

MANAGING YOURSELF

5 Misconceptions About Networking

by Herminia Ibarra
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A good network keeps you informed. Teaches you new things. Makes you more innovative. Gives you a sounding board to flesh out your ideas. Helps you get things done when you're in a hurry. And, much more (see my recent [Lean In video](#) on how networks augment your impact).

But, for every person who sees the value of maintaining a far-reaching and diverse set of professional connections, many more struggle to overcome innate resistance to, if not distaste for, networking. In my 20 years of teaching about how to build and use networks more effectively, I have found that the biggest barriers people typically face are not a matter of skill but mind-set.

Listening closely to my MBA students' and executives' recurrent dilemmas, I have concluded that any one or more of five basic misconceptions can keep people from reaping networking's full benefits. Which of these are holding you back?

Misconception 1: Networking is mostly a waste of time. A lack of experience with networking can lead people to [question whether it's a valuable use of their time](#), especially when the relationships being developed are not immediately related to the task at hand. Joe, a Latin American executive in a large company striving to promote greater collaboration, for example, told me that every single co-worker who visits his country asks him to meet. Last year alone he had received close to 60 people, a heavy burden on top of the day job. Rightly, he wonders whether it's the best use of his time.

But, just because networks can do all these things, it doesn't mean that yours will. It all depends on what kind of network you have, and how you go about building it. Most people are not intentional when it comes to their networks. Like Joe, they respond to requests, and reach out to others only when they have specific needs. Reaching out to people that you have identified as strategically important to your agenda is more likely to pay off.

Misconception 2. People are either naturally gifted at networking or they are not, and it's generally difficult to change that. Many people believe that networking comes easily for the extroverted and [runs counter to a shy person's intrinsic nature](#). If they see themselves as lacking that innate talent, they don't invest because they don't believe effort will get them very far.

Stanford psychologist [Carol Dweck](#) has shown that people's [basic beliefs about "nature versus nurture"](#) when it comes to personal attributes like intelligence or leadership skill have important consequences for the amount of effort they will put into learning something that does not come naturally to them. People with "fixed" theories believe that capacities are essentially inborn; people with growth mind-sets believe they can be developed over time.

As shown in a forthcoming academic paper by Kuwabara, Hildebrand, and Zou, if you believe that networking is a skill you can develop you are more likely to be motivated to improve it, work at it harder at it, and get better returns for your networking than someone with a fixed mind-set.

Misconception 3: Relationships should form naturally. One of the biggest misconceptions that people have about networking is that relationships should form and grow spontaneously, among people who naturally like each other. Working at it strategically and methodically, they believe, is instrumental, somehow even unethical.

The problem with this way of thinking is that it produces networks that are neither useful to you nor useful to your contacts because they are too homogenous. Decades of research in social psychology shows that left to our own devices we form and maintain relationships with people just like us and with people who are convenient to get to know to because we bump into them often (and if we bump into them often they are more likely to be like us).

These “narcissistic and lazy” networks can never give us the breadth and diversity of inputs we need to understand the world around us, to make good decisions and to get people who are different from us on board with our ideas. That’s why we should develop our professional networks deliberately, as part of an intentional and concerted effort to identify and cultivate relationships with relevant parties.

Misconception 4. Networks are inherently self-serving or selfish. Many people who fail to engage in networking justify their choice as a matter of personal values. They find networking “insincere” or “manipulative” — a way of obtaining unfair advantage, and therefore, a violation of the principle of meritocracy. Others, however, see networking in terms of reciprocity and giving back as much as one gets.

[One study](#) discovered that views about the ethics of networking tend to split by level. While junior professionals were prone to [feeling “dirty” about the instrumental networking](#) they knew they had to do to advance their careers, their seniors did not feel the slightest bit conflicted about it because they believed they had something of comparable value to offer.

The difference came down to confidence or doubt about the worth of their contributions, with junior professionals feeling more like supplicants than parties to equitable exchange. My own [research](#) suggests that the only way to conceive of networking in nobler, more appealing ways is to do it, and experience for oneself its value, not only for you but for your team and organization.

Misconception 5: Our strong ties are the most valuable. Another misconception that gets in the way of building a more useful network is the intuitive idea that our most important relationships in our network are our strong ties — close, high trust relationships with people who know us well, our inner circle. While these are indeed important, we tend to underestimate the importance of our “weak ties” — our relationships with people we don’t know well yet or we don’t see very often — the outer circle of our network.

[The problem with our trusted advisers and circle of usual suspects](#) is not that they don’t want to help. It’s that they are likely to have the same information and perspective that we do. Lots of [research shows](#) that innovation and strategic insight flow through these weaker ties that add connectivity to our networks by allowing us to reach out to people we don’t currently know through the people we do. That’s how we learn new things and access far flung information and resources.

One of the biggest complaints that the executives I teach have about their current networks is that they are more an accident of the past than a source of support for the future. Weak ties, the people on the periphery of our current networks, those we don’t know very well yet, hold the [key to our network’s evolution](#).

Our mind-sets about networking affect the time and effort we put into it, and ultimately, the return we get on our investment. Why widen your circle of acquaintances speculatively, when there is

hardly enough time for the real work? If you think you're never going to be good at it? Or, that it is in the end, a little sleazy, at best political?

Mind-sets can change and do but only with direct experience. The only way you will come to understand that networking is one of the most important resources for your job and career is try it, and discover the value for yourself.

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