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The Unconnected Leader

By Randy Hain, managing partner of Bell Oaks Executive Search

As they ascend the corporate ladder, many leaders do a curious thing ... *they stop networking*. There isn't much else that can have more of a long term negative impact on a career. I have observed this phenomenon over much of my professional life, most recently in conversations with countless senior executives during this painful recession who have unexpectedly found themselves in career transition. Many spend the first three months of the job search rebuilding networks they failed to maintain while employed. However, the need for leaders to maintain effective, dynamic networks goes well beyond a possible date with destiny in the ranks of the unemployed.

In spite of our hectic schedules, networking is essential to forward-looking leadership. Leaders with strong networking skills benefit themselves, their organizations, their community and the people in their network. Networking is more than creating a safety net for an inevitable period of career transition; it is a means to access an enormous pool of resources with unlimited benefits. The reasons executives stop networking are manifold, and I will address many of those in this article. More importantly, I will speak to the investment required and the payoff for those who do it well.

The Obstacles

Why is networking a challenge for many leaders today? What gets in the way? There are five fundamental obstacles that surface on a consistent basis:

1. **"I don't have enough time to network."** This is the easiest to overcome as you will see in the investment section of the article. This is simply a scheduling and commitment issue.
2. **"I just don't see the importance."** Andrew Dietz, president of Creative Growth Group, recently shared his views: *"For many leaders, networking is an interior project, if it is done at all. On the exterior of the business there are only 'vendors' or 'customers,' so why network with them? And, despite all the talk of innovation, there persists a 'not invented here' culture in many corporations and professional services firms."*
3. **"My job is secure, so I don't need to spend time meeting new people."** Unfortunately, I have seen too many leaders who felt safe in their positions fall victim to corporate downsizing. This false sense of security was once rampant, but the reality of today's economy is finally taking hold.
4. **"I'm on Facebook and LinkedIn, so I am networking."** These helpful social media tools serve a useful purpose and can enhance networking. But, they should not replace face-to-face human interaction required in effective network building.
5. **"I'm not very good at making new connections and in fact, find it intimidating."** This is a troublesome, and common, admission for many. Remember that networking can and should be tailored to your style and personality. The secret is to find the method that maximizes your strengths.

Helpful Tip! I find the best way to shift a way of thinking is to ask challenging questions. For example: Does my team have the best talent available? Am I getting the personal development I need? Is my job secure and if not, do I have a network of people who can help me? Do I have quick access to helpful professional resources and competitive intelligence outside my company? If you answered "no" to any of these questions, this article was written for you.

The Investment

Okay, you understand the importance of networking and its potential obstacles, so what comes next? Networking must be a priority. Rethink your calendar. Be selfless and help others. Make personal interaction the ultimate goal versus simply connecting via the Internet. Vibrant networks take time to build and a long-

term commitment to sustain and grow them. Here are five practical ways to make a meaningful investment in networking:

1. **Take an honest look at your calendar.** Where you may see little time for networking let me challenge you a bit. There are five opportunities a week for coffee/breakfast and five opportunities a week for lunch. Start utilizing at least one of these times to schedule a weekly meeting with someone new. You have to eat, so you accomplish two things with the effort of one.
2. **Make time for existing contacts in your network, both in and out of your organization.** Nurture these relationships at the same time you are expanding new ones. Also, ask these people for connections to new contacts in order to build a larger, more relevant network.
3. **LinkedIn is my recommended tool for connecting through social media, but Facebook and Twitter can be useful in building personal networks.** It is important to have complete and transparent profiles with pictures, but don't use these tools passively. *Practical LinkedIn 2.0* offers specific tips on how to get the most out of LinkedIn (found on our web site at www.belloaks.com under Insights).
4. **Attend relevant speaker events, workshops, seminars or other social mixers to meet fellow professionals.** Personally, I rarely attend these in the evening as there are ample opportunities for breakfast or lunch time meetings. Consider hosting or co-hosting events at your office or another venue. Organizing breakfast or lunch meetings with notable speakers on relevant topics allows you to play host and invite other business leaders you might not meet other ways.
5. **Volunteer and get involved in the community.** Where is your passion? What causes excite you? Getting involved, first and foremost, should be about helping others. But, volunteering your time and serving on non-profit boards are excellent ways to meet like-minded professionals.

