

Career Compass No. 30: Building a Powerful Network

by Dr. Frank Benest

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest shows us that a solid network can change not only your career but your life.

I am a senior planner in a city community development department. I have good work experience and have expanded my portfolio of skills and experiences over time. I believe that I will be ready to advance in one or two years of continued good work and learning in my current position. In some of my development conversations with my supportive boss, she stated that I am on my way to advancing but suggested that I attend professional meetings and better develop a network.



Recently, I attended a one-day state planners meeting. In my conversations with others, I introduced myself, indicated my agency and title, and shared some of the projects that I'm working on. However, the conversations felt stilted and self-serving. I am also concerned that going to all these meetings and building a network takes a lot of time.

Is all of this networking really important and worth the effort? If it is crucial, how do I do it so it feels more natural?

It sounds like you are doing a good job preparing yourself for advancement. Connecting with others and building a powerful professional network is important and provides many benefits, such as:

- Learning from others
- Resources for current or future projects
- "Intelligence" about job openings and other opportunities
- Opportunities to contribute and further enhance your skills
- Visibility in the profession
- Social support as we struggle in a difficult public environment
- Friendships.

My professional network has not only enhanced my career development over the years but enriched my life. So, how can you get started?

Start Inside

You should start at home inside your organization. Assuming that you have developed good relationships inside your department, seek out opportunities with the support of your manager to serve on cross-departmental committees and teams. These cross-cutting special projects and experiences will help you further achieve key results, build skills, and learn. These relationships will also assist you in solving future problems as they arise. (Remember—relationship and rapport-building needs to precede problem-solving.)

Colleagues on these special teams can also serve as informal peer coaches and suggest opportunities to network outside the organization.

Look Close to Home

As you look to opportunities to network outside your organization, do not overlook regional information-sharing and work meetings involving planners from other local and state agencies. You can represent your city government at these meetings dealing with the regional jobs/housing imbalance, or traffic congestion, or the lack of affordable housing. You might want to volunteer to serve on a work committee as part of a regional planning effort. Meeting people and developing relationships are easier if real work is involved. Another close-to-home opportunity is to get involved in business and service groups in your community. Typically, these organizations are working on community betterment so you will be making a contribution to your city through your service. Plus, it is easy to volunteer for a leadership position and thus add to your skills portfolio and enhance your visibility.

Seek Professional Involvements

As you get engage close to home, you can begin to search for wider professional opportunities. Some involvements might include the state association for local government planners, or industry groups like the Urban Land Institute. You can evaluate these opportunities with the assistance of your boss and/or one or several informal coaches or supportive peers who can help determine where to start based on a number of factors:

- Time required
- Cost (agency cost or your own cost)
- Ease of joining the group or attending meetings
- Potential value based on your goals (e.g., learning, building relations, gaining skills).

It is usually easier to attend a county or regional meeting or a state gathering associated with your profession than a national conference.

Prepare for the Networking Opportunity

Like any important opportunity, it is wise to prepare so you can maximize the value. Besides bringing a stack of business cards, you can prepare in the following ways.

GO WITH A COLLEAGUE

It may be easier and less intimidating if you go to a professional meeting with a coworker or a colleague friend from another agency. However, if you do go with a colleague, make sure you go your separate ways during the gathering, meet new people, and then compare notes on the way home.

IDENTIFY PEOPLE YOU'D LIKE TO MEET

There may be people you'd like to meet because they might be a resource for one of your projects, or they have authored an interesting article, or you have met them briefly before and you'd like to become better acquainted. Start by making a preliminary list and then query your colleagues or your boss to increase or enhance the list. You might want to prioritize the list of potential contacts for the upcoming conference. You may have a good idea at which function you will likely encounter a potential contact or send an introductory email before the meeting and indicate that you are looking forward to meeting them at the conference.

FOCUS ON YOUR MOST IMPORTANT INTERESTS

Of course, you want to be open to serendipitous encounters at professional meetings. However, as you look to identify people to meet in advance of the meeting, be aware of your key interests.

For example:

- Is there something you want to learn?
- Are you hunting for resources regarding a current or upcoming project?
- Would you like contacts in other agencies to be on the look-out for job advancement opportunities?
- Do you want to join a particular professional committee?

FORM SOME INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

To help meet and interact with new people, you can formulate some open-ended questions. For instance:

- "How did you get started in the field?"
- "What has been your career journey?"
- "What is the next chapter in your career story?"
- "What are some new challenges you are addressing?"
- "I'm working on a general plan update. I'd like to promote transit-oriented development. Have you or someone in your agency had any experience with transit-oriented development? Do you have any advice?"
- "What are you looking forward to learning at this conference?"
- "You have an interesting name. Where does your family come from? My family originates from Lebanon."

People love to share and talk about themselves. Encourage them.

