How to be a confident networker

By Lucy Gower

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How do you feel about networking? Most people I speak to dread having to *'network'*. Perhaps it's because for some the term *'networking'* conjures up images of people in suits trying to out-do each other while aggressively handing out business cards. For others, it's the anxiety of being in a room (real or virtual) of strangers and either the fear of getting stuck with the most boring person and not being able to make a polite exit or ending up stood on the side-lines on their own feeling like a spare part. When we remove the word *'networking'* and talk about business events or business socials, it can sometimes feel more palatable, yet, in my experience it still it sends a shudder down most people's spines.

The truth is that results happen faster when we know, like and trust people and whether that's online or face-to-face, this involves networking. Research has shown that people skilled in networking and who have large and diverse networks find better jobs faster, are more likely to be promoted earlier, close deals more rapidly, receive higher performance evaluations, receive larger bonuses, enhance the performance of their teams, are more likely to be sources of diverse information and are more likely to generate innovation. There is also evidence that it's not your immediate network that bears the most fruit – but weak ties: connections on the edges of your immediate network, for example, a friend of a friend, or someone you used to work with or even

go to school with are most likely to find you your next job as well as your next relationship!

Regardless of role, seniority or sector, building your networks is an important part of successful working life. Networks can provide a different perspective on a situation, help problem solve, provide opportunities and **can also be enjoyable**.

Building and maintaining your network is key to achieving success at work. The tips in this workbook apply to online and face to face networking. They are designed to be a useful reminder if you're already a good networker, a renewed source of energy if your inner critic is getting the better of you now face to face networking is becoming a reality again, and a starting point if your lack of confidence is holding you back from signing up to any networking event.

Wherever you feel your networking skills are at, this quick guide offers some practical tips to help you better manage and maintain both your confidence and practical skills to enjoy and get the most from networking. Use this workbook, make notes, do the exercises and log your progress. Let me know how you get on by emailing **hello@lucidity.org.uk**.

'You can't stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.'

A.A. Milne, Winnie-the-Pooh

1. Start with why

What is it that you want to achieve from your networking? Perhaps you have a problem that you need some help solving, or are looking for new job opportunities, or maybe you'd like an outside perspective on something you've been working on? Who are the individuals or types of people, for example, someone who does the same type of role as you, people in the role you'd like to do or someone from another sector entirely whom you'd like to meet? Pick the events where you're most likely to meet the people or types of people who can help you achieve your networking objectives.

Action: Think about why you're attending a networking event and then research which event or events you'll attend. It's as simple as Googling *'networking'* and the location or type of industry or sector. Eventbrite can also be a good source of networking events.

2. Research

Once you've picked your event, do your research. Who will be there whom you'd like to meet? Many events will publish the delegates' names, job titles or organisations attending. Do some research – even if it's as basic as knowing what organisations are attending, so you can open a conversation. Being prepared will also help to build your confidence.

Action: Whom do you want to meet? Maybe it's a specific person, or an employee of a company, or someone with a similar role to yours? Write them down here.

3. Mindset

Most of us feel apprehensive about attending a networking event. Before you turn up to an event (even online), spend a bit of time tackling your nerves and getting yourself into a confident and positive mindset.

- **Spend a minute or two breathing** slowly in and out.

- **Notice how you're standing or sitting.** Sit or stand tall – like you're already super confident. You can trick your body into feeling more confident by taking on a confident stance. (see resources for more on this).

Some sound advice I took from a colleague is:

'Don't compare your inside to someone else's outside – you will always lose'. Focus on being your most confident you, and don't let yourself be intimidated by how other people are projecting themselves. What you see on the outside is often not what the person is feeling on the inside.

My other top tips for getting in the right frame of mind before a networking event are:
a) to tell yourself you're going to have an enjoyable time and
b) pretend that you're the host (when you're the host you know everyone and I've found this mindset helps to dissipate the fear of walking into a room, or siting in a Zoom room full of strangers).

'Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen.'
Brene Brown

4. Choose who you approach

In a face-to-face networking situation have you ever felt that you were circling round, or patiently waiting for what feels like an excruciatingly long amount of time for a group in deep conversation to welcome you into the fold? You can often feel a bit like a spare part and your confidence can start to ebb away. We've all done it and my advice is don't. Don't try to join a group engrossed in conversation.

Closed pair, closed group – don't approach these people

If a pair or a group is closed, facing towards each other with no obvious gap for you to join them, then leave them alone. If there's someone in the closed group you'd like to talk to, keep a look out for when the group disperses and approach them then.

Closed pair

Closed group

Approach open groups

Open groups are where there's room for you to join them, for example, where the body language is open or facing outwards or where there's a lull in conversation.

Individual   Open pair   Open group
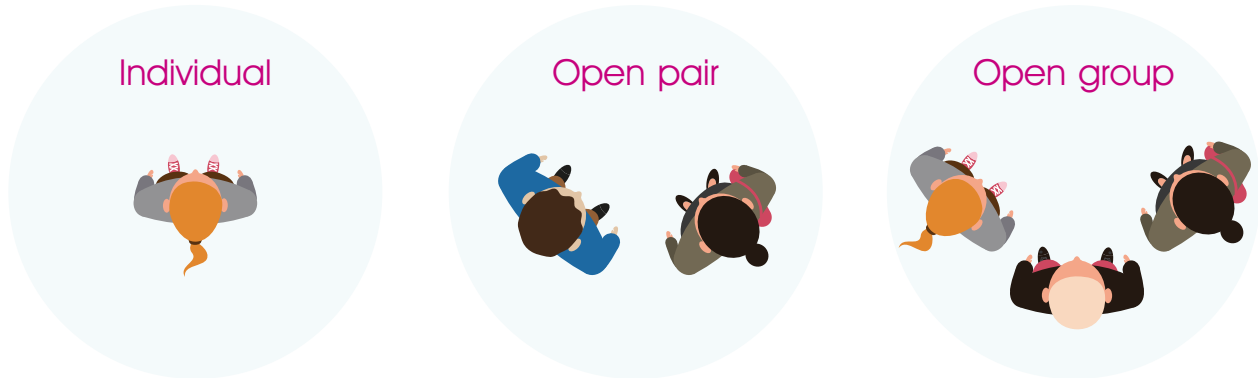
5. Notice your own body language

