

Leadership: How to Network

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In today's fast-paced and interconnected world, it is difficult to overstate the power of networking. There's certainly more to it than exchanging business cards or attending social events.

This lesson will guide you through the benefits of networking and provide you with clear examples of how to approach it.

Networking is a strategic art form that – when used correctly – can propel your personal and professional life to new heights. It's a particularly essential skill for leaders and managers, enabling them to build robust relationships, access diverse perspectives, and navigate the complexities of the modern business landscape. While some may view networking as only self-serving, it is a golden opportunity for exchanging ideas, sparking collaboration, and gaining access to valuable information so that you can further your career *and* get the most out of your team.

In this course, we will synthesise the key insights from knowledge experts to provide a 360-degree view of how to network effectively. Whether you are a seasoned leader or aspiring to a management position, these strategies will help you appreciate the nuances of networking and enhance your professional growth and success.

Let's set the scene by discussing *perspective*, as many individuals struggle with networking due to a lack of confidence or misconceptions about its purpose. A two-year study by HBR of 30 managers going through the so-called "leadership transition" found networking was "simultaneously one of the most self-evident and one of the most dreaded developmental challenges that aspiring leaders must address." [1] However, networking is merely a natural extension of the relationships we *already* manage in various aspects of our lives.

By reframing networking as building friendships in business and focusing on mutual interests and curiosity, leaders can overcome barriers and embrace the true essence of effective networking.

Effective networking is not only about self-promotion but entails fostering genuine connections based on shared interests and a willingness to support others. When approaching networking with a mindset of helping others, leaders can create a conducive environment for collaboration and growth while establishing meaningful connections that go beyond transactional exchanges.

According to Christine de Largy [2] from the *London Business School*, the right time to network is “anytime, anyplace, anywhere”. In other words, it is a *continuous journey* of relationship-building and learning. So, networking should not be limited to specific circumstances or when seeking new opportunities. Instead, it should be seen as an *ongoing* process that provides the support, feedback, and valuable insights to help you deliver in your current role while fostering personal development towards future roles.

By *actively* engaging with others and seeking meaningful connections in all scenarios, leaders can tap into a wealth of resources that contribute to their professional growth. Leaders should seize as many opportunities as possible to connect with others, whether at industry events, team meetings, or casual encounters. By dedicating time and effort to nurturing relationships, you can create a network which offers reliable support, guidance, and diverse perspectives throughout their careers.

It’s as clichéd as it is true: don’t forget about *quality over quantity*. The size of your network is typically less important than the *quality* of relationships formed. Building a network is not just about collecting contacts. It is about fostering genuine connections based on trust and shared values. To this end, you must invest time and effort in developing meaningful relationships. By actively engaging with a smaller group of individuals, leaders can create a network that is built on trust, collaboration, and a genuine desire to support one another. *Genuine* is the operative word here, as it’s paramount to be sincere when networking as a leader. According to an article by the Center for Creative Leadership [3]: “If you earn a reputation as someone who takes but doesn’t give, who uses information inappropriately, or who breaks confidences, your networks will shut down”. So, if you want to contribute to a healthy and collaborative workspace, never compromise on sincerity or authenticity.

It is important to choose the right *context* to network in that works for you. Networking events can take various forms, from large-scale conferences to intimate one-on-one meetings. While some individuals thrive in large gatherings, measuring success by the number of *LinkedIn* invitations received, others may find more value in forging meaningful connections with a select few. Leaders should find a networking context that aligns with their preferences and objectives. They can choose to attend events that allow for one-on-one coffee or lunch meetings, where genuine connections can be established and nurtured. It can also help to set intentional and realistic goals. For example, you might tell yourself that you will “engage with at least two individuals at

this event that I did not know before". This is a far more *purposeful* approach to networking.

A commonly asked question is, "How many contacts should you have?" In the 1990s, the acclaimed anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar introduced the concept of "Dunbar's Number" [4], which suggests that individuals can only manage meaningful connections with up to 150 people. According to his research, leaders should focus on cultivating relationships at different levels of "closeness" within a hierarchical structure, ranging from immediate team members and superiors to external contacts from professional organisations and alumni groups.