OVERCOME AWKWARDNESS

In addition to formulating some introductory questions, here are some other ways to minimize awkwardness suggested by Devora Zack in a “Careers in Government” blog posting:

- Consider going early to the function so there are fewer people to meet and connect with. It is easier to talk and engage when the room is not packed and people are more accessible.
- Stand in line for food or drink and connect with the person in front of you and in back of you. It is easier to interact with just two people instead of a whole roomful.
- Volunteer to help organize a meeting, a reception or other professional event. For instance, volunteer to welcome people at the table in front of the event room or to serve wine. This gives you a function at the gathering and makes it easier to interact with other attendees.
- End graciously with a comment, such as: “May I have your card? It was great meeting you.” Or, “Have you met [colleague passing by]?” Or, “I’ve enjoyed our conversation. Thank you.”

Eight Tips for Building a Powerful Network

Now that you’ve done some basic preparation, here are some tips for becoming a networking pro.

1. GO WITH A “CURIOUS MIND”

While you might have some targeted interests in attending a professional conference or meeting, it is wise to go with an open and curious mind. You will tend to discover people, resources, and opportunities if you inquire about what interests others, what is challenging them, and what they are learning.

As part of participating with a curious mind, you should ask questions and probe with follow-up questions such as “why is that important?” Maintain eye contact, smile, and most importantly listen intently. Don’t be looking over the person’s shoulder to meet the next person in your possible network. Being in the moment with someone is the best way to make an authentic connection.

2. GIVE A LOT

You must look to contribute in all relationships. Be generous. Think about how you can help others:

- Can you share a helpful idea?
- Can you offer a resource such as an article?
- Can you connect the person with another colleague who may have expertise in an area of interest?
- Do you have some intelligence that you can offer about an agency that interests the other person?
- Can you suggest a professional committee involvement that the other person might seek out?

With every encounter, look for opportunities to give and share. Giving a lot is energizing. Leveraging your knowledge, expertise, and existing network is gratifying.

Do not evaluate contacts as to how much they can help you. I concur with Jodi Glickman who wrote in a recent hbr.org blog piece that “life is a virtuous cycle.” If you give a lot, you will get a lot.

3. FOLLOW UP

As you discover an interest or a need for a professional contact, you should specifically write down what the person needs or what you can offer (e.g., an article or report) on either their business card or their name and e-mail address on your business card. (Earlier in my career, I collected a lot of business cards at meetings but occasionally forgot how I was to respond.) Then, of course, immediately respond after the meeting. Otherwise, the immediacy of work demands will interfere with the follow up. Immediate response also helps your new professional contact to remember you.

People will offer opportunities to those who are most recently in their memory. It is amazing how many times I get a speaking, training or consulting opportunity immediately after I follow up with a chance encounter at a professional meeting.

4. LOOK FOR COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS

By visiting the website of the professional association and asking questions of your contacts, you can identify committee or other leadership opportunities. These assignments can help build skills, relationships, and of course your network. Again, professional or industry groups are always looking for volunteers.

5. LET PEOPLE KNOW WHAT YOU NEED

While you want to be generous in responding to what others might need, do not be afraid to let everyone know what is on your mind or some intelligence or contact that you might desire. The more you announce to different people what interests you, the more likely you will find the contact or resource you seek.

6. SEND THANK-YOU NOTE

Once someone helps you by providing a resource, an idea or another contact, send a handwritten note. Expressing gratitude enhances a relationship and also feels good to the person expressing the appreciation. In this high-tech world, a handwritten note (instead of an e-mail) sticks out and makes someone remember you. I always have thank-you cards or my stationery available so I can write notes during boring meetings or when I’m watching TV or on the plane flying home. Again, send the thank-you as soon as possible after the meeting.

7. STAY IN CONTACT

To strengthen the connection of someone whom you find interesting or perhaps helpful, stay in contact. Check in periodically via e-mail or a phone call, send an article or a blog posting, connect through social media, arrange a coffee when you are in the area, and certainly reconnect at the next conference or seminar.

8. HAVE FUN!

Meeting new people, learning new things, sharing ideas and experiences—it's all fun. Don't look at networking as another burden but rather as an opportunity to enjoy and refresh yourself.

“Lucky Networks”

In an hbr.org posting entitled “[The Secrets of Building a Lucky Network](#)” Anthony Tjan noted that “lucky networks” leading to great outcomes are based on serendipitous connections. A lucky networker does not start by targeting a list of must-have relationships, but rather by demonstrating vulnerability, authenticity, generosity, and openness. By sharing your true self, being open to new ideas and relationships, demonstrating generosity with your knowledge and ideas, offering friendship, and caring about others, you will end up encompassing people in your network who will be pivotal in many different ways.

The Wonder of Networking

If you are open to growing a network, you will never know where a professional encounter will lead. In addition to professional growth and advancement, my professional networking has led to life-long friendships and relationships with people whom I love. For example, I first met at a conference my best friend who is also now the Godfather of my daughter. The woman who helped my wife and me connect with the birthmother of our daughter is a colleague in my network.

So grow your network, learn a lot, give a lot, advance your career, make friends, and have fun!



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.