to our section members and the greater SOA community. ■

Mitchell Stephenson, FSA, MAAA, is chairperson of the Leadership & Development Section Council and can be reached at *mitchell.stephenson@prudential.com.*