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How to Build Your Network

by *Brian Uzzi* and *Shannon Dunlap*

Strong personal networks don't just happen at the watercooler. They have to be carefully constructed. Here's how to strengthen your connections.

If you were to ask your colleagues, “Who was Paul Revere?” most would probably know the answer. He was, after all, immortalized in the Longfellow poem that begins, “Listen, my children, and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere.” Yet how many of your colleagues, students of American history aside, would be familiar with William Dawes? Both men rode on horseback from Boston on the night of April 18, 1775. Both sounded the alarm that the Revolutionary War had begun. Dawes rode south while Revere rode north, but the towns they traveled through were demographically similar. Both men came from the same social class and had similar educational backgrounds. But only Revere raised a militia, and only Revere's name became famous. What accounts for the difference? In large part, the type of social network each man cultivated.

Paul Revere was an *information broker*, a person who occupies a key role in a social network by connecting disparate groups of people. Because Revere targeted other well-connected people during his ride, his news spread widely and quickly, as explained in Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*, for example. William Dawes was not an information broker, so he didn't know which doors to knock on when he entered a new town. As a result, the information he carried was circulated within a small group of people instead of expanding outward. (See the exhibit “The Networks of Paul Revere and William Dawes.”)

The Networks of Paul Revere and William Dawes

Now imagine that the information being ferried by messengers isn't about redcoats but about a new product idea or a different way to manage a team. If that information isn't delivered to the right people, it will wither and die. For example, before Microsoft was a household name, Bill Gates had a singular distinction in his network—his mother, Mary Gates, who sat on the board of United Way with John Akers, a high-level IBM executive. At the time, Akers was helping to lead IBM into the desktop computer business. Mary Gates talked to Akers about the new breed of small companies in the computer industry, which she felt were underappreciated competitors of the larger firms with which IBM traditionally partnered. Maybe she changed Akers's vision of who to go to for the new IBM PC's DOS, or maybe her comments confirmed what he already knew. In either case, after their conversation, Akers took proposals from small companies, one of which was Microsoft. The rest is history: Microsoft won the DOS contract and eventually eclipsed IBM as the world's most powerful computer company. Without Bill Gates's potent network, a sensational new operating system might have faded into obscurity just like William Dawes.

Studies have shown the same correlations between networks like Paul Revere's and success in various commercial ventures. Networks determine which ideas become breakthroughs, which new drugs are prescribed, which farmers cultivate pest-resistant crops, and which R&D engineers make the most high-impact discoveries. In a monumental 1998 study of innovations in science, art, and philosophy,

sociologist Randall Collins of the University of Pennsylvania showed that breakthroughs from icons such as the seven sages of antiquity, Freud, Picasso, Watson and Crick, and Pythagoras were the consequence of a particular type of personal network that prompted exceptional individual creativity. In fact, Collins could find only three exceptions in all of recorded history: Taoist metaphysician Wang Chung, Zen spiritualist Bassui Tokusho, and the Arabic philosopher Ibn Khaldun.

In this article, we'll take a close look at the inner workings of networks. We'll also show you how to diagnose your current network, create a more potent one, and then actively manage it.

A Powerful System

Networks deliver three unique advantages: private information, access to diverse skill sets, and power. Executives see these advantages at work every day, but might not pause to consider how their networks regulate them.

When we make judgments, we use both public and private information. These days, public information is easily available from a variety of sources, including the Internet; but precisely because it is so accessible, public information offers significantly less competitive advantage than it used to.

Private information, by contrast, is gathered from personal contacts who can offer something unique that cannot be found in the public domain, such as the release date of a new product, unpublished software code, or knowledge about what a particular interviewer looks for in candidates. Private information, therefore, can give top executives an edge, though it is more subjective than public information because usually it is not verified by an independent party, such as Dun & Bradstreet. Consequently, the value of your private information to others—and the value of others' private information to you—depends on how much trust exists in the network of relationships.

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