



CREATING CONFIDENT COMMUNICATORS

The Power of a Personal Network

Are you LinkedIn? Do you Tweet? What about Facebook? With so many social networks gaining popularity, it raises a provoking question: how important is a personal network of contacts, colleagues and friends in leadership?

According to a story in *The Wall Street Journal*, pretty important, as it turns out. Journalist Carl Bialik highlights Oxford professor Robin Dunbar who in 1993 coined the phrase 'Dunbar's number' to represent the average circle of friends and acquaintances – 150 people. Dunbar proposes that throughout your life, you develop or acquire approximately 150 friends or people you know well. These friendships are composed of concentric circles, much like ripples in a pond. Your close intimate friends, mates and family members are usually included in the smallest rings close to you. Colleagues, acquaintances and friends of friends compose the outer circles.

People on the outer circles are typically not ones you interact with frequently. And that is where the power of the internet can really impact your personal network. Using email and possibly professional online networks can help you connect to these outer fringe contacts, much like a virtual Rolodex®. By keeping in touch via occasional emails, you can increase your ties and stay relevant in people's minds. Why is that important? Most jobs and opportunities are filled through networking contacts. And, when you need a resource, you have a much larger "pond" in which to fish.

Mark LeBlanc, founder of SmallBusinessSuccess.com, consults on entrepreneurial leadership, also known as thinking of yourself and your skills as a business. As we continue to flex and redefine business relationships, understanding the value and benefits of your skills is crucial in not only performing well in your current role but also in looking ahead for future roles. Contract positions are increasingly popular in both the public and private sectors, so staying foremost in other people's minds is practical and proactive. To stay visible and connected, LeBlanc recommends a technique that draws from corporate wisdom: establishing a board of directors for yourself.

This technique is easy to implement and delivers profound results within months. To assemble your personal BOD, think of 10-12 people you admire and trust. These can be colleagues or community and government officials; they do not have to be people you necessarily know well but have least met or been acquainted with. You do not even need to tell them that they have been selected as a board member.

Your BOD does not have "formal" meetings as a group. You select these people to mentor, connect and advise you on life and career issues. Then, once a month, contact this person with either an email, phone conversation or face-to-face meeting. If you have 12 people selected, that about 3 contacts a week – very manageable. Your goal is to make a connection monthly and eventually develop these relationships into supporters on your inner concentric rings.

You may be wondering if 12 people can realistically impact your career – yes, if you consider that each of the 12 bring you into their own Dunbar's network. 150 multiplied by 12 is 1800 people that you can now reach through your connections. As you progress, need to fill key positions or find resources or vendors, your circle has vastly expanded by simply networking with 12 people.

On the subject of networking, true networking is mutually beneficial. That means both people gain from the relationship, so make sure you contribute to the success of your BOD member as well. Keep an eye out for articles, news clips or websites that may interest or help them succeed; then just drop a quick email or note with the information. That is one of the easiest ways to ensure a respectful and reciprocal relationship.

The hardest part of networking is tooting your own horn. If you've done your homework with your BOD members and send them information that is helpful, it is easier to send out an email with a subject line of "Reason to celebrate" or "Great news on our project," etc. The purpose of this type of communication is to report hard-earned results or good news of project approval or awards. Initially, this feels verrrrry awkward and uncomfortable and yet, it is critical to your success. People need to know why you are good at what you do – keeping your BOD informed is the quickest way to spread the good news without "bragging."

Your BOD will also change as your life changes. You can add or replace people as needed, just keep in mind that more than 12 contacts can be very time consuming; less than 12 is also fine. Mark LeBlanc has literally hundreds of stories and testimonials of how this one technique has changed lives for the better. As for LeBlanc, he is a living testament – last summer he was elected president of 3,000-member national professional association – and he claims it all started with 12 people...

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