Teaching Positive Networking
For Life-long Impact

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ABSTRACT

As college communication instructors, we could further assist students by teaching the value of positive networking. This article provides (1) a foundation for positive networking and (2) several successful ways in which students can begin building a strong long-lasting network of professional relationships during the semester…and for their entire careers.

INTRODUCTION

*I*n business communication and managerial communication courses, we teach the practical value of honing resume-writing and job interviewing techniques, but the skill of networking is either ignored or marginalized because the instructor may not appreciate how to fully implement this important job search tool. This purpose of this article is to help instructors better understand the meaning and value of networking. Instructors can then provide students with greater insight and more tools to be successful in shaping their lives.

First, we need to set the foundation of this article with a clarification of the word "networking." The word "networking" means different things to different people. Some journal articles, trade books, and textbooks promote building a personal network to further an individual's career. For example, Nierenberg (2006) discusses "working a room" to build contacts and, hence, achieve personal career goals. Likewise, Carter (2008) advises professionals to build their careers by making friends through self-promotion techniques.

Likewise, to some people, networking is simply a pyramiding strategy where you capitalize on one name to gain an interview with another. Uzzi and Dunlap (2005) tout the advantage of gaining "power and others' skill sets" through networking. Further, they recommend disclosing your networking intent to the person you are trying to include in your network cache. A straightforward translation of this type of message is "using people."

In contrast to the above philosophies, a few voices, like Dulek (2006), disagrees with this self-promoting approach since it dehumanizes friendships and respect for others. Hochberg, Ljundqvist, and Lu (2007) emphasize partnerships based on mutual benefit. Haggerty (1999) takes a step further and advocates that networking should be more about <u>giving</u> than about expecting benefits in return.

A POSITIVE, RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING MINDSET

We teach our students to look at networking in a positive, life-enhancing way. We promote the concept that networking means building friendships that endure. In business, in education, in communities, and in life situations, true friends help friends with no hidden agenda—no "what's in it for me" attitude. Frankly, networking is a two-way street. Expecting a reward for helping someone is counter to the spirit of networking. Sincerely helping others will foster a life full of choice relationships.

Our job search lectures and assignments focus on students learning to grow and nurture their network throughout their lives. This concept puts networking in a life-long context—not simply in the context of completing an assignment for class.

Understanding the positive side of networking can assist students in making valuable changes in their lives. This positive mindset can lead students to widen their acquaintances, to nurture meaningful relationships, and to help others, rather than "use" others.

Trying to explain the value of networking is somewhat similar to trying to answer the perplexing question: "How does salt taste?" It is difficult to verbalize to someone.

Once a person has developed the skill of positive networking and applied it in life, he or she knows how it feels inside. A person feels comfortable as opposed to thinking: "What's in this for me?" Sincerely expressing "thank you" (in person, on the phone, or in an email) when another person who helped solve an issue or problem enhances a relationship. Opportunities should be sought to assist this person who helped. This may take time but can be done with some effort. As this relationship builds, both individuals find other ways to serve one another.

Developing the positive mindset of helping others builds an individual's character and widens the sphere of friendships. Through meaningful efforts in developing relationships, a person "knows how salt tastes." Helping others who have needed assistance on projects, information on topics, advice, new ideas, etc. builds trust. Positive networking is built on trust and on honest communication. Maintaining a friendship takes effort. Yet, "connecting" through an email, a phone call, a lunch, or in some other way takes relatively little time. Connecting often builds enjoyable relationships.

Perhaps there is no better course in academia than a business communication course to teach positive networking. Positive networking has practical application regarding the job search skills taught in communication courses.

For example, a graduate who is helped in securing a career position by a professor may assist the "giver" in any number of ways. Perhaps this "giver" needs help developing graphics for an upcoming oral presentation, and the graduate has those particular skills. By helping this professor with the graphics, the previous receiver is now the "giver." The relationship becomes stronger as they help one another as needs arise in their lives. These relationship-building events may arise in a week, next month, or several years later. Most importantly, trust is being nurtured. Following a kind action, the receiver should always show sincere gratitude to the "giver." This expression is absolutely essential to fostering the relationship.

