

## Networking Lessons for Women Professionals – Connecting the Dots, Building Matrices

Rosalyn C. Richman, MA

Ms. Richman is codirector of the Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine (ELAM) Program at Drexel University College of Medicine in Philadelphia.

We all attend various scientific, disciplinary, and other conferences, meetings, and symposia, because we know that we don't know everything. We know some things, and we have skills, expertise, or experience in some areas. So, we share what we do know with one another. And what we don't know also brings us to these events ... to learn from each other: networking or working *our* net. Not *the* net (Internet), which certainly overflows with more information than we ever may want or need. But *our* net, of colleagues and contacts, even family and friends – people we know well and others whom we will choose to get to know – if we want to be in the know and develop professionally and personally. That is what draws us from our Dilbert cubicles, laboratories, and classrooms. For although *the* net can connect us with the world outside our professional realms, it is the personal, face-to-face connections we make that are vital to charge and recharge our batteries, to stimulate us intellectually.

Consider:

- Do you equate networking with the “old boys’ club”?
- Do you think that networking is just “schmoozing,” or worse, a selfish, what-can-you-do-for-me process?
- Do you think that it is a term for (male) bragging?

Wayne Baker,<sup>1</sup> a professor at the University of Michigan Business School, debunks some myths about networking.

- **Myth:** Tough-minded business people do not value networking and relationship building, because its “soft skills” cannot be quantified. **Fact:** Numerous scientific studies show that those who network well are more

effective, better paid, promoted faster, healthier, happier – even live longer! And, according to one study, 75% of us get our jobs this way.

- **Myth:** Professional success depends primarily on technical skills, training, and abilities. **Fact:** Successful leaders are the best relationship builders, and relationship building becomes even more significant as we advance in our careers.
- **Myth:** Rugged individuals win. **Fact:** We are all connected, and the more vibrant our networks, the more empowered we are.

Networking represents our richest resource, what Baker terms “social capital.” If our network is well built and well developed, we can derive information, ideas, leads, opportunities, financial capital, power, emotional support, goodwill, trust, and cooperation. Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine (ELAM), a core program of the Institute for Women’s Health and Leadership at Drexel University College of Medicine, strongly promotes networking as a primary critical skill for the women medical and dental school faculty participants preparing themselves for professional advancement.

ELAM provides its participants with many networking opportunities. The women work in small groups to develop bonds to connect them with their classmates long after the program ends. From their intersession assignment to interview their institution’s key leaders, ELAM fellows get to know these individuals while learning about broader

functions at school and university levels. And at the ELAM Forum on Emerging Issues, which closes each program year, fellows work with their deans in a highly interactive session. Some results follow:

- One ELAM alumna nominated another from her class to be dean of the medical school at another institution.
- A group of fellows now together in the same city nominated an ELAM alumna from a different class to become chief of staff at the regional Veterans Affairs health system.
- Several graduates helped to recruit another to become the first woman department chair at their institution.
- One alumna, after interviewing the executive leaders at her institution for her ELAM intersession assignment, was nominated by one of these executives for associate senior vice-president of the university. She's now thriving in that new position.

I, too, have experienced the value of networking: For more than 20 years, I was a full-time volunteer (chapter chair, regional president, national vice-president) of a nonprofit organization. When I decided to seek a paying job, I turned for advice to several people that I had met through my volunteer work, people who knew the level of my responsibilities and performance. One gave me wonderful guidance *and* offered me not one but two jobs – my choice to decide which I preferred. Eventually, that position led me to my current position as ELAM's codirector.

The Humax Corporation,<sup>2</sup> a consulting firm headed by Cheryl Baker, has created a networking exercise, the Reciprocity Ring,<sup>3</sup> building on Wayne Baker's concept of social capital. Unlike traditional networking, it encourages participants to *ask for* help without incurring a sense of obligation and to *give* help without expecting something in return. ELAM will introduce the Reciprocity Ring for the first time this fall. Women, though willing and eager to offer help to others, typically are averse to asking for help, especially for themselves. ELAM will use this exercise to demonstrate the power of both giving *and* receiving help and to further enhance fellows' networking capabilities.

Women have long demonstrated a natural affinity for relationship building, connecting, and building personal networks, from play groups to volunteer work. Why not apply this skill at work, for professional success and

advancement? Unfortunately, although women use their networking abilities to meet their children's and family's needs (think: carpools, co-op babysitting), they try to do their jobs *solo*. According to Deener and Fredericks,<sup>4</sup> powerful networking is not based on need, but on *nurturing* – rational and emotional support leading to deeper, long-lasting, and reciprocal relationships. They outline an approach to nurturing network building they call "Yes I C.A.N."

- **Connect:** You connect with others and connect others with still others. As ELAM's codirector, I consider this to be a significant part of my role.
- **Acknowledge:** Let people know you notice their achievements, publications, speeches. I accomplish this quickly by sending Blue Mountain e-cards ([www.bluemountain.com](http://www.bluemountain.com)).

- **Nurture:** Call or write a note to lift spirits or help to solve a problem for colleagues. ELAM's network of 300-some alumnae is used extensively for this purpose.

Deener and Fredericks<sup>4</sup> emphasize that we must allow ourselves to ask for and accept nurturing from our networks; when we deny others the opportunity to nurture us, we actually damage the bonds we have created. Think about the last time you were in a bind. Did *you* ask for anyone's help? Or contact a colleague to rehearse a

difficult conversation? Time and again, I've learned, after the fact, of an ELAM fellow who faced a tough situation, either in her personal or professional life (an expected promotion dissolves or an elderly parent requires extensive, time-consuming care), and many times, these women – highly intelligent, highly accomplished – isolated themselves and deprived themselves of the benefit of others' nurturing support or practical help. In a recent workshop led by Adele Scheele,<sup>5</sup> three women and I (all strangers) arbitrarily were grouped together and found that we had concrete professional help and resources to offer each other.

So how do you connect the dots and build your own matrices? Deener and Fredericks<sup>4</sup> suggest:

- Attend at least two new events a month (seek appointment to a new committee or join a high-profile community service group) and aim to meet three new people at each. (Tip 1: When you get someone's business card, write on the back of the card the date and event and any pertinent details to capture your conversation. Then, file the card after you've contacted the person.

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Tip 2: *Do not* sit next to a colleague ... get out of your comfort zone!)

- Add at least five people per month to your network.
- Contact each new person in your network with a Yes I C.A.N. item.

Misher and Morgan<sup>6</sup> contend that networking is as much hen party as old boy and offer their own tips.

- Embrace the Givers Gain philosophy: think first “What can I do to help?”
- Work in a disciplined structure to develop (and renew) contacts and always remember to follow up.
- Plan networking – be purposeful and strategic, meet key people. Try to learn ahead of time who will be at an event, and know which ones you want to meet.
- Have a database of resources to help others – knowledge is power; cultivate a reputation for knowing people who can get things done.
- Make relationships part of your life; people share knowledge, information, and contacts with those they share relationships with.

Glaser and Smalley (who wrote *Swim with the Dolphins: How Women Can Succeed in Corporate America on Their Own Terms*) in their new book, *What Queen Esther Knew: Business Strategies from a Biblical Sage*,<sup>7</sup> conclude: “For many women, networking is all about cultivating relationships, celebrating personal and professional successes, and

sharing information in a safe, noncompetitive environment. But strategic networking is also about making contacts, finding new leads, striking deals, and fitting in. And the good news is, there’s certainly no rule that says you cannot meet all of those goals simultaneously.”

Adele Scheele<sup>8</sup> demonstrated in her workshop how to form strategy groups – a type of networking. Another presenter there referred to a “future needs network.” So there are lots of terms for this concept and approaches to achieving a productive, powerful network.

Fisher and Vilas<sup>9</sup> sum it up this way: “Even if you learn all the skills, say all the right things, and go through all the right motions ... networking is only truly powerful when genuine human caring exists.”

So, how many business cards have you given out – and asked for – at the last meeting you attended? Whom have you connected with? What steps did you take in the past week to expand your network? And who have you offered to connect with another colleague?

Each of us has valuable personal and professional resources. Sharing yours can help others; and by doing so, you will connect with others and allow them to connect with you. Remember, it is not just *what* you know, it is *who* you know. And if women have chosen to work as professionals, we must embrace what will help us to succeed as professionals.

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