

Networking – An Art or Science?

Is Networking an art or science? This was the issue at the exciting joint BLD and AWS network event on the 5th July 2007, sponsored by the Magic circle law firm, Slaughter & May at their offices. There were two different and excellent speakers, Rosalyn Breedy and Meena Heath. Both covered this issue which most women and ethnic minorities either find difficult or failed to do effectively. The event was presented by Debo Nwauzu, founder of BLD and Susha Chandrasekhar, Chair of the AWS. There were practical networking exercises such as finding your connection (you simply move around the room, the person you end up gravitating towards is the person to whom you feel connected) and speed networking. Below is the excerpt of what Rosalyn and Meena said at that event.

Networking- why it is important and how to do it by Rosalyn Breedy

Networking is an important skill for every professional and is of critical importance to women lawyers and lawyers from ethnic minorities. This is because people are more likely to achieve their potential if they are recognised, supported (emotionally and practically) and encouraged. People who have greater hurdles to overcome need it even more.

As the first person in my family to go to university, to join a profession and to go into the city, I simply wouldn't have survived in my career or go onto achieve the success I have today without the support, advice and friendship of many other people. One of the most important of those people, spoke to you earlier tonight, Nigel Boardman. Nigel taught me how to be a lawyer and has provided unfailing good advice and counsel for over 15 years for which I thank him. Martin Havelock, and Slaughter and May as a firm as you can see for yourself take seriously the success of individual lawyers from all backgrounds and I thank them too for sponsoring this evening.

The purpose of my speech tonight is to share with you the importance of the need to network also, to dispel some myths and finally, to provide some easy tips for engagement.

First, what do I mean by a "network"? There are many different ways of describing it but for me, it is really quite simple. It is the people you know and the people they

know who might be able to support you in your career. By support, I mean emotional and practical support, advice, ideas, a different point of view, objective feedback, a dispassionate view of a situation, introductions, references and so on....

A network is made up of a collection of mutual overlapping relationships and as a participant it can be easy to forget that you need too need to give something back to all the individuals in your network. You may believe that there are people who seem like they don't need any advice from you but absolutely everyone needs acknowledgement and frankly, a good joke helps too once in a while!

Like all things in life diversity enhances the experience, so it makes a difference if you can form relationships with people from different backgrounds, maturities, outlooks and experiences. Different viewpoints also usually lead to better problem solving and an ability to capitalise on opportunities.

Second, what do I mean by "networking"? Well, it is simply the activity of regularly engaging with people in your current network and extending it by meeting new people and fostering relationships. It is all pretty simple, really, and there is a reason why it is and that is that networking is actually an innate human trait. Those of you here tonight who are parents will know how vulnerable the human baby actually is. Human babies and ultimately all human beings fail to thrive unless they are able to elicit the support and co-operation of others. Similarly, pretty much all of us are programmed to give it, so it is important to remember that it is not actually something that anyone needs to learn! You can do it already. The question is do you want to and how you might be effective.

I have already explained why it makes sense to network but am conscious of the fact that for many people there is still a psychological barrier. I have been thinking for some time about why the term "networking" makes so many people feel uncomfortable and have come to the conclusion that it is not the activity of networking itself that is offensive but the ways in which some people undertake it.

Those of us of a certain age will remember the height of the internet boom when business people and professionals busily "worked" the room frantically handing out business cards whilst not even looking at the person they were speaking to in the eye. Some of you may have had experiences where someone has passed on private information and/or contact details to people who have abused it. I call that

“networking without integrity”, we all know what it means, you shouldn’t do it and people who do it eventually find themselves frozen out anyway.

I’m sure that all of you here tonight would never do any of those things I have mentioned but one way in which people can unwittingly cause problems for themselves is by being a little thoughtless, perhaps passing someone’s contact details to someone else without asking their permission. Not being thoughtful regarding the use of a person’s time or understanding the constraints their position may put them under.

My final point is to provide some tips for people who really want to start networking effectively.

The easiest way to do this is to join a professional network like BLD and AWS. If you think about, all the hard work has been done for you. Debo and Susha have created this event, invited lots of people with commonality of interest and even provided food! Meena, an excellent professional coach is also here tonight to share her wisdom and run a practical exercise. We thank them all for this and respond by making the effort to engage and make the most of it. Please do enjoy the event and really gain the benefit by following up with at least one person you meet tonight.

Going forward, and as your relationships develop, you could think about calling busy people you don’t know that well rather than meeting, going out for coffee or sending an email.

When you attend an event, take a look at the names on the invitation list before you go in and see if there is anyone you know or at least may have something in common with so that you know that there is at least one person with whom you will be able to engage. This will boost your confidence if it is flagging. Be aware of body language and time at events. Very often people attend because they also need to build business and so need to speak to lots of people; don’t be offended if the person speaking to you wants to move on.

Be careful about how you take relationships to a mentoring level, not everyone wants to be or is able to mentor. If you are junior the temptation is to rush the relationship, mentors evolve from chance relationships they can’t be forced. If you need a mentor now then you should join a formal scheme like one offered by the AWS and BLD.

