



CONSULTING SCOOP



Reflections on Not-For-Profit Membership: The Power of Networking

[By Paul A. Dillon]

When I first contemplated writing about networking in non-profits, I emailed the following message to my three children, all young adults in the working world: "Writing on this subject will be interesting. It will force me to evaluate what I have been doing all these years, with the hope that I won't discover that I have wasted all of this time. In terms of what the world appears to value, there are many people far more successful than I could ever hope to be."

My daughter replied, "Your letter reminded me of a line in the movie *Adaptation*: 'People are defined by who they love, not by who loves them.' I think the same analogy can be applied to networking. You are who you *know* and *serve*, not who knows and serves you."

I thought about her words a lot as I considered the best way to approach the subject. The easy way would be a "One Minute Non-Profit Networking Guide." But I have a point of view about networking that incorporates psychology, philosophy, and dare I say it, *theology*. I started networking and volunteering in non-profits for my own selfish business reasons. Now, I volunteer because I really care.

It's this point that is the most important.

What Networking Is, or, More Precisely, What It Isn't

The first thing to recognize about networking is that it isn't about *you*...it's about *them*! In an email exchange with a search consultant, I wrote: "You termed what I do as 'networking.' While I understand that is the current colloquialism, I do much more than that. To me, networking is almost pejorative since it implies getting a lot of business cards and calling people to use them for your own business or personal objectives."

I don't do that.

What I have tried to do over the past 30 years is to love each person I meet with my whole heart, my whole mind, and my whole soul and to always put their interests **first** and my interests **third**. There is no second; that's my margin of error.

When you do that, when you totally abandon your interests to others, it comes back to you, not just 10 times, but 10,000 times without you even asking! Remarkable!

Networking, then, is really relationship building. It is a fine psychological art and spiritual craft. It is interacting with another human being in the most positive, giving, and uplifting way over an extended period of time and hopefully into perpetuity.

That is really why so many people do it so wrong or can't do it at all. I find that most people are far too selfish to be effective relationship builders. You quickly understand that it's all about them and that they don't care at all about you or anyone else. They are phonies. They are frauds. And frauds are eventually found out.

When I peer deep into the eyes of people like this, I ask myself, "Where were their parents; where were their teachers; where were their priests, ministers, rabbis, or other religious leaders?"

I believe that effective relationship building-effective networking, if you will-can't really be taught. It can only be nurtured in those who have been raised by their parents, taught by their teachers, and instructed by their religious leaders to be warm, gentle, loving, kind, open, giving people who believe in the basic goodness of mankind.

How to Go About It

I have watched people join organizations and attend networking events solely to collect business cards or a board-of-directors roster to use to call people up, perhaps make an appointment, or sell their products or services.

Wrong! That is not the way to build effective, long-term relationships that lead to long-term friendships that perhaps can lead, in turn, to long-term business opportunities. If that is your idea of building relationships, then go sell vacuum cleaners or encyclopedias door-to-door.

A droll friend with a rather patrician upbringing once observed, derisively, someone who used this approach with him by saying, "He was better suited for selling ice than bonds." Ouch! I never forgot that comment.



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There is an old adage in Chicago business and civic circles that you must give *before* you get. Let that be your cardinal rule in relationship building.

When you network with someone, ask how you can help them, their business, or their organization. Explain your skills, contacts, and resources, and ask what they need. Begin the relationship by giving rather than getting. When you sincerely offer to help someone and you follow through, they almost always reciprocate in kind and sometimes give you much more in return.

The same is true when volunteering in a non-profit organization. Volunteer for only those organizations whose missions and purposes really interest you. Then, work very hard to help the organization fulfill its mission. Or, in the words of the Roman statesman and orator Marcus Tullius Cicero, "Facta, non verba." (It's deeds, not words, that count.)

Prove to other members that you are more than a name on the letterhead and that you want more than to advance your own interests. Be as conscientious and diligent as you are in your business environment, and you'll be recognized as a person of substance who can be relied upon to serve the interests of the organization.

Several years ago, at an Economic Club dinner, the former president of a local university paid me one of the highest compliments that I have ever received and one that I hope I can live up to: "This is Paul Dillon. He is a good man. He really cares."

He is a good man. He really cares.

He really cares. That is how you build long-term relationships in Chicago's civic community that can lead to possible opportunities for you down the road. You

have to give before you get. You really have to care.

The Value of Networking for Yourself and Others

Most senior executives realize that building long-term relationships is one of the keys to a successful business career. Not doing so is equivalent to committing career "suicide." If you typically go to work, do your job, and go home without participating in professional societies, community activities, or "networking" events, your behavior must change.

In a 1992 presentation that I made at a Midwestern Regional College Board meeting that focused on "What Business Expects from Higher Education," I said, in part:

New graduates-and all other managers or professionals who want to survive in the white-collar work force of tomorrow-are going to have to be very visible and have a lot of professional contacts. They will need to be smarter, tougher, more self-reliant, exceedingly cynical, a great deal more fiscally prudent, and willing to take dramatic-even terrifying-short-term risks for long-term employment gains.

At a certain point in your career, your competence will be assumed. From that point on, ambition, drive, style, image, politics, and luck will determine your success in the business world.

While I realize that your primary concern is making contacts to find another job, I want you to mentally set aside that all-important task for a moment, if you can, while I appeal to the more altruistic side of your nature. There is an even more important reason to

volunteer for service on a non-profit board, governmental committee or commission, or other such professional or community-based organization. And that is to better the lot of your fellow man.

