

Servant Networking: Leading and Connecting Through Service

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by William H. Bishop

‘Networking’ is a term that conjures up thoughts of people schmoozing with the boss to gain an advantage, mingling with the ‘in crowd’ in the hope of moving up on the social ladder, or using their connections with the ‘right people’ to better their lives. While people might be interacting with one another for those reasons and others, they are not networking. RoAné (1993) states the following in regard to networking:

Networking is a reciprocal process, an *exchange* of ideas, leads, and suggestions that support both our professional and personal lives. There is also a spirit of sharing that transcends the information shared. The best networkers reflect that spirit with a genuine joy in their “giving” (p. 6).

Networking, especially from a Christian perspective, involves adding value to people’s lives with no thought of personal gain. Proverbs 11:25 states, “The generous man will be prosperous, and he who waters will himself be watered” (NAS). Christian networkers are really servant networkers. They serve as consultants and mentors and are ultimately the servants of those with whom they network. They ‘interview’ people with whom they come into contact in order to assess their needs and better serve them. Thus, they ultimately provide leadership to those in their network through what Sheard and Kakabadse (2007) define as “relationship building.” Networking without service amounts to little more than using people and will not stand the test of time.

Background

We have all networked. If we did not network, things would not get done. Actually, they would, they would just take longer. Although we have all done it, we may not have thought of it as ‘networking.’ Servant networking, like all networking, involves interaction with others, however it is not superficial or done for selfish reasons. “In its simplest form, networking is a reciprocal process in which you

share ideas, leads, information, advice, brainstorming, laughter . . . and sometimes tickets to a ball game” (RoAne). Essentially, networking is getting to know people in various capacities and fields of endeavor and serving their needs. Representative Rigell (personal communication, July 25, 2011) states that with networking, you “help others and get pulled along with them.”

Fundamentally, networking is really about leadership. Maxwell (2007) states, “Leadership is influence...nothing more, nothing less” (p. 16). Sheard and Kakabadse (2007) go further and define leadership as “a disproportionate social influence process.” Well, networking is also about influence, but it is about the influence of many individuals, not just the influence of one or two people you know. With networking, it is not about the people you know. It is about the people *they* know! The people with whom you network may not be able to do anything *directly* to help you or impact your life. However, they may know someone who can, and that is the key to networking. Gladwell (2002) calls these people *connectors* (p. 38). “The first - and most obvious - criterion is that connectors know lots of people. They are the kinds of people who know everyone. Connectors are important for more than simply the number of people they know. Their importance is also a function of the kinds of people they know” (Gladwell, 2002, p. 38).

In order to be an effective networker and successfully lead and connect people, one must consult, mentor, interview and provide servant leadership to those in and out of the network.

The Consultant Networker

Networkers interact with people all the time. Frequently they give advice about things ranging from employment opportunities to seminar information. As such, they really serve as consultants. Block (1981) notes, “Every time you give advice to someone who is faced with a choice, you are consulting” (p. 1). Consultants are in a unique position to lead others by providing information and opinions that will not only influence their decisions, but will also be the impetus of change. Kakabadse, Louchart, and Kakabadse (2006) posit that one of the roles of consultants is to act as agents of change.

Consultants enable change to occur by educating and coaching their clients (Smith, 2002). In the case of networking, those in the network serve as clients. “The consultant’s objective is to engage in successful actions that result in people or organizations managing themselves differently” (Block,

1998, p. 5). The reciprocal nature of networking is such that, if done correctly, those in the network will be changed—for the better—as a result, and will take action accordingly.

It is in this capacity that networkers provide leadership to those whom they consult. Miller (1995) notes the importance of building a circle of friends through which one can lead and be led (p. 46). Block (2001) refers to this as “leadership by engagement”(p. 341). That is, people feel involved in the change process because leadership is directly engaged with them, and they are more receptive to new ideas. Therefore, they are more likely to respond favorably to information and suggestions they receive from those whom they consult in their network.

Mentoring your Network

Mentoring and networking go hand-in-hand. “‘Mentors’ are leaders who engage in deliberate actions aimed at promoting learning” (Bell, 2002, p. xvii). Learning, as it relates to networking, is not necessarily academic. Rather, it is learning that is focused on assessing the needs of others and connecting them to the right people.