I hope what I have said is of help and if you have any further questions then please do speak to me afterwards.

Networking is about Passion, Energy and Connection by Meena Heath

Ros has talked about opportunities that networking has created for her- it is clearly a powerful tool. And we have three fabulous women here (Ros, Debo and Susha) all of whom are superb networkers - and I believe they have three very important characteristics in common:

The first is their passion- that they are all passionate about what they believe and what they do.

The second is energy. They all have high energy levels and a positive approach to things.

The final and in my view most important is that they all understand the value of building relationships.

I think that many people struggle with the whole idea of networking and the scientific approach to which tell you:

Do your research-know your audience

Go with a goal in mind

Hone your message

Follow through

All of these are useful and valid pieces of advice but I actually think we can look at networking with a slightly different slant based on simple human energetic connection and the three golden rules- passion, energy and connection.

Let's start with passion- if you are living your life the way you choose to live it, doing something you love, your passion will be clearly and authentically communicated to everyone you interact with- you won't need to worry about selling yourself. When our work is just a job, it is not enough. We have to take pride in what we do and believe

in the organisation for which we do it and if we don't, we have to take responsibility for the inevitable lack of satisfaction that we feel and make the necessary changes. Each and every one of us is in control of what we choose to do and if we don't like it, we can make a different choice.

The value we place on the individual's ability to choose to use our services or work with our organisation, directly impacts on how well our firms or businesses do and the value we place on our own ability to direct our own future, directly impacts on our own success.

This takes us on to energy. Now I am sure some of you are thinking: Energy? Connections? What's this all about? Have you ever encountered a situation when you walk into a room with other people in it and you feel an overwhelming sinking feeling-- or you have a good day and you go home and your partner hasn't and your mood suddenly drops that's negative energy.

Now sometimes it is caused by how we are feeling and sometimes by how others are feeling. If someone is unhappy or depressed, and you spend time with them, you end up feeling some of their unhappiness- energy attracts energy. Conversely, when we are around upbeat people you feel happy and positive.

So if you consider that there is a universal energy that binds all things in the together and moves from person to person, place to place. Different cultures have called this energy many names. Chi, Prana and Ki, vibes, life force- it doesn't really matter . So when you are passionate about what you do and you talk about yourself or what you do your energy is visible and attracts other people. Their magnetism- understanding the concept of energy is a key factor in successful networking.

Connection

And the connection- that's about building relationships- a genuine interest in others. I went to seminar about networking and the trainer said- give people the impression that you are interested and I sat shouting silently- no **be** interested- if you give the impression- there is no authenticity- unless you are interested .

Now I think one of the ways to overcome our hesitancy in initiating that conversation is to have in mind the concept of connection. You have all heard of the six degrees of separation, I think. **Six degrees of separation** refers to the idea that, if a person is

one "step" away from each person she knows and two "steps" away from each person who is known by one of the people she knows, then everyone is no more than six "steps" away from each person on Earth. Several studies, such as [Milgram's small world experiment](#), have been conducted to empirically measure this connectedness. While the exact number of links between people differs depending on the population measured, it is generally found to be relatively small. Hence, six degrees of separation is synonymous with the idea of the ["small world" phenomenon](#). I believe that as you get older, the degree goes down to one or two degrees of separation. Another concept which has its origins in Eastern Philosophy is that there is no such thing as coincidence- we are where we are because that is where we are meant to be and that we all have messages for each other and this turns the whole process into more of a game than a chore.

So if you don't have time to do your research or hone your message you can give yourself a fall back position, which is that you are where you are for a reason and that the person you are talking to has a message for you or a connection to you and you just need to talk to each other until you find it. If you are genuinely interested in someone and are listening to what they are saying, you will remember them. The more you relaxed you are about it the easier it becomes.

Ok so this is what uncomfortable feels like, hunched shoulders, fear and this is the energy you will carry and transfer in that situation. When you are frightened and worried about something- you create an invisible forcefield around you, which is designed to keep people away.

Being drawn to each other is the ultimate connection. I went on a course a few years ago where they ran an exercise about energy and connection. I was actually on the course with my fiancé at the time, now my husband. We were the only couple on the course and the course leaders had said to us to try and work separately, stay away from each other. There were about 20 people on the course. The others on the course didn't know we were a couple. For one of the exercises they asked us to get into pairs and they asked us to move around the room and go to where we drawn. Karl and I were deliberately avoiding each other and everyone else ended up in pairs leaving the two of us standing opposite each other.

For the next one, we all put on blindfolds and were asked to go to where we felt drawn- yes you guessed it- we ended up together again. It is a powerful technique

when you become aware of it and very useful when you are out shopping and you don't have a mobile or a signal or something- you just close your eyes and feel. When you walk into a room- go to someone you feel drawn to and find the connection- if you feel it- they will feel it too. We will try that when we start the speed networking.

I will ring the bell after 3 minutes and you move on to the next person. We will do it 5 times and then stop. During the speed networking, you should look into the eyes of the other person and actively listen to what they are saying.