



# RE-IMAGINE "NETWORKING"

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# Networking is a phrase that elicits a number of opposing responses.

Extraverts think of a party or a social event where cocktails are served and stories are shared. Work agenda items may be attended to... or not. Overall, a pleasant time is had by all. Introverts often see networking as a must I really attend? activity. It may be necessary for career advancement or to connect with colleagues, but often these events are situations which test their social limits. They are deemed an exercise in futility.

All of us, whether we are extraverts or introverts, have an opportunity to reframe networking and re-imagine it in a way that unleashes the “power of the Informal” as a strategy to exponentially increase our personal and professional influence. In our book, *The Influence Effect*, we explore the Big 5 strategies for gaining influence:

- 1. The Power of the Informal**
- 2. Relationship Maps**
- 3. Scenario Thinking**
- 4. Influence Loops**
- 5. Momentum**

We'll focus here on the **The Power of the Informal**, which is networking made simple and more accessible.

Let's face it. Women are natural relationship builders, but we hide behind excuses: "I don't have time to network." "Nothing important ever happens at these events." "I don't get invited."

So, we put our heads down. We work hard day in and day out, and we hope that will garner favor and good will in our organization. That should be enough to move our career forward and get us noticed, right? Wrong!

The unvarnished truth it is that it is incumbent upon us—each of us—to push our own agendas forward by asking for what we want. Influence begins by building connections and developing trust—one relationship at a time.

A woman I coach, Kerry, has forever been a rock star performer at work. As such, it was no surprise to anyone when she was promoted to Chief Legal Counsel. Over coffee, she confided in me that she was feeling isolated and insecure in her new C-suite role.

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"It feels like a house of cards that could come crashing down at any minute," she said.

Kerri is surrounded by high powered men. There are two other women on the executive team but they have known each other for years. She is new. The more we talked the more I realized: Kerri doesn't know any of her new colleagues. And they don't know her.

She walks in and out of high powered meetings with her game face intact. She gets her job done without much personal interaction. She answers the necessary questions and moves on. She operates by email and keeps facetime to a minimum.

Clearly, that modus operandi isn't working for her. Here's why: The higher up we go in an organization, the more important informal interactions become. Kerri needs to build her support network and enhance her reputation among her new colleagues.

This is where the power of the informal comes in.

The power of the informal helps us work behind the scenes to gain support and strengthen our professional relationships using informal networks and soft power.

It can be achieved in at least two ways: casual office interactions and social networks. Casual interactions occur during hours spent with colleagues on the clock, inside the office and out, when the focus is loose and off the cuff. Informal interactions happen as we stop to shoot the breeze before and after meetings, before and after work, at lunch, and at company activities such as dinners or events. Social networks are groups of colleagues who choose to spend some of their time together engaging in leisure activities and shared interests outside the workplace, such as sporting events or the arts. Being a part of these social networks amplifies our influence.

Where to begin? These are the big picture parameters of harnessing the power of the Informal:

- Forget about pure “networking,” this is about truly connecting.
- Focus on strategic relationship building as opposed to mindless “working the room.”
- Consider your personal style and decide which way of connecting with people feels most natural to you. Put together a plan based on that.
- Connect in a way that suits your lifestyle—meet over a meal or coffee or at an industry event.
- Bake it into your schedule by setting time aside. (I have clients who color-code their calendars to make sure they dedicate time to making connections.)
- Just do it—no excuses.

In order to get Kerri started we charted a 20-point course to help her put the power of the informal to work:

### **1. Make your move.**

Take stock of your existing professional network and put together a manageable plan. Take it slow at first. Kerry is busy. She has two grown children and two at home. I advised her to target one person a week and get to know them better on a personal basis.

## **2. Plan ahead.**

Make up your mind to spend an hour at a cocktail party after work and decide in advance what you'll accomplish. Do you have an innovative idea you need to put to the test? Identify three colleagues and talk them through your plan. Regardless of what you need to achieve, use your time wisely. Kerri found that planning her informal time made her efforts far more efficient.

## **3. Utilize unscheduled time.**

Do you need to make a new connection? Instead of scheduling a formal meeting, plan to catch your colleague in between calendar commitments—in the elevator or walking into work. Kerri took time before a quarterly board meeting to get to know a sales colleague who was usually out on the road. She even got his buy-in on a project. This was unscheduled time that she usually spent checking email.

## **4. Get in on unscripted conversations.**

People let their hair down in informal settings. Nobody's really loving that new branding campaign? You may hear about it walking over to the train together after work. Getting in on informal conversations helped Kerri get to know people better and cement her understanding of events at the office.

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### **5. Maximize the upside of going off-site.**

Social settings can be an excellent equalizer. An event at which top-level executives, staffers, and everyone else is munching on the same cocktail olives is an open opportunity to meet new people and hear what they have to say. Even better, it's an ideal environment to talk to executives and board members who are usually inaccessible during office hours.

### **6. Look for patterns.**

Examine the cross-silo social networks that underlie your organization. Does the tech-savvy set all sit together at staff meetings? Do the young moms meet for lunch every Monday? Even if you don't fit within any of the social networks yourself, simply knowing who does can tell you who's closely connected to whom. Kerri noticed that three of the company's top female leaders went for tea together on Thursday mornings. She mentioned her love of Earl Grey and earned herself a standing invite.

### **7. Take a walk.**

I know one savvy executive who arrives early to the office each morning to walk around the floors of the building. Sometimes she has an agenda, other times she simply stops to chat with whoever's milling around. Regardless, she always catches somebody and finds out what's going on. Taking time to walk around, show your face and interact with colleagues is one way to set yourself apart and strengthen your network.

### **8. Put your phone down.**

It's not just millennials who can't take their eyes away from their smartphones; screens rob all of us of precious facetime. This is an easy one if you set your mind to it: stop hiding behind your phone. Talk to people. Simply looking them in the eye when you're talking with them will help you make that crucial connection. Kerri made it her mission to answer questions in person instead of resorting to email and IM every time.

### **9. Hold the meeting before (and after) the meeting.**

Come early to meetings, get a good seat and chat with colleagues as they enter. Stick around after the meeting to close off the discussion and talk informally about the other issues on your minds.

According to a male senior vice president I know, "Men are really good at the pre-meeting. They go by the office to talk, throw the ball to each other almost in a conversation, and they work their agenda for the meeting. It happens before anyone gets to the table and it's very important." Kerri found that this informal time before and after meetings is where the real work happens and how key issues are resolved.

### **10. Understand informal norms.**

Is your workplace a coffee culture, or do people head to the bar for a beer after work? Informal rituals are important to understand because they make networking easier to accomplish. Many organizations have birthday lunches whereas others order sushi. Regardless of the specifics, seize opportunities around these norms to make connections and let other people get to know you. Kerri's team had "Monday-morning bagels." She found this was a great opportunity to check-in with colleagues.

### **11. Don't wait for the invite.**

Many of the women I coach never make it to the informal networking events where deals are sealed and decisions made. Why? They weren't invited.

But, wait... no one is ever really invited. Are there times when just a few colleagues need to go out together after work to talk about a specific problem or close a private deal? Of course. But most times you don't really need a reason to join a group for drinks. This is how people decompress, talk about what they're working on, and get to know each other. No invitation needed!

**12. Do it your way.**

Informal networking and socializing is never a one-size-fits-all proposition. Don't bother learning to play tennis if that's not your thing. Decide what you like—opera, ballgames, trendy eateries—and invite a few colleagues along for the fun. Doing something that you enjoy and are good at not only makes you happy, it also makes you more comfortable and puts you in charge in a way that can change how people perceive you.

**13. Use the group dynamic.**

If you are an introvert, you don't need to go it alone. Meet a close work friend and head to the company picnic with her. It's fine to work the room in pairs. The same goes for informal socializing. It doesn't need to be a one-on-one event. Getting a group together to have drinks or dinner makes it easier to talk to someone you don't know.

**14. Have a dinner party.**

Kerri felt most comfortable on our own turf. That's not uncommon. Many people prefer to invite colleagues and their spouses or partners over to their home instead of meeting together

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solo or going out to dinner. Inviting people to your home creates trust and makes personal interactions easier.

### **15. Build on mutual interests.**

Find out what you have in common with colleagues and plan time together. I have a client who loves going to wine tastings. For the past three years she's gone to a different wine region for a weekend away each year with her friends from work. They spend the day hiking, biking, and sampling great wine. They have a blast and it's brought them closer together.

### **16. Establish common ground.**

Another woman I've coached is a self-proclaimed "Boston-born, Irish-Catholic from a large family who grew up spending weekends at Fenway Park." She loves to talk about Boston. When she learned that her incoming boss was a Red Sox fan, she saw an easy opportunity to connect with him—and she seized it.

"The first thing we talked about was baseball, and it was an instant ice breaker," she said. "It created a real connection and we were able to build a relationship based on shared interests."

This works every time. Find out what most interests influencers and build a connection based on it. Kerri formed a lasting connection by collaborating on a project that was important to both. Be it baseball or an agenda item, find something to talk about or sponsor a project together. Common ground helps form strong relationships and becomes the basis for future influence.

### **17. Give something to get something.**

You need to open up a little to make the most of informal interactions. People love to learn something new and important. Think about what you can tell them to help them understand the context of a situation, for instance, or explain why a controversial decision was made. After that, they'll be more willing to engage with you and tell you what's on their mind.

**18. Keep the talk light.**

Informal networking should be casual. Your conversation needs a relevant point, but it need not be uptight, structured, or overly serious. (Yes, this usually means avoiding politics and religion.) And don't get too informal! Oversharing makes people uncomfortable. Likewise, sharing confidential information destroys trust and gets you into trouble.

**19. Don't go it alone.**

I asked Kerry: who do you know who is exceptional at networking? She named a female friend who had been a mentor of sorts. Perfect! Kerri took her to lunch to find out what worked well for her. You'll find that the people who are the best at connecting love to do it... and love to talk about it. Just ask.

**20. Get comfortable being uncomfortable.**

You don't need to love networking, but you need to do it. The good news? It gets easier with practice. Use these strategies and remind yourself that connecting with people is just another part of your job!

The bottom line? Hard work is important—but it's not enough to move our agendas forward. Developing relationships and building connections are critical.

Many of the women we coach guard their free time and insist that they don't have the bandwidth to get to know their colleagues on a more personal basis. Our philosophy has always been, try it and see how it works for you. Stop over-relying on email and texting and go talk to people face to face. Engage, ask questions, and find out about them. When someone reaches out to you, go have lunch with him. If an old college roommate asks you to help her son with his job search, talk to her. Do favors and then ask for a favor in return.

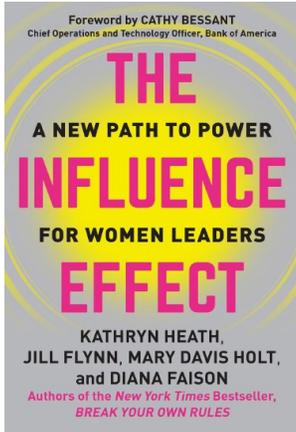
Much of the advice in this manifesto requires a leap of faith. How do we know it works? We've tried it ourselves!

Give networking a shot. You'll love what happens. Kerri did. It's changed the way she works. She puts time on her calendar to walk the halls and pass by the offices of colleagues who are important to her. She arrives early for work one or two mornings a week and finds opportunities to grab coffee and interact informally with colleagues. She answers emails in person and makes more eye contact.

The bottom line? Hard work is important—but it's not enough to move our agendas forward. Developing relationships and building connections are critical. **Informal networking is a simple, yet powerful strategy that creates an influence effect in your career.** 📌



# Info



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