When I look back at the opportunities that I have been fortunate to have over the past 30 years of volunteer service on various non-profit and governmental boards, committees, and commissions, I am truly humbled by what has been accomplished. Midway Airport was a direct result of the Midway Airport Revitalization Commission. The Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce played a pivotal role in the first phase of the O'Hare Airport redevelopment program in the 1980s. The Regional Transportation Authority was formed in 1974, and state pension laws were rewritten in 1982 to increase their investment returns in subsequent bull markets, inuring to the benefit of Illinois taxpayers.

Politicians have been influenced to pass good legislation; editorial writers have been influenced to write editorials supporting good causes; performing artists have been financed so that they can perform; and most important, through the work of wonderful organizations like the Jane Addams Hull House Association and its attendant foundation, funds have been raised, not only to feed, clothe, and shelter Chicago's underclass society, but to provide this society with the support, encouragement, and tools to escape the vicious vortices of poverty, racism, and hopelessness.

No simple business career can provide such wonderful opportunities-opportunities that promote an infectious conspiracy of goodness in all who touch you and in all whom you touch. These are opportunities to care. In the words of Francis Bacon, "In this theater of man's life, it is reserved only for God and for angels to be lookers on."



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If you recall your Sunday school days, Cain kills Abel in the book of Genesis, and God asks Cain, "Cain, where is your brother?" Cain replies with the most profound question in the whole of the Bible. "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" The whole of scripture from that point on, indeed the whole of civilized society, is designed to answer that one question. Of course we are.

In the Old Testament, we find the example of Job: "I was eyes to the blind, and feet I was to the lame. I was father to the poor, and the cause which I knew not, I sought out." In the New Testament is the parable of the Good Samaritan: "'Go and do likewise,' Jesus enjoined."

John Ruskin made an acute observation of scriptural teachings when he wrote, "It is written, not 'blessed is he that feedeth the poor,' but 'blessed is he that considereth the poor.' A little thought and a little kindness are often worth more than a great deal of money."

It is the work of many, many non-profits and government committees and commissions that give you an opportunity to fulfill that scriptural charge to be your "brother's keeper" and to "share your strength with the weaker." That is the real reason why you should undertake volunteer service in community organizations, non-profits, governmental advisory bodies, and the like.

This is Paul Dillon. He is a good man. He really cares.

How and Why I Started Networking

But my initial reasons for "networking" were hardly altruistic. I got involved in business and community activities because it was obvious that you needed a wide range of contacts if your job dried up or you were fired.

I started my business career after military and government service. At that time, it was extremely rare for professional service firms to use advertising or public relations. One way to market yourself was to build a solid reputation in Chicago's business and civic community.

I entered the real estate business in the late '70s to the mid '80s. Real estate is the ultimate contact business because that is how you hear about deal flow and how you assess the socioeconomic factors that comprise "market value." As a real estate analyst in pre-Internet days, I needed a wide range of contacts to perform various market and financial analyses.

I had wonderful mentors who introduced me to many prominent business and civic leaders. I am indebted to them for showing me the value of forming long-term business and civic relationships and hope that I have been a worthy student.

Did I Find Them or Did They Find Me?

Interesting question. Initially, I found organizations where my volunteer service would help my career. Later, after I had established a reputation for hard work and commitment, they started coming to me.

I have found that the needs are great, and competent, committed, knowledgeable volunteers are few.

The Transition to Caring

In *Make Gentle the Life of This World: The Vision of Robert F. Kennedy*, Kennedy is quoted, "[Another great task] is to confront the poverty of satisfaction—a lack of purpose and dignity— that inflicts us all. Too much and too long, we seem to have surrendered community excellence and community

values in the mere accumulation of material things."

My initial motivation was to develop contacts to further my business career. But as I worked in these organizations, I found I was less interested in my own career and more interested in how these organizations contributed to the well-being of the citizens of Chicago.

I quickly saw the tremendous societal influence that volunteer service could have, an influence that I could never have achieved in a traditional business career.

Let me tell you about one particular experience that served as an epiphany of sorts. Several years ago, I was asked to become involved with the Jane Addams Hull House Association, the oldest and largest social service agency in the United States. (Full disclosure here: the Hull House Association has since become a client of our firm.) I was invited to tour one of their community centers to see the work of this wonderful organization. I was stunned!

What I saw was truly God's work on earth. I saw wonderfully committed people trying to ease the suffering of the most economically afflicted among us. They had very limited resources yet offered tools and encouragement to help them escape a world of poverty, drugs, and violence. They shed the warm light of hope on people who had known nothing but despair. Truly, this was God's work, and I wanted to be a part of it.

And it has been a wonderful experience serving on the board of the Hull House Foundation, the development arm of the Association, to help raise funds to support the wonderful work of this organization.



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You Can Do It, Too

I have no special talents or abilities, and there is nothing unique in what I have done. You can do it, too. You can contribute to the good of the people of our region while advancing your own set of contacts in Chicago's business and civic communities. Here are some guidelines to follow:

1. Find a non-profit community-based or business organization or a government committee or commission whose mission and purpose really interest you. You will be more successful and find more enjoyment if you believe in the goals and purpose of the organization.

This isn't difficult. Your local church, synagogue, or other house of worship or your local town or village government can be good sources of information on social service agencies in your area. Your business may have trade associations or professional societies that might be of interest to you. Local governments have numerous citizen volunteer committees or commissions on planning, zoning, veteran's affairs, etc. that are seeking people with your talents. Other organizations in Chicago, such as The Donors Forum of Chicago or Business Volunteers for the Arts, an organization that matches the needs of local arts-oriented groups with the skills and talents of business volunteers, are just a "click" away. The Internet is a

powerful tool, and you can explore sites such as chicagovolunteer.net and volunteermatch.org.

2. Once onboard a non-profit, approach volunteer service with the same discