

Good News for Young Strivers: Networking Is Overrated



By Adam Grant

Aug. 24, 2017

Not long ago, after interviewing a venture capitalist onstage, I announced to the audience that we would take questions but no pitches. The first person at the microphone asked the investor to fund his start-up. I cringed as the second person started to pitch, too. Our educational event had quickly turned into a bad episode of “Shark Tank.”

The following week, at a similar event, I saw a student ask a C.E.O. for her personal email address in front of the crowd. I’ve been stunned by the lengths people will go to at tech and business conferences to make a connection with a big name: sneaking backstage for a selfie, slipping business cards into briefcases, chasing them out the exit.

If the very thought of networking makes you throw up in your mouth, you’re not alone. Networking makes us feel dirty — to the point that one study found that people rate soap and toothpaste 19 percent more positively after imagining themselves angling to make professional contacts at a cocktail party. Just reading that research made me want to take a shower.

Yet we’ve all been warned that it’s not what you know, it’s who you know. Success is supposed to come to the suave schmoozers and social butterflies.

It’s true that networking can help you accomplish great things. But this obscures the opposite truth: Accomplishing great things helps you develop a network.

Look at big breaks in entertainment. For George Lucas, a turning point was when Francis Ford Coppola hired him as a production assistant and went on to mentor him. Mr. Lucas didn’t schmooze his way into the relationship, though. As a film student he’d won first prize at a national festival and a scholarship to be an apprentice on a Warner Bros. film — he picked one of Mr. Coppola’s.

Or take Justin Bieber’s career: Although it took off after Usher signed him, he didn’t network his way into that meeting. Mr. Bieber taught himself to sing and play four instruments, put a handful of videos on YouTube, and a manager ended up clicking on one. Adele was discovered that way, too: She wrote and recorded a three-song demo, a friend posted it on Myspace, and a music exec heard it. Developing talent — and sharing it — catapulted them into those connections.

For entrepreneurs, too, achievement is a magnet to mentors and a beacon to backers. Spanx took off when Oprah Winfrey chose it as one of her favorite things of the year — but not because she was stalked by the company’s founder, Sara Blakely. For two and a half years, Ms. Blakely sold fax machines by day so that she could build her prototype of footless pantyhose by night. She sent one from the first batch to Ms. Winfrey.

Networks help, of course. In a study of internet security start-ups, having a previous connection to an investor increased the odds of getting funded by that investor in the first year. But it was pretty much irrelevant afterward. Accomplishments were the dominant driver of who invested over time.

Similarly, researchers found that in hospitals, the radiologists who ended up with the most desirable networks were the ones with the highest performance nine months earlier. And in banks, star performers attracted bigger networks and were more likely to maintain those ties. Achievements don’t just help us make connections; they also help sustain those connections.

Not long ago, I watched a colleague try to climb the ladder of success solely through networking. For a few years, he managed to meet increasingly influential people and introduce them to one another. Eventually it fell apart when they realized he didn’t have a meaningful connection with any of them. Networking alone leads to empty transactions, not rich relationships.

It’s a lesson I’ve learned in my own career. I once emailed an entrepreneur I admired and got nothing in response. Some months later he contacted me out of the blue, with no memory that I had tried to get in touch before. He had attended a talk I gave and wanted to meet — now he had proof that I could add value.

My students often believe that if they simply meet more important people, their work will improve. But it’s remarkably hard to engage with those people unless you’ve already put something valuable out into the world. That’s what piques the curiosity of advisers and sponsors. Achievements show you have something to give, not just something to take.

Sure, you can fire off cold emails to people you respect — they’re just a click away — but you’ll be lucky if 2 percent even reply. The best way to attract a mentor is to create something worthy of the mentor’s attention. Do something interesting, and instead of having to push your way in, you’ll get pulled in. The network comes to you.

Sociologists call this the Matthew effect, from the Bible: “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance.” If you establish a track record of achievement, advantages tend to accumulate. Who you’ll know tomorrow depends on what you contributed yesterday.

I don’t mean to suggest that success in any field is meritocratic. It’s dramatically easier to get credit for achievements and break into the elite if you’re male and white, your pedigree is full of fancy degrees and prestigious employers, you come from a family with wealth and connections, and you speak without a foreign accent. (Unless it’s a British accent, which has the uncanny ability to make you sound smart regardless of what words come out of your mouth.) But if you lack these status signals, it’s even more critical to produce a portfolio that proves your potential.

Of course, accomplishments can build your network only if other people are aware of them. You have to put your work out there. It shouldn’t be about promoting yourself, but about promoting your ideas. Evidence shows that tooting your own horn doesn’t help you get a job offer or a board seat, and when employees bend over backward to highlight their skills and accomplishments, they actually get paid less and promoted less. People find self-promotion so distasteful that they like you more when you’re praised by someone else — even if they know you’ve hired an agent to promote you.

So stop fretting about networking. Take a page out of the George Lucas and Sara Blakely playbooks: Make an intriguing film, build a useful product.

And don’t feel pressure to go to networking events. No one really mixes at mixers. Although we plan to meet new people, we usually end up hanging out with old friends. The best networking happens when people gather for a purpose other than networking, to learn from one another or help one another.

In life, it certainly helps to know the right people. But how hard they go to bat for you, how far they stick their necks out for you, depends on what you have to offer. Building a powerful network doesn’t require you to be an expert at networking. It just requires you to be an expert at something.

If you make great connections, they might advance your career. If you do great work, those connections will be easier to make. Let your insights and your outputs — not your business cards — do the talking.