

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Networking ▶ 09/10/09

### **Dig your well before you're thirsty**

Years ago, when the economy was still expanding, I coached a woman named Stephanie. She'd worked for the same company since graduating college and, by the time I met her, was in line to become a director. She was concerned that, having worked at only that one company, she wasn't as worldly as her peers.

Feeling her concern might have merit, I gave her a rule of thumb: you should spend five percent of your work hours every month looking for your next job—even if you never take another job! Why? When you network skillfully, you A) broaden your professional horizons, B) become able to realistically assess the position you have, and C) build networks that make you a more valuable employee.

Just recently, I moderated a panel aimed at helping people survive the recession. Any attendee who wanted to remain anonymous could write questions on index cards. One card read, "My boss is tyrannical. I feel abused and want to leave but know this isn't the right time to be job hunting. Help!"

Panelist Dr. Bruce Heller, a friend and colleague who is himself a gifted coach, said in response, "Whether there's a recession or not, you should always have an exit strategy. Even if you love the job you have, you should have an exit strategy because, well, things happen."

Looking for your next job, as I encouraged Stephanie to do, or creating your exit strategy, as Bruce encourages his clients to do, requires active networking.

### **Ten golden rules for networking**

Because these times are so challenging, I've been talking a lot about networking with groups and individuals. I hear the same response repeatedly: people know they *should* be networking but they dread doing it, so they just never seem to get around to it.

In truth, networking isn't easy. It takes effort and discipline. You have to consciously choose to do it. And you have to stick with it even when you have no evidence it's paying off. This is just like [choosing persistence](#).



I have ten golden rules to make networking a manageable, positive part of your work life. Here are four of those rules.

### **1 Plant, don't hunt**

People often avoid networking because they think they have to ask the person for something. They feel like stalkers.

I say, take the pressure off yourself by taking the long view. If you were to meet someone at a coffee house for a first date, you wouldn't walk them to the parking lot and, before saying goodbye, ask them to marry you. It's just not appropriate.

Why is it, then, that when we're networking we think we're supposed to reach out to people we barely know and ask them for things—referrals, partnerships, work. I say that's not appropriate. It's no surprise people would rather put their fingers in a socket than network.

Change the equation. The people you're reaching out to don't have targets on their chests. Stop shooting at them. The goal of networking is to build a relationship. That takes time. It's planting, not hunting. You're not proposing to a blind date.

### **2 Be of service**

Many people aren't shy about planting a seed on that first call. But when it comes time to make the second or third or fourth contact, they find themselves avoiding it because they feel like they're begging.

You can feel better about making repeated contact by turning the tables. Be of service. Add value.

If you find an article or blog or podcast that might interest the person you're contacting, forward it to her. (Many people tell me they use these Executive Coaching Tips for exactly that purpose!) The point of networking isn't to have the same conversation over and over ("Do you have any openings yet?") but rather to keep your name in the front of the other person's mind. Sending the person something of value accomplishes that. It also allows you to display your thinking and show your style.

When you share something of value, you move from a position of scarcity to one of abundance. That position is better for everyone.



### 3 Share the airtime

Don't just talk about yourself; be curious about the other person. Ask questions that have nothing to do with your situation. Express interest in another human being. Sharing airtime is another shift from scarcity to abundance.

The ultimate goal of networking is to build a relationship, right? Well, relationships take root through common interests and shared experiences. Maybe you both have been touched by adoption. Or you coach kids' soccer. Or you grew up on the Great Plains. Or you love Wes Andersen movies. Whatever you share with the person, you won't discover it if you keep talking about yourself. Stop hunting and plant!

After you talk with someone, ask yourself how much of the airtime did you use. 50%? That's probably a good percentage. 85%? That's probably not.

### 4 Tend the relationship

All too often people lose track of whom they've called and when. Their next contact with someone becomes a matter of chance. That's not a very reliable method for most of us.

I often say this is where the "work" part of "networking" comes in. Create a system that will allow you to know the specifics of your previous contacts with each person. Three months down the line, you don't want to send them the same link to that New York Times article again!

There is no "right" rhythm for networking. The way you do it will become your signature. But the rule of thumb I shared with Stephanie is a good way to measure your efforts—you should spend five percent of your work hours building your network. If you're working a forty hour week, that's two hours a week. You might choose to spend that time actually meeting with someone, but also might use the time to research material you'll send to people or keep your tracking system up to date. The only real mistake is putting it off.

Would you like to see the complete list of **ten golden rules for networking**? [Just ask](#). I'd be happy to send it to you. It's an important step on the road to *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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