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## **ARTICLE** **NETWORKING**

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*by Liane Davey*

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When I interviewed people for a university [research project](#) 23 years ago about networking, many people weren't familiar with the term. I explained it as "multiperson mentoring." Evoking the millennia-old concept of mentors and protégés, that description made it clear to everyone that networks included people who could provide you with advice and support.

In its ideal form, a network, like a mentor, offers two very different types of support. The first is *instrumental support*, the ideas, advice, and assistance offered by people trying to help you achieve your goals. The second is *psychosocial support*, the support your network gives you to help you

survive and thrive as a person. Great networks provide both, but the people I studied back in 1993 tended to focus on one type of support and missed the value of the other.

Fast forward to 2016, and now nearly everyone has a network — and they're bigger than ever before. Almost everyone I meet boasts a LinkedIn network in the hundreds (if not thousands). But how do today's networks compare to the original concept of networking? Are people still emphasizing one purpose of the network at the expense of the other?

When you look at instrumental support, today's networks fare well. While it's easy to think that vast technology-enabled networks aren't as real or valuable as the old-fashioned, face-to-face variety, [research](#) doesn't support that view. Diverse networks provide what are referred to as “[weak ties](#),” which give you entrée to people in different departments, organizations, industries, and even countries. They are particularly valuable because they provide access to new and novel information, whereas your close ties (often coworkers, neighbours, etc.) tend to have experiences, insights, and opportunities that are similar to yours.

Rather than dismissing the vast network of people you hardly know, you should recognize it for what it is: an amazing source of ideas, connections, and assistance. In other words, today's shallow but wide networks are likely better at providing instrumental support. Do you need to find out about another industry while preparing a sales pitch? Just reach out to your network. Are you looking for someone who can give you a warm introduction so that your résumé actually gets seen? No problem — your network can help. Do you need some examples of where a new technology is being used to bolster your business case? Simply send out an email. Your bigger-than-ever network of people you barely know will probably come through for you.

But modern networking doesn't always compare favorably: Your big, distant, loose network that can help you solve myriad business challenges probably provides little or no value in the realm of psychosocial support. It's unlikely that you would reach out to a recent LinkedIn connection to get help with surviving your micromanaging boss, to allay your concerns about returning to work after the birth of your first child, or to disclose your private worry that you chose the wrong career. Those conversations require a deeper connection. They also require a certain amount of time, something you might believe you can't afford to invest in networking anymore.

I encourage you to assess your own network and determine how well it's providing you with both instrumental and psychosocial support. If you aren't receiving the instrumental support, you're doing without the connections that will help you prosper in your role and your career. If you're not tapping into relationships for psychosocial support, you're forgoing the stress-buffering benefits that a network can provide. How does your current network stack up on these dimensions?

To determine whether your network can provide instrumental support, ask yourself whether you have:

- Someone objective to talk to about your development and career progression
- People in other departments or other levels in your organization who can help you influence important decisions or expedite projects
- People at different companies in your industry with whom you can share insights about how the industry is evolving

If you need to increase the amount of instrumental support you're receiving from your network, first assess whether you're connected to the right people. If not, seek out people within your organization, your industry, and your community who can broaden your understanding and influence. You can make those connections by joining a relevant community. Whether it's online or in person, seek out a group of people (a supply chain professionals group, a chamber of commerce, women in capital markets, etc.) and join in.

Don't overlook the most accessible network of all: your personal networks. You might have spent years watching Little League games next to someone who could make some valuable business connections if you knew each other's occupations. And don't stop there. There's a big difference between having a network and networking. Too many people build a vast network of connections without exchanging value across that network. Make sure people know what you're interested in, and when you need something, ask. Adding value for your network members and allowing them to reciprocate will strengthen your network.

Now see how your network measures up on the psychosocial side. It should include:

- Someone outside your department with whom you can confidentially share concerns about your relationships with your boss or coworkers
- One or more people with a similar family situation who will understand when you share the trials and tribulations of daily life
- People who have known you through multiple phases of your life, who can provide perspective beyond your current job or stage of life

If your assessment showed that your network comes up short on the psychosocial side, don't shrug it off as something that would be nice to have. Stress is a very real problem, contributing to both mental and physical health challenges. Psychosocial support can alleviate some of that stress. To access these benefits from your network, invest the time to strengthen your ties with a few people you trust. Have coffee with someone at work and tell them you "just need 15 minutes of not thinking about your project." Spend more time with people in your neighborhood, friends from previous workplaces, or old college friends. All of these people can provide precious human connection and encouragement.

In a connected world, networks are as relevant as ever before; unfortunately, you're probably not getting the most from yours. Optimizing your network means getting both work-focused instrumental support and individual-focused psychosocial support. You'll need to invest time and

energy to build your network so that you have a large number of weak ties for instrumental support and a select few strong ties for emotional support. Keep feeding and nurturing your network by giving assistance and by allowing others to provide help in return. Only then can you say that you're effectively networking.

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**Liane Davey** is the cofounder of 3COze Inc. She is the author of *You First: Inspire Your Team to Grow Up, Get Along, and Get Stuff Done* and a coauthor of *Leadership Solutions: The Pathway to Bridge the Leadership Gap*. Follow her on Twitter at [@LianeDavey](#).

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