In practice, this might mean having a central supportive circle of (say) up to five people, with an increasing amount of people radiating out from this central core. Starting with a core group of five individuals, your level of familiarity expands to include up to 15 individuals who might compose your "sympathy group". Then, it extends to encompass up to 50 individuals who make up your "active or close network", and finally up to 150 individuals who belong to your "personal network". While establishing your network, it is advisable to consider these categories and effectively manage the frequency and nature of interactions within each level. This more strategic approach ensures a deep and diverse network that continuously provides access to varied perspectives and resources.

According to subject matter experts and professors Herminia Ibarra and Mark Lee Hunter in an illuminating article published in HBR [1], networking with purpose involves nurturing different types of networks based on specific objectives. These are labelled by the authors as "operational", "personal", and "strategic" networks.

Operational networks encompass internal relationships focused on tasks and include colleagues, superiors, suppliers, and customers. These networks are essential for day-to-day operations and achieving organisational goals.

Personal networks, on the other hand, offer a safe space for personal development and idea testing, comprising both internal and external contacts from professional associations and alumni groups. These personal networks provide ample opportunities for leaders to expand their knowledge, receive feedback on their ideas, and get exposure to diverse perspectives.

Finally, strategic networks cover far broader perspectives and connections outside the immediate business unit or organisation. These networks allow leaders to stay in the loop about industry trends, identify potential opportunities, and navigate the professional and political landscape effectively.

Operational networking is the most common form of networking but often overlooks important connections and relationships beyond immediate tasks. Personal networking

helps managers gain new insights and referrals, but it alone is insufficient for navigating the “leadership transition”. And strategic networking is critical for leaders as it involves forming relationships and coalitions, understanding the broader strategic landscape, and enlisting the support necessary to achieve goals. This – usually less spoken about – network requires one to leverage relationships, influence stakeholders, and shape the relational environment to align with business objectives. It may require time and energy that managers typically devote to operational tasks, but it is essential for long-term success. The takeaway here is that leaders should be *intentional* in developing and nurturing networks in each of these categories via a three-pronged strategy in order to create a comprehensive support system and strategic resource.

Finally, building fruitful relationships is not a one-time effort. Instead, it requires ongoing nurturing and maintenance. Leaders should prioritise follow-up actions and diligent record-keeping to ensure that connections remain strong and relevant. Keeping an organised record of contacts, interests, and relevant details using tools like *Excel* spreadsheets or databases can facilitate effective network management. Consistent communication is essential for maintaining relationships, and leaders should stay in touch with their network by sending *value-added* communications that are relevant to the recipient. Remember that networking should be viewed as a *two-way street*, and as a leadership figure, you should be committed to assisting others too. By providing information, insights, or opportunities that align with their network's interests, leaders demonstrate their commitment to building a mutually beneficial relationship.

If you remember one thing from this session, remember this: Networking is not just about self-promotion but about fostering genuine connections based on shared interests and a willingness to support others.

This week, set yourself an achievable networking goal, such as:

- Learn something new about an existing valuable contact
- Initiate a conversation with someone you haven't communicated with in a number of months
- Speak to someone you haven't spoken to before, whether in person or online

To sum up, mastering the art of networking is an ongoing journey for leaders and managers. By adopting a mindset of genuine connection and collaboration, leaders can unlock the power of networking to access diverse perspectives, drive innovation, and navigate challenges effectively. Networking is not a one-time activity but a continuous process that requires dedication, strategic thinking, and nurturing relationships with purpose. By building a diverse network, leveraging different types of connections, and investing in meaningful relationships, leaders can harness the full potential of networking to enhance their professional growth, drive organisational success, and make a lasting impact in their industries.

[1] *How Leaders Create and Use Networks*, Herminia Ibarra and Mark Lee Hunter (2007)

<https://hbr.org/2007/01/how-leaders-create-and-use-networks>

[2] *Walk Before You Run: How To Network Like A Leader*, London Business School (2023)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/lbsbusinessstrategyreview/2023/03/01/walk-before-you-run-how-to-network-like-a-leader/?sh=42ac39526e42>

[3] *The Top 6 Rules of Leadership Networking*, CCL (2021)

<https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/top-6-rules-leadership-networking/>

[4] *Dunbar's Number: Why We Can Only Maintain 150 Relationships*, BBC (2019)

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20191001-dunbars-number-why-we-can-only-maintain-150-relationships>