



BUILDING YOUR NETWORK AT WORK

Women often overlook what may be the easiest place to start paving the path for success

By Patricia O'Connell, Contributor

"There's no place like home," Dorothy intones in *The Wizard of Oz*. The point of the story is what she really needed was close by but overlooked by her. And too often, that's the case with networking, especially for women. For a variety of reasons — ranging from ill-serving modesty to being afraid of being "exposed" — women don't recognize or acknowledge the opportunity to build or leverage relationships within their own organization.

That's a mistake, according to networking professionals and coaches. In ignoring the opportunities to network within their current organization, women are very likely missing out on the possibility of advancement or being seen beyond the parameters of their current position. "There are two bases of power in your career — internal and external," notes Diane Darling, a career coach and author of *The Networking Survival Guide*, and *Networking for Career Success*.

She notes that men and women not only network differently, but view it differently. "Typically, you'll see men go out for a beer and a burger, at lunch or after work. Women view this as 'the men are playing' and think that they themselves have to be at their desks, working," she says. Women justify missing out on the social aspect because they tell themselves their work will speak for itself."

This reasoning is flawed, Darling asserts. The men aren't off playing, she notes. They're building the kind of easy-going relationships that can lead to being comfortable enough to be able to ask for help — or offer it — when needed. "They're watching out for each other — constantly, without even being aware of it." She says it's not that women don't watch out for each other so much as they think they have to be self-sufficient — that they should be able to take care of themselves.

And sadly, the work doesn't always speak for itself. "Doing good or even great work isn't always enough to get noticed," she points out. She advises that there is nothing wrong with pointing out how your work has contributed to the company's success or helped a department reach its goal. "It's easier to remember someone when there is something of significance attached to their name."

That, of course, speaks to one of the problems that numerous studies have identified with networking and women: They feel uncomfortable calling attention to themselves. The reasons vary: imposter syndrome; believing they aren't doing enough; feeling uncomfortable promoting themselves for simply doing their jobs. "Everyone wants to have a network, but not everyone likes networking," Darling observes. She describes networking as "building relationships before you need them." Too often, women wait until they actually need something to reach out, which makes them even more self-conscious about doing so.

Workplace expert Alaina Love (who is working with Stephens Inc. on its Diversity and Inclusion initiative, INVESTED) points out that networking can require a degree of vulnerability, which isn't always comfortable for women in the workplace. "There are two issues: One is you have to trust the person, so that you're confident that whatever you tell them isn't going to come back and bite you later on," she says. The other is that networking can feel awkward when there is a power disparity. "What do I have to offer someone who is several levels above me in the organization?"

Darling agrees that the transfer of trust, which is at the heart of networking, can be a difficult hurdle to get past. "At that point, all you can do is be genuine and be a good person and assume the same of the other person," she advises.

Love says one way women can "protect themselves" is by letting their bosses know that they have reached out to someone. "Any boss is going to assume you don't want to be in your same position forever, so you have to start thinking about the steps to get you from here to there," she says. There is nothing wrong with asking someone — male or female — about the journey they themselves took. "Nobody got where they are without people helping them along the way," she says.

She advises complete transparency with whomever you reach out to about what you are looking for, and with your supervisor. "You never want your boss to hear about it after the fact," Love asserts. "That's embarrassing for your boss, and it can make your motives seem questionable, even if they aren't."

But keeping your boss in the loop isn't the same as asking for permission. If you feel a need to do that, take a hard look at yourself – and at the organization. "Ask yourself if the issue is within yourself or is it indicative of the culture of the organization," she advises. If the former, it's time to lose the too commonly held belief that lack of specific knowledge is a fault. If it's the latter, think if that's the kind of organization you want to be part of.

By building your internal network, you're taking steps to better situate yourself at your company while also building confidence and acquiring business-related social skills that will be useful to you at every stage of your career, wherever you work.

Seven tips for networking at your current place of employment

1. Dig deeper for a connection beyond having the same employer. Maybe it's something you both enjoy outside of work; maybe it's a mutual acquaintance who works elsewhere. LinkedIn is a better place to start than internal bias, Darling says.
2. Treat everyone with respect—you never know who in your network will be called upon to vouch for you. Darling told a story about a general counsel who had been hired because the CEO had gone to high school with the mail room supervisor at the GC's former employer. Turns out the GC and the supervisor shared a love for music, and she made a point to talk with him about it every chance she got. That was literally what made her stand out against equally qualified candidates.
3. Be completely clear about what your ask is, advises Love. Is it informational, an introduction, a favor that only that person can do? "A lack of clarity can make the other person feel put on the spot, because they have no idea what you're after, and it may be something they're not willing to do."
4. Be mindful of the person's time. "That's the one thing no one can ever give back – time," points out Love. Ask for a small amount, and don't waste that by asking for information you could have gotten elsewhere.
5. Networking takes commitment, so work at it, says Darling. Set aside small blocks of time twice a week to reach out to people on LinkedIn, and "stop having lunch at your desk," she advises. If you're still working from home, book "coffee" dates a week, even if they're virtual.
6. Don't overlook the men in your organization. They frequently want to be allies, too, and are in a position to be. Love advises using the same kind of clarity about timing and goals as when networking with women.
7. Don't assume you have nothing to offer, even if you are junior in your career. You may have an obscure piece of knowledge or be familiar with something that matters to someone else. Make sure you let whoever you network with know that they can reach out to you, on their own behalf or someone else's, at any time.

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