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Getting Back to Basics – Invest in Building Long and Lasting Business Relationships

By: Rita B. Allen

Do you invest the proper amount of time, effort and energy into developing and nurturing relationships at work? As we all do more with less, and have barely enough time and resources to effectively accomplish what is expected of us, your answer to this question is likely to be "not as much as I would like."

Have you stopped to think what has been the cost of not investing in these relationships—such as the kind of opportunities you may have missed, resources that were not developed, unidentified trends, lack of visibility, and/or friendships and partnerships that were not enabled to be established.

During these unpredictable economic times, it is our relationships that can preserve our livelihood as well as our professional capabilities. As we continue to navigate through these uncertain and complex times, having a network of colleagues to reach out to for resources and assistance is invaluable. In fact, our ability to focus our businesses, whatever discipline we may be in, on the tried and true basics of building solid and long lasting relationships is essential for success. Building and nurturing relationships with our clients, customers, employees, colleagues, managers, executives, team mates, and all other appropriate stakeholders is one of the core competencies required in business today.

People can make the mistake of believing that relationship-building only applies to those who are in an external role—nothing can be further from the truth. Building relationships as a human resources practitioner is just as crucial as for an external consultant or service provider. There are also different layers of relationships that exist as a practitioner—internal within your organization and external within your industry, profession, specialty and geography. Having a global reach is essential and cultural awareness is critical. Relationship building is not a science but an art ... and requires much creativity, passion, enthusiasm and finesse. Having deep and rich relationships is the best career management strategy for which to invest time, effort and energy!

It is important to execute strategies that allow us to do so in a proactive and deliberate manner. There is a basic formula which includes a number of best practices that enable us to plan and carefully execute an effective and measurable strategy. The key is to create your own formula that works for you and fits your style, approach and needs. The formula

is made up of the following:

Planning – 30% Include even mix of strategy, execution, accountability and discipline – create your "formula" and stick to it! Steps required in the planning process:

Self Awareness – Be ready and able to articulate your personal brand, value-add, differentiating factors, goals and aspirations. Know yourself well—your strengths, interests, limitations, values and priorities. Empower yourself with this knowledge and exhibit the confidence of a self-directed, focused and purposeful business professional.

Business Plan/Goals and Objectives – Do your homework/due diligence; define your business strategy; set goals and objectives. Have a vision and mission for your career—short-term and long-term plans. Allow for flexibility and learning to evolve; revisit and adjust regularly as necessary.

Identify your "key contacts" – Create your "VIP" list of existing colleagues/clients/contacts, hot prospects and other relevant sources of resources, leads and information.

Create a Database of these Key Contacts – Maintain, update and enhance regularly! Select a tool that also has a tickler system to assist with follow up and on-going contact management.

Develop your Annual Marketing Plan – Be specific, targeted, realistic yet creative; plan for monthly, quarterly, semi-annual and annual activities. Stay true to it—follow up and be accountable! Marketing yourself is essential to building, articulating and enhancing your personal brand.

Sincerity – 20% Keep it real—be authentic and genuine:

Get to "Know" your Contacts and their Needs – What are your commonalities, similarities and differences? Reveal yourself; find shared interests as well as ways to complement and balance one another; initiate ways to assist each other address needs, concerns and challenges. Be a resource.

Listen Actively – Engage in dialogic communications; Show genuine interest in helping and being a resource. Start a two way conversation and keep it going. Listening more than speaking always leads to attentive comprehension and effective results.

Offer Your Time and Expertise – Extend yourself, your knowledge and your contacts as

appropriate. Offer to help in a variety of ways without asking for anything in return. Act in ways that truly exhibit your passion and values. Exercise the "golden rule," common courtesy and professional etiquette.

Outreach/Visibility – 20% Every portion of each day should include communications of one kind with key contacts:

Maintain Regular and On-Going Contact – Stay in regular touch with key contacts via e-mail, telephone and in-person meetings. Be deliberate and planned with your efforts including specific timelines, activities and follow up. Send notes, book information, articles, links, make lunch/coffee dates, initiate introductions to others, etc. Follow up in a deliberate and systematic fashion.

Be Visible – Maintain your visibility in the marketplace. Attend professional association meetings, dinners and events; stay current on the market and industry trends; be well read and educated. Keep your name out there—write articles; conduct workshops and speaker presentations, be quoted in newspapers and trade journals. Network, network, network!

Execute Well-Defined Marketing Strategies – Craft and execute marketing strategies that allow you to exhibit your value-add in a disciplined and methodical way. Identify a plan that is suited for your style and approach—stay true to it! Find ways to give back to your profession and community.

Credibility – 15% Follow through—deliver what you promise in a timely and consistent manner:

Focus on Quality – Walk the talk and deliver on your promises. Reach out to mentors and advisors regularly. Stay grounded and humble. Don't stray from your mission and vision yet stay open to new opportunities.

Build a Solid Track Record and Reputation – Stay true to your mission; market yourself and your accomplishments regularly; advocate for yourself. Don't be afraid to promote your value add. Establish yourself as a subject matter expert and reputable advisor. Tell your stories of success, give testimonials and quotes.

Patience/Resilience – 15% Long term process—can't be rushed, there are no short cuts:

Long Term Mindset – Don't expect immediate gratification. Have a formula and stick to

it—gain momentum and never stop! Relationship building is a long term process to be viewed as laying a foundation and planting seeds for future growth and success.

Acknowledge and Celebrate Victories – Stay positive and optimistic! Once you reap the rewards and see benefits achieved, it all makes sense and you will be a believer in the process. Keeping your eyes on the ball creates a can do attitude and the ability to endure the valleys along with the peaks!

About the Author:

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