Networking as a Leadership Habit

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Morgan Johansen and Kelly LeRoux’s article “Managerial Networking in Nonprofit Organizations: The Impact of Networking on Organizational and Advocacy Effectiveness” provides empirical evidence for what many leaders in the nonprofit and civic sectors know firsthand. Success—however you define it—depends on building and sustaining a range of relationships within and outside the organization.

At the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the nation’s oldest and largest network of nonpartisan community organizations, we refer to this as the “habit of relating.” We speak of “relating” because it captures the essence of these meetings: getting to know the stories, interests, and hopes of others to explore whether and how they overlap with our own. And we use the term “habit”—what Merriam-Webster defines as “an acquired mode of behavior that has become nearly or completely involuntary.”

More than 60 civic groups in the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Germany have been built on this simple practice. Increasingly, the IAF has taught the practice of what Johansen and LeRoux call “networking” to the civil society institutions that constitute the membership of our organizations. This includes work with religious congregations of all varieties, unions, and human service and advocacy organizations.

Why the need to reemphasize and reteach this elemental practice of social organization? Part of the challenge—implicit in Johansen and LeRoux’s article—is the bureaucratic culture that rules in so many of our institutions: endless, and often pointless, meetings; reports, minutes, and other paperwork; hierarchical procedures for review and approval. To this list we can now add the various screens that we react to on a constant basis. Collectively, these activities can pin many nonprofit managers to their desks and keep them reacting rather than initiating.

As Johansen and LeRoux’s research shows, effective managers find a way to limit or manage this bureaucratic culture and find the time to get out of the office and into the community. The article does not speak much to the “why” or “what” of these meetings other than to identify the “nine different sets of actors and institutions” with which they interact. This list includes nonprofit agencies, local business groups, churches and faith communities, government agencies, and political leaders.

Based on my experience working with leaders in a host of institutions, I would suggest at least four reasons for networking: to find leaders, to find allies, to raise money, and to acquire expertise and ideas.

Finding and developing others leaders is a primary task of anyone who runs an institution. This includes locating people for key staff positions and building a strong and effective board of directors or leadership team. Waiting until a staff or board vacancy occurs to recruit a replacement often means very limited options. Indeed, effective leaders are constantly on the prowl for talented individuals to drive their organizations.

The head of one of the most effective charter school networks in the country once told me that he spends close to half his time recruiting principals for their fast-expanding organization. Scores of religious leaders have used this technique to revitalize declining congregations. In fact, one Christian denomination now requires training in how to conduct effective individual meetings for all candidates for ordination.

Locating potential allies and collaborators is a second reason for networking. The most effective nonprofit leaders I know are clear on their organization’s mission and capacity and collaborate freely with others to reach their goals.

The head of a community–university institute at a local university recognized that although she had a
Finally, effective leaders are also always looking for new ideas and expertise—for their own development and for their organization’s growth. A seasoned organizer shared the story of how, early in her career, she had been assigned to work in rather drab, mid-sized city where she knew no one. She initially focused all her time on the existing churches that were members of her organization and found herself wearing out. At that point, her supervisor gave her a new assignment: meet with the 10 most interesting people in town in a host of disciplines. She sought out doctors, artists, academics, businesspeople, and the like without a thought as to whether they would “fit” with her core assignment. The encounters gave her a fresh perspective on the work—and a set of relationships and ideas that, over time, did help the organization.

In sum, Johansen and LeRoux have made the case that networking is worthwhile. Acting on this insight—and turning it into a habit—remains the key challenge facing leaders in the nonprofit sector.

Range of outside relationships to bring to the university, she was less clear whom her collaborators inside the institution might be. As a result, she had a habit of meeting with at least one new faculty member a week to extend her reach within the university. Over the course of a year she acquired 50 new relationships in this manner. For people who say they are too busy to network, this story suggests that even a modest goal of one meeting a week can pay measurable dividends.

Most nonprofit managers recognize the centrality of raising money for their budget, and their calendars include regular meetings with the government agency heads and foundation officials who underwrite their work. Moving beyond these tried and true sources is a challenge for most. An extremely successful civic leader once described the “money radar” that he had acquired to probe for individuals likely to support his organization. He regularly schedules meetings with financial managers, accountants, business leaders, and others who can point him to potential funders.

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