

## Relationship Building and Networking

By

Michael J. Farlow, PhD

Recently I was at a kick-off luncheon for the United Way. There were six or seven of us sitting at our table but there must have been nearly a thousand people total in the banquet room. I started talking to the two people to my right who were both pleasant and engaging. At some point I gave them my business card and asked for theirs. The response was, in a way, surprising. Neither of them had thought to bring their cards with them. When I asked why, they said that they seldom use cards because they are rarely outside of their building.

My wife was sitting next to me and she later said that she knew what was coming. I told my two table mates that I was a leadership coach and always encouraged my clients to carry cards ... at all times. I then went in to what my wife calls a "short rant" on the advantages of not only the cards, but the importance of developing relationships (networking, if you will) both inside and outside the work environment.

Inside an organization, business cards aren't always necessary (but are useful), however expanding your group of peers and making other important connections is invaluable. As a manager or executive, personally making connections with the internal organizations your group works with yields great dividends. It is much easier to deal with interdepartmental issues if you actually know the other people involved rather than getting angry with or retaliating against "those other people." Problems are solved more quickly and easily. By talking and working with one-another you are more apt to discover inefficiencies and make improvements to processes. Good relationships build a team spirit and prevent the "them against us" syndrome. When was the last time you got up out of your chair and went to visit a peer or others in a different department? For many people, the answer is rarely or never. Try getting around and asking people in other areas what they do and how you might better work with them. Even if you don't work on related issues now, you probably will in the future. So cast a wide net. Walk around and get to know other people and what they do. I promise it will pay dividends.

Networking outside the organization can be equally or even more important ... and is also the thing people are the least inclined to do. I tell my clients not to keep themselves head down in their current company or organization. There are two good reasons. The first reason is that there is a lot going on outside your particular workplace, much of which can be of value to both you and your organization. In professional associations, for example, you get the chance to see how other people and companies address similar issues and what new innovations exist that might help you do a better job. There is a good chance that you may find new customers or partners for your company. You also get the chance to test new ideas with others before presenting them to your own management team. This is good for you and good for the company. A win-win situation.

The second good reason to create relationships outside the work area is to establish a network of contacts to use for help when your time with your current company is over. We no longer live in a society or culture where you will work for one company for your entire life ... like our grandparents did. I recently attended a lunch in which the speaker noted that the new generation of workers ( X and Y) will likely move six times in their lives and change jobs as many as 22 times in their lives. Even if we discounted these number by half, it means that both the current and follow-on workforce will likely change jobs (voluntarily or involuntarily) every two years or so in a 20 year period. If that doesn't scare you a little, it should. Should you find yourself in transition between jobs, your best resource will be the professional network you've built. Waiting to build a network until after you're unemployed puts you at a serious disadvantage.

I speak at career transition courses in addition to coaching and I tell people I am going to give you some advice that you probably will not follow. And then tell them to develop and cultivate a network even when employed. The ugly truth is that most people don't take the advice and end up telling me they wish they had listened to me way back when. Developing a network is not an indication of disloyalty to your organization. Start Investing in building a professional network today ... it will help the organization and you as well. So if you don't do it for yourself, do it for your organization. There is a double pay off!

Dr. Farlow is a partner and coach at Wolf Leadership Development, LLC. He works with executives and pre-executives who desire to increase performance and take their leadership skills to the next level. His specialty is improving performance at work by improving relationship behaviors required of successful leaders. He is the author of *Leaders are Made Not Born: 40 Simple Skills to Make You the Leader You Want to Be* and can be contacted at [mfarlow@wolfleadership.com](mailto:mfarlow@wolfleadership.com).