An ambitious leader knows she’ll need to network to achieve her career goals. But because networking feels slimy to her, she asks her coach for help.

“Plant, Don’t Hunt”

Pavni was thinking ahead. She was in year two of a three-year project. When the project ended, she wanted to leave her giant multi-national corporation and leverage her momentum to get hired as a chief officer with a mid-sized company.

She’d mentioned this during our coaching conversations, but today she lingered on the idea, saying, “If I’m serious about it, I have to get started. I’m probably already behind.”

“What’s stopping you?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, I hate networking, Tom. And that’s probably how this is going to happen. It might happen through a recruiter, but I doubt it. I think it’ll be somebody I know introducing me to somebody they know. Which means I need to network. And I just hate it.”

“Because...?”

“Because it so obvious,” she said. “It’s obvious I’m only talking to them because I want something from them. But we’re both pretending that’s not what’s happening. Ugh! Makes me want to take a shower.”
I nodded but didn’t speak.

She looked at me expectantly. “Aren’t you going to help me out here? You usually have some helpful idea.”

“Well,” I said, “I have a saying about networking. It addresses that icky feeling you’re talking about. ‘Plant, don’t hunt.’ It means, when you’re networking with someone, don’t focus on your immediate need. Plant a seed. Planting is a long game. Don’t target someone and go after them.”

She looked a little embarrassed. “I think I’ve been guilty of that. Actually, I was on the receiving end of that recently.”

“Someone put a target on you?” I asked.

**Converse, No Monologuing**

She nodded. “I was at a conference and got cornered three different times. Each time it felt like a bit of an ambush. And they all just talked and talked. I tried to listen, but I just couldn’t. It felt just like that, like I was a target and they were firing away.”

I said, “I call that monologuing. It happens all the time when people are networking. I confess, I used to do it myself! But now, to me, monologuing is in direct opposition to what I think the purpose of networking is. To me, the purpose of networking is to know people. Nurture a relationship. That takes time. Don’t ambush people. And certainly don’t monologue. Plant, don’t hunt.”

She was slow to respond. When she did, she said, “I’m trying to imagine having the time to network that way. You have to admit, hunting’s efficient!”

“Oh, I agree, time is an issue. Here’s what I think. I think five percent of your work week, every week, should be spent networking. Make it part of your job. We’re talking about two or three hours a week. Go to lunch once. Go to dinner once. Do some research. Write some emails. Get to know people. As part of your job.”

She said, “And how do I justify that to my boss, that I’m already looking to jump ship?”

I replied, “Networking doesn’t mean you’re looking to jump ship. Networking is a good thing. It benefits everyone. If you expand your network, you play on a bigger stage. That’s good for your company. If you get exposed to new ideas, that’s good for your company. I’d like to think your boss would see you networking and be grateful.”
She laughed at herself. “See? I keep thinking networking is something to hide, something bad. I’m going to have to shake that.” She said, “So here’s a question. Let’s say I invite someone to virtual coffee. Before, I would have thought the purpose was for me to put myself forward and let her know what I’m looking for. But now we’re saying that that would be hunting. So do I not tell her I’m looking?”

**Your Baby is Out There**

“No, you do! If the purpose of networking is to know people, I hope she’ll want to know how you’re thinking about your future. And I hope you’ll be interested in hers.”

“Oh! I hadn’t been thinking about her talking and me listening. I’d only thought of me talking and her listening. That changes everything, doesn’t it? If I’m going to listen to her, that makes it a conversation. That doesn’t feel like networking at all. Okay! I can do this.” Then her head gave a shudder. “Ooh, the initial outreach will be hard. I’ll do it, but it’ll be hard.”

“I completely understand that feeling,” I said. “Can I tell you a story about it?”

“Will it make me feel better?” she asked.

“I think so, yes.”

“Then go ahead,” she said.

I said, “I have two daughters, both grown women now. Both are adopted. And in both cases, their mother and I committed to finding our own birthmothers. That is a hard hill to climb. The very first lawyer we ever talked to about finding a birthmother told us this story. I’ve never forgotten it.

“She said to us, ‘Your baby is out there. You don’t know where. But it’s out there. And someone knows where it is. So you have to tell everyone you’re looking for a baby, because you don’t know who has your baby.’ And then she told us about a client of hers who was standing on her porch one day, chatting with her mail carrier. She mentions that they’re looking to adopt, and the mail carrier says, ‘There’s a couple next door to me and my wife. Their sixteen-year-old is pregnant, and I don’t think they’re keeping that baby.’ And sure enough! That was their baby. From telling the mail carrier. Because you never know who has your baby.”

She said, “I like that. It is encouraging. So every time I don’t reach out to someone, it’s a missed opportunity.”

I nodded in agreement. “Because you don’t know who has your baby.”
“And in my case, the baby is what? Just the relationship itself?”

“Should there be more?” I asked.

She laughed. “I suppose not!”

“Because the purpose is just to know people. Have a relationship. Have a conversation.”

She said, “I get it. Well, I’m getting it.”

I said, “If you’re shy about making an ask, here’s something I’ll do sometimes. Suppose my ask is to make connections in some company. When I network with people, I’ll tell them my ask, then ask if there’s anyone they think I should talk with. I’m not putting them on the spot, asking them if they’ll do it. I’m asking who in their network they might connect me to. And, if they give me an introduction, no matter what happens, it grows the number of people I know. That’s a win.”

She nodded. “I hear how that could be helpful. But I’ve got a bigger question. Suppose I’m having a networking conversation, getting to know someone. I don’t want to put a target on them, but I want to be sure they really hear what I’m looking for. I can’t picture what that would sound like.”

That part of my conversation with Pavni about networking is next month’s episode of The Look & Sound of Leadership.
Core Concepts

- The purpose of networking is to know people.
- Don’t target people. Nurture a relationship.
- Make networking 5% of your job every week.
- Networking makes you a more valuable employee.
- Show interest in the other person. No monologuing about yourself.

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