Hopefully, students will grasp the concept that the network must be nourished frequently. Finding ways to help others is the key. The often-used phrase, "Think outside the box" is applicable here.

NETWORKING LECTURE TIPS

Any lecture on networking should not only include the value of positive networking but also helpful tips on ways to successfully grow and maintain a network of trusted friends.

For example, assume your university is hosting a career fair on campus in the next few weeks. Role-play with students how to make contacts with potential employers. Role-play how to ask for a business card from a company representative. Teach students to keep in touch with company representatives by sending thank-you letters immediately and making appropriate phone calls that show thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Further, stress the importance of keeping in touch with a friend who has made a contact for you regarding a job opening with a company. A relationship will flounder by not communicating directly with the new "friend" regarding the outcome of the referral. Nourish the relationship by finding a way to show your appreciation. For example, contact this friend to help him or her as situations arise when your "job" situation is *not* the issue. For example, you could take this person to lunch, send flowers when learning of a happy or sad life event, or drop a note to show you are thinking about him or her, etc.

Students can build relationships by extending themselves to other students, to faculty members, to staff on campus, etc. Students can join fraternities or sororities, clubs, or student association committees on campus where

they can enhance communication and leadership skills and often give service to others in the process. Many student organizations connect often with employers by arranging tours of company plants and inviting company representatives to speak in classes.

Outside the university setting, students can further enhance their network through:

- becoming involved in community groups, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, homeless shelters, Special Olympics, senior citizen rest homes, etc.
- participating in hobbies that involve others, such as antique auto shows, photo exhibits, running clubs, etc.
- coaching young people in a sport
- volunteering to help a scout group
- tutoring at a local school
- attending plays, concerts, or sports events with others

Students will ask for specific methods to develop and nurture a network in their everyday lives. Here is a helpful "to do" list:

- maintain a list of your friends and associates. Keep in touch periodically.
- exchange names, email addresses, and phone numbers with new contacts. Record anything you observe about the person--likes and dislikes, situation, circumstances, etc. Add them to your list.
- work every day to expand your network. Make no mistake; this does take work.
- help others when you see a need arise.
- get to know a new person in another department at your present job every month.
- acquire a mentor, both at work and in your academic major.
- be a mentor to someone.

NETWORKING ASSIGNMENTS

Ten networking assignments to give students are listed below. Select the ones that best fit your course. Assign appropriate points for each assignment, as some assignments take significant effort to complete. Require each student to complete a specific number of the following activities. For each assignment, require the student to submit evidence of completion. Examples of evidence may include a memo with copies of business cards attached, a letter verifying participation, etc.

1. Send a thank-you letter to someone who has helped you in some way during the past two months. An alternative to the thank-you letter is a congratulatory letter to someone who has achieved something significant over the past month. This assignment works best by restricting the letter to someone outside the family.
2. (a) Prepare a list of individuals in your present network. The list should include name, position, organization, phone number, email address, areas of expertise or traits admired, and notes about the relationship. Next, identify 10 people you would like to add to your network this semester. Your list should include each individual's area of expertise or some specific traits admired. This would be an appropriate assignment at the start of the semester.
    (b) Produce your revised network list at the end of the semester.
3. Work with your university's alumni association in contacting past graduates. For instance, Weber State University has a very successful "Meet Your Mentor" program. In this program, the university contacts past WSU graduates to take a student to lunch.   The WSU supporter is typically a successful businessperson.   The WSU Alumni Association matches the graduate's business area to the student's major. The purpose of the program is to give students opportunities to meet professionals and learn more about the area of interest. Other universities have similar programs.
4. Join a professional association or a student organization on campus. Be active in their events. Seek a leadership role.

5.   Attend a career fair on campus. Identify specific companies of interest. Take tailored resumes to the company representatives. Require the student to prepare a database, including: the name and title of the company representative, the name of the company, the product or service, and the position available. Write a thank-you letter to each of the recruiters you met.
6.   Attend a campus lecture or an off-campus professional conference. Introduce yourself to the speaker, ask the speaker to meet with you to further discuss the area of interest, and subsequently meet with the speaker.
7.   Volunteer your time and/or skills to a community organization, such as a homeless shelter, Rotary Club, Kiwanis Club, Red Cross, city government office, etc.
8.   Assist a candidate running for office.
9.   Meet with the career counselor in your university's career center. Discuss at least two available internships and contact their company representatives.
10.   Participate in a service-learning or service project. These projects are often available on campus or through campus contacts. Participating with others who are committed to strengthening the community can be a valuable experience.

NETWORKING EXAMPLE

Students always want concrete examples. Ryan's real experience is characteristic of the use of a positive network. As a child, he always wanted to fly. In particular, he wanted to fly for a commercial airline. During his bachelor's degree program, he began keeping a networking list of students and faculty with whom he had developed positive relationships. He continued to update his list as he attended Air Force flight school and subsequently trained pilots.

Five years later, Ryan supervised a pilot, Chad, who was having some family problems. After learning about his difficult situation, Ryan juggled schedules and was able to shift this pilot's load to others who were willing to assist. Ryan secured two weeks' emergency leave for Chad so that he could be with his family. Although the rescheduling placed some additional burden on his flight group, Ryan and his colleagues went out of their way to help, not asking anything in return.

After gaining flight experience over eight years in the Air Force, he was ready to switch from military flight to civilian flight. When a pilot position opened at Southwest Airlines recently, several friends in Ryan's network contacted him. They realized Ryan would be a perfect fit for this position. He applied.

Chad, now a pilot at Southwest, learned that Ryan had applied for the job. Without Ryan's knowledge, Chad contacted a friend who was on the Southwest interviewing team. Chad enthusiastically recommended Ryan, emphasizing his leadership ability and character traits.

Ryan sent his application and resume to the Southwest interviewing team. They requested that he bring six letters of recommendation and specific flight credentials with him to an interview one week later. Ryan was ecstatic to have secured the coveted interview. Within four days, Ryan was prepared with his portfolio of recommendation letters, extra resumes, requested documents, and much more.

Ryan researched Southwest further by contacting other Southwest pilots he had fostered relationships during the past few years. One thing became evident: he needs to be unencumbered when interviewing because that is the environment at Southwest. He gained additional insight that he should be relaxed and follow the recruiters' examples throughout his interview experience at Southwest. He resolved to be relaxed and be unencumbered.

After a rigorous day of interviews at Southwest, Ryan and fellow interviewees left the corporate headquarters. The other candidates hurried to the airport to return to their homes. Ryan didn't rush; he planned not to be encumbered with other interests. He strategically planned to stay overnight and return home the next day. He calmly boarded the shuttle to the hotel, which happened to be where other Southwest pilots were staying. He immediately noticed several members of the interviewing team on the shuttle. While conversing with them, he was suddenly hailed by two Southwest pilots who had flown with him during military training. They joked about old times; the interviewing team members joined in the bantering. Because of past relationships, the two old friends

painted a very favorable picture of Ryan, not unnoticed by the interviewing team members. Ryan "fit in." He was relaxed and unencumbered.

Later, Ryan was visiting with Chad about his interview experience at Southwest. Chad emphasized that Ryan was hired for who his character and job expertise—not for who he happened to know. He was offered the Southwest position because he had developed outstanding character along with his flying and leadership expertise.

Ryan acknowledges the importance of his networking list. He highly values his relationships with people, stretching back to his college days. His sincere interest in others paid dividends he had not expected. Ryan emphasizes that his strong networking relationships have been gained because he communicates periodically with those on his networking list. He cares about others—their careers, their joys, their lives. He looks for opportunities to help others along the pathway of life.

CONCLUSION

Successful networking requires a positive mindset. Positive networking focuses on giving, not just taking. Taking time to help others develops lasting relationships based on trust and respect. Students should look for opportunities to grow new friendships, add value to these relationships, and communicate frequently with these friends.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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<u>NOTES</u>