Leck and Robitaille (2001) note, “Mentoring is typically a mechanism whereby a senior person 'takes under his/her wing' a more junior person, and ensures that their protégé understands his/her job, is introduced to the right people, is aware of how the organization works and has someone to talk to about personal and other issues.” A key component of networking is the introduction to the “right people,” whether formally or informally. Pointing someone in the right direction with a referral is networking through mentoring.

Kahle-Piasecki (2011) states the mentoring relationship is “a deliberate pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced one, with the agreed-upon goal of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies.” This definition could easily be applied to networking with the understanding that the growth and development of the lesser skilled person is the achievement of proficient networking skills.

Interviewing the Network

Effective networking involves communication. In order to lead and connect people, information must be gathered and exchanged, hence the interview process. Hannabus (1996) notes the purpose of interviewing is, “to find out what is on someone's mind.... We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe.” This interview, however, is informal and unstructured,

usually occurring in a social environment. When interviewing, Creswell (2009) suggests the use of an “ice breaker question at the beginning,” followed by several specific questions and a summary (p. 130). In this manner, the servant networker can accurately assess the needs of others and begin to make suggestions, recommendations and connections.

In order to successfully gather information about people and serve their needs, one must learn the craft of interviewing. Dilley (2000) notes, “One of the best ways to learn how to interview is to observe and analyze interviews.” Taking note of other’s interactions at social events is one way to do this. Another is to simply ask questions and see what develops. Carnegie (1936) stressed that people love to talk about themselves, which is necessary if one is to learn about them and how best to serve them (p. 93). The interview process is the exchange of information that mutually serves the needs of both parties for the greater good of the network.

This mutual information exchange is a necessary and vital step in the networking process. Without knowing a person’s needs, the servant networker cannot lead. Prybutok, Richards and Cutshall (2001) concluded the focus of leadership should be on people and information. Successful networkers must interview accurately and assess regularly to serve their networks and those in them.

Networking and the Servant Leader

Servant leadership centers on leading others through service. "The servant leader is servant first. It begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (Parolini, Patterson, & Winston, 2009). Servant networking differs only slightly from servant leadership in that the leadership application is focused on connecting others. The servant networker gathers information, consults and mentors—all in an effort to lead and connect others through networking. Servant networkers lead by bringing the right people together.

Furthermore, servant networkers strengthen their network by bringing something of value to others, which is the essence of servant leadership. John F. Kennedy understood this concept well, which is demonstrated by his famous words, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” In this instance, Kennedy was acting as a steward. “As stewards, servant leaders regard their followers as people who have been entrusted to them to be elevated to their better selves and to be what they are capable of becoming” (Sarros, 2002).

Serving others and helping them achieve all they are capable of achieving is the hallmark of a leader. “True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others” (Spears, 1996). Servant networkers are leaders who think in terms of what they can do for other people specifically by connecting them to other people. Who can they bring into their network? Who in their network needs help? The more they give to those in their network, the more they will receive in return and the stronger and more mutually beneficial it will become for those in it.

Using a network to benefit other people is similar to what Steve Covey (2004) refers to as an Emotional Bank Account. You make deposits by helping other people connect and form mutually beneficial relationships. As time passes, your bank account grows larger and allows you to make withdrawals, if necessary. The real reward is when you collect interest. That is, you get something for free because you have made a series of deposits, a dividend. A dividend in networking is when your network works for you without your direct action. It is in this manner that serving others reaps huge dividends. As Covey (2004) states, “The Emotional Bank Account is the production capability side of human relationships, human interaction” (p. 188). With servant networking, human interaction increases the balance of your Networking Bank Account.

Conclusion

Service to others is the basis of servant leadership. Leading and connecting people is the foundation of servant networking. In order to successfully connect people and propagate a network, one must consult, mentor, and interview others to assess their needs and serve them. Only through the selfless introduction and connection of one person to another can a viable network be built and maintained. Networks exist to serve people if they are willing to become the servants of those in it. If they are, the network will flourish and they will surely prosper.

About the Author

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