Jo Ann Herold, president elect of the American Marketing Association, Chief Marketing Officer with TopRight Consulting and former CMO of The HoneyBaked Ham Company, shares this insight: *"Networking and volunteering have always been important in my career. I like to join organizations I am passionate about and I abide by the old saying: The more you give, the more you receive! I try to take a leadership role when I volunteer because it's a great way to get to know the organization, the members and the people we serve."*

Helpful Tip! Integrate networking into other activities. Neighborhood swim meets, youth sports events, church social activities and community volunteering all can be fortuitous opportunities to meet other professionals. I have found more success in these casual settings than through any other avenue. There is something authentic about connecting initially as parents, through shared interests and shared faith before discussing professional backgrounds. It builds trust which often leads to a mutually beneficial relationship.

The Payoff

Is investing time and energy in building a viable network worth it? Is there a pot of gold at the end of this rainbow? The answer is an emphatic—yes! Leaders who are skilled at networking have access to people, resources and information to help solve problems and create opportunities. It encourages personal growth, benefits organizations and positively impacts the community. Although there are more, here are five positive results of establishing and growing a dynamic network:

1. **If you are in a job search, a strong network will help you.** With company loyalty to employees increasingly disappearing, it is likely you will be in career transition one day. You owe it to yourself and your family to prepare for that possibility.
2. **Personal development and coaching will keep you active and engaged.** Most leaders I know say development and coaching are lacking in their organizations today. A dynamic network gives you access to new ideas, current trends and an ongoing opportunity to engage with a group of peers. This flow of information can help your organization stay ahead of the competition.
3. **Get ahead of the pending war for talent.** Don't be reassured by high unemployment numbers and the myth that the streets are filled with top performers. There are great people out there, but the looming retirement of Baby Boomers and growing dissatisfaction among employees who have survived the recession (and wish to look for new jobs) means there will be a need to find good people

quickly. Stay connected within your industry, know the players and develop trusted networking resources to help find the best talent.

4. **You can do immense good in the community.** Investing time in getting your connections to support your causes (and in return support theirs) is a great way to exponentially leverage positive influence to serve the needs of others. Dr. Ron Young, president of Trove, shares this insight: *“We should give of our time because it is the right thing to do. It feels good to be needed, we will be recharged and replenished far more than we give, and we will ultimately receive a return that is much larger than our investment.”*
5. **You can help your extended network with their business and career needs if you are highly networked.** Connecting others to new jobs, positive business relationships, and the like are immensely gratifying benefits.

Helpful Tip! An important underlying theme of effective networking is pay it forward. Make your efforts about helping others and serving their needs and you will find networking to be a worthwhile, fulfilling experience that will ultimately serve your needs. When it is all about *you*, people see through that and networking becomes a miserable, laborious experience on many levels.

According to Dan Stotz, Director of Strategic Partnerships for the Terry College of Business at The University of Georgia, *“Executives who are viewed as “transformational leaders” seem to have mastered the art of NetWeaving which is a step beyond traditional networking. NetWeaving is a simple, but powerful, reciprocal approach that focuses on helping others solve problems. I highly recommend the book, The Heart and Art of NetWeaving by Bob Littell.”*

To conclude, I advocate that leaders who neglect their networks are missing out on a critical component of their role. By allowing networking to be an integral part of your leadership and by proactively developing and nurturing networking-related skills, you create benefits for your team, your organization and yourself. Randy Patterson, Vice President of Human Resources for Recall and a committed networker shares this insight, *“Making the personal commitment to truly building and cultivating my network has been one of the best decisions of my life. In addition to building knowledge to solve business problems or helping me to find great talent for my organization, networking has introduced me to many friends who I will keep for the rest of my life.”*

I practice what I preach by meeting people at La Madeline restaurant near my office beginning at 7 a.m. for coffee up to four days a week, and most of my lunches are with clients, team members, friends and networking contacts. I have spent many years building my network and am proud of the highly synergistic relationships we have developed to help our respective businesses, the community and each other. Your next great employee, business opportunity, Big Idea, community impact story or career move may only be a coffee meeting away. It is time to get started.

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About the Author

Randy Hain is Managing Partner and Shareholder of Bell Oaks (www.belloaks.com), a nationally-recognized executive search firm. He has an established track record of leading successful searches and building teams in diverse industries and functional specializations ranging from individual contributors to C-level leadership. He has played the lead role in hiring, training and developing of one of the most successful search consultant teams in the industry, and has earned a reputation as a values-based leader who invests heavily in his colleagues, candidates, clients and the community. He may be reached at rhain@belloaks.com.