These group dynamics work both ways. If you're in a closed group others won't approach you. It can be helpful if you're starting to be ready to leave a closed group to be aware of your own body language, perhaps stand at an angle to the other person/people, to create an open group or step back allowing space for someone else to join the group.

Action: Practice your body language. Become more aware of standing in a closed and open stance so when you do it at your next event you do it naturally.

6. Have a give first attitude

Go with the mindset of helping others. How can you add value to conversations? Can you help to unpick other people's problems and be a go-to person when others need help? Be the person who gives first, invests in relationships, asks open questions and builds on others' ideas and conversations.

> **'The single greatest 'people skill' is a highly developed and authentic interest in the other person.'**
>
> *Bob Burg*
> *Bestselling Coauthor of 'The Go-Giver.' Co-Founder of The Go-Giver Community Network.*

7. Go with a buddy

Going networking with a buddy can help confidence and accountability. It's easy to be too busy to go to a networking event, but if you're going with someone else, you're more likely to go. When you're there, split up, talk to different people. Look out for each other. Perhaps have a signal if you need rescuing!

Action: Find a network accountability buddy or buddies and arrange to go to an event together in the next month. Write your buddys name/s here.

8. Spot networking archetypes

Every room has a mix of people or what we term *'archetypes'*; the loner who uncomfortably hangs round the edge; the socialite who seems to know everyone yet doesn't stop to enter into meaningful conversation; the person handing out business cards as if their life depended on it. Observe how these people and conversations play out and remember that your networking style or archetype is a **builder** - helping others, giving first and building on conversations.

9. Introductions

When you're introduced to others, and you're asked the common question, *'What do you do?'* talk about the impact you make rather than your job title. Many job titles don't make sense unless you're actually in the role, so job title introductions can close down conversations rather than open them up. For example, when I used to tell people I was a *'fundraiser'* people would either back away thinking I was a *'chugger'* or tell me they already gave to lots of charities. When I said I helped protect children, it opened up questions about how, which led onto more dialogue and better conversations.

Action: Practice your response to 'What do you do?' so when you're asked it in a networking situation it comes naturally. Write it here...

10. Build rapport

We get results faster when we get to know, like and trust other people. And building rapport builds trust. Ask open questions (questions that can't be answered with *'yes'* or *'no'*). Ask people about *themselves*. Find things in common, for example, a great taste in shoes, knowledge of a local area, a football club or a shared hobby. It doesn't have to be work related, you're looking for any topic where there is a common interest. Notice your body language, as you talk you will naturally match and mirror other people's body language. Become more deliberate about this (without over doing it and making the other person feel odd) and build rapport more quickly. Take the pressure of yourself by focusing on being interested in them rather than on you needing to be interesting.

Action: Practice matching and mirroring body language in conversations. When it comes to networking you'll do it naturally building rapport faster.

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11. Listen

It sounds so simple and obvious yet so many of us are not very good at listening. A lot of the time we have partial attention, we're so busy multi-tasking; flicking through screens on our phone; responding to notifications or even daydreaming that we miss a lot of what goes on. Focus your attention on listening to the other person. And show you are listening by using *'yes and'* at the beginning of sentences to build on the last thing someone has said. As well as *'yes and-ing'*, repeat some of the sentence that you have just been told in your response. You might feel a little odd but the other person won't notice – they'll just feel (and have been) listened to.

12. Moving on

No-one wants to get stuck with the boring person, so having confidence to make a polite and decisive exit is an important networking skill. Plus, to achieve your networking objective it's very likely that you'll need to talk to several people during the course of the event so it's important to be able to keep moving on. My advice is:

• Keep your body language open, part turned to the room so you are inviting other people to join you (see point 4).

• Ask if there's anyone you can introduce them to (remember you are a builder) and together wander to find them (it doesn't matter if you don't know anyone – most networking events have name badges and you could suggest going for a wander to try and spot the person in question).

• Suggest working the room together and through this you'll both end up talking to different people.

13. Follow up

Often the objectives of a networking event are to meet someone with a view to getting a meeting over a cup of tea on another day, so make sure you follow up. At the event exchange business cards and arrange a time to call and follow up. Allocate time in your diary to do the follow up as quickly as possible after the event. Use Linkedin to connect to the people you meet, too. (And if you are not on Linkedin – get on Linkedin right now!)

Action: Connect on Linkedin. Get into the habit of connecting with people who you meet.

The best on the web on building your confidence for networking

Check out the **resources section** for the best content and practical tips to help you build your confidence for networking. We've gone down the internet rabbit hole so you don't have to!

Lucy Gower is a facilitator, trainer and speaker helping frustrated managers and leaders with the confidence to think differently and become more effective at work. She set up the Lucidity Network because she knows that with the right support we can all achieve much more than we think is possible.