

Networking is Vital for Successful Executives

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Managers today juggle more responsibilities than ever and for many of them networking becomes an afterthought. Ibarra says that's a potentially fatal career mistake. "What you know is who you know," she says and warns that managers who neglect to build their networks risk failing or remaining stuck in middle management.

Ibarra insists that networking is a requirement for business leaders in today's competitive environment.

"Other things being equal, what is going to give you an edge? It's the relationships that you have that allow you to augment what you know and allow you to take the 'what you know' and actually to translate it into practice, into something the organization can use. It makes all the difference."

Three Types of Networks

There are three types of networks important in business: operational, personal and strategic. While a lot of managers excel at building and using their operational network, they often overlook their personal and strategic networks.

Operational networking involves cultivating the relationships with people you need to accomplish your job. This may mean working closely with your Human Resources manager to make sure you hire the right people or developing relationships within other departments to win support for your initiatives.

"This is the network you need to have to basically get things done. It's good relationships with the people in your critical path, your customers, your suppliers, your team members," says Ibarra.

Most people master this skill or they wouldn't be in management. But some managers don't reach out widely enough to build all the relationships they need longer term or they miss key changes in overall company priorities because they get bogged down in the day-to-day functions of their jobs.

Personal networking is an afterthought for many busy managers. When you work 60-80 hour weeks, the easiest thing to eliminate from your schedule is your alumni meeting, the annual golf fundraiser and your scuba diving course. But these networks allow you to meet a diverse group of like-minded professionals. They also are a way to develop important social skills for many professionals and may be the first place you turn when you start thinking about changing careers.

"These are professional contacts that are discretionary, that are not as closely tied to the immediate job (so) that you can neglect or even abandon and still get your work done today. But these are the contacts that allow you to continue to develop professionally, to benchmark yourself with peers outside, to remain a bit on the cutting edge of your profession. These are the networks that people often use when they want to make a career move," she says.

Strategic networking is the toughest but most essential if managers want to become business leaders.

Ibarra explains that contact with peers and with senior executives in your field is vital and she encourages managers to look beyond their industry as well. This allows managers to share ideas about best practices in management, learn new approaches and keep close tabs on developments in business and technology. It helps managers to see the bigger picture and create their own visionary approach.

“How do you link your contacts outside the firm (and) your contacts inside in order to add value, to leverage the knowledge and the ideas that you get outside to make things happen inside?” Ibarra says “these are the networks that make a huge difference in leadership. This is where strategic ideas come into play. This is what allows people to line up stakeholders and, frankly, this is the area where most people have serious gaps.”

Why Managers Fail at Networking

Ibarra says many managers tell her they just don't have the time to network or that they consider it unsavoury. If you want to succeed you need to make the time. She says managers should delegate more in their day jobs and schedule networking into each week to make it a habit. “A lot of people who are not very good at this may feel, initially, that they are wasting time. They've gone to that conference, to those meetings, to this networking event, and what do they have to show for it? They have less time to do the bread-and-butter day job. However over the longer term or even over the mid-term, those are the contacts that really pay off.”

The second objection to networking is that “it's sleazy, it's using people, it's political,” says Ibarra. “As you move up within an organization or a career path, doing the actual work itself becomes less and less your role and getting work done through people becomes more and more your responsibility,” she says. “That's where networks come in. Informal connections that give you information, ideas, resources support, political intelligence and frankly most people are not very good at building these networks and using them.”

This isn't easy for a lot of managers who have survived and succeeded using their raw talent. “In a leadership role you truly have to operate outside the box and if you haven't been doing that previously in your career it is a fundamental paradigm shift.”

In addition, it's the quality not the quantity of contacts and how you use them that really counts. Managers need to remember that networking is two-way and they need to offer help and make connections for others in their network as well as expecting help. You can have the biggest contact list in your field, but if you only pick up the phone when you are in a crisis, you won't get far. “That's why you don't want to leave yourself vulnerable to having no where to turn when you do have a crisis,” she says. “Relationships take time, they take effort, they have their own rhythm ... Depending on what you put into it and what you give back to it, to the extent that you are investing for the future, your network will be there for you.”

Cultural or Gender Networking Challenges

Ibarra says the benefits of networking apply across cultures, but there may be differences in style. “I haven't seen any national culture (in which) things don't get done through networks.” In some

cultures, you may be able to directly approach contacts, in others you may need an intermediary. Different kinds of groups or organisations may be better suited to networking depending on the country. Karaoke might be a great networking plan in parts of Asia, but might not work in the US and Western Europe.

Women aren't either more or less capable of networking, but since it's easier for people to make connections with people who are similar, the fact that there are fewer women in senior positions in business can be a barrier.

Networking and Your Career

But can networking really make or break a career? Ibarra says yes. "It's that black and white: when you get to a level in the organisation where your peers are as good as you are in terms of intelligence, in terms of track record, in terms of credentials and in terms of raw smarts," she says. "When you look at what top companies do as they try to grow their future leaders and as they try to assess the leaders they currently have, they will tell you very explicitly that the ability to manage relationships across boundaries and to sell ideas is a critical competency."