

## How Leaders Create and Use Networks

*By Hermina Ibarra and Mark Hunter, Harvard Business Review; January 2007*

Successful leaders have a knack for knowing whom to tap to get things done. We call this networking. Networking is one of the most self-evident but also one of the most dreaded developmental challenges that aspiring leaders must address.

Three distinct but interdependent forms of networking -- operational, personal, and strategic -- play a vital role in the success of leaders. **Operational networking** helps them manage current internal responsibilities. **Personal networking** boosts their personal development. **Strategic networking** makes them look at new business directions and the stakeholders they need to enlist.

### Operational Networking

All managers need to build good working relationships with the people who can help them do their jobs. Operational networks include not only direct reports and superiors but also peers within an operational unit. They also include other internal stakeholders who can block or support a project, and key outsiders such as suppliers, distributors and customers. Operational networking helps ensure coordination and cooperation among people who have to come together to accomplish their immediate tasks. While not always easy, it is relatively straightforward, because the task provides focus and a clear criterion for membership in the network.

Operational networks are usually geared toward meeting objectives as assigned. Managers do not exercise much personal choice in assembling operational relationships, because these relationships are largely prescribed by the job and organizational structure. Thus, most operational networking occurs within an organization, and ties are determined largely by routine, short-term demands.

### Personal Networking

Once aspiring leaders become aware of the dangers of an excessively internal focus, they begin to look outside their organization. Simultaneously, they become aware of the limitations of their social skills. They also realize that they lack knowledge about professional domains beyond their own. This makes it difficult for them to find common ground with people outside their usual circles. Through professional associations, alumni groups, clubs, and communities of interest, managers gain new perspectives that allow them to advance in their careers. This is what we mean by personal networking.

Personal networks are largely external, made up of discretionary links to people with whom we have something in common. Our personal contacts are valuable to the extent that they help us reach quickly and efficiently a far-off person who has the information we need. A personal network has great referral potential.

### **Strategic Networking**

When managers begin the delicate transition from functional manager to business leader, they must start thinking more strategically. Relationships with other functional and business unit managers, who are outside their immediate control, become important. Thus strategic networking plugs the aspiring leader into a set of relationships and information sources that collectively generate the required ammunition to achieve personal and organizational goals.

Recruiting stakeholders, lining up allies and sympathizers, diagnosing the political landscape, and brokering conversations among unconnected parties are all part of a leader's job. As they become more senior, some managers accept their growing dependence on others and seek to transform it into mutual influence. Others do not take the initiative and dismiss such work as "political" and undermine their ability to advance their goals.

Strategic networking can be difficult for emerging leaders because it absorbs a significant amount of the time and energy that are usually devoted to meeting many operational demands. This is one reason why many managers drop their strategic networking precisely when they need it most: when their units are in trouble and only outside support can rescue them. The trick is not to hide in the operational network but to develop it into a more strategic one.

### **Concluding notes**

Building a leadership network is less a matter of skill and more of will. When initial efforts do not bring quick rewards, people may wrongly conclude that networking is not among their talents. But networking is not a talent; nor does it require an extroverted personality. It is a skill that takes practice. People who work at networking can learn not only how to do it well but also how to enjoy it. And often they tend to be more successful in their careers than those who fail to leverage external ties or insist on defining their jobs narrowly.