

The Networking Mindset

In a recent interview with Chip Conley, founder and CEO of the second-largest boutique hotel chain in the U.S., a mindset was apparent that enabled Conley to achieve the success he has, and insight into why others don't reach that level.

Conley was asked why he thought it was so hard for people to do things like networking that didn't seem difficult and were clear paths to power. Conley said that for most people, networking was seen as a task. That mindset held true for many of the other actions required to build power—they were tasks. Tasks, he said, are things like taking out the garbage. You don't try to develop your "skill" at taking out the garbage, you don't think much about it, you just do it and get it over with.

However, if you think of networking as a skill, then that mindset changes everything. Skills are things that can, and maybe even should, be developed. You think about how well you are performing skills, you work on getting better, you get feedback, you apply thought, you learn.

The implication of Conley's insight: the difference between people who build effective networks and those that don't, the difference between people who develop political skill and grow that skill over time and those that don't, has much less to do with intelligence or charisma or charm and everything to do with how people see and define what they are doing—as skills or as tasks.

Most professionals think the road to the top is through doing your job well. However, according to recent statistics, your chances of sealing a deal are 79% higher when business networking is involved.

Is your business network working for you? Here's a simple test, borrowed from the professor of behavioral sciences at Northwestern University.

1. On a piece of paper write down your most important business contacts to whom you turn to for advice, mentoring and networking on professional, not personal, matters.
2. Next to each mentor write down the name of the person who introduced you to this key contact.
3. Study the list of your "referrers."

Most of us will discover that, often, there are just a handful of people who introduced us to the most important people in our business lives. These are

people who ought to be cultivated because they are helping to broaden our network. Make sure to continue to connect with those people.

But another major finding might very well be that you found many of your own mentors. That's a sign that you are not using your business network effectively. Like a garden, a business network needs careful and constant attention and care.

Simply collecting business cards and attending events may expand your number of contacts, but does not increase the likelihood that those contacts will benefit you in the future. To reap the benefits of networking when you need them, you must know how to make your network work for you, and how you can work for your network.

Do you use your network effectively?

The next time you find yourself at a meeting that you think is boring and trivial, consider how your mindset affects your approach. There is a big difference in what we do and what we learn depending on whether we define some activity as a task or a skill. As a consequence, our ability to build power and influence derives as much from how we think about our activities as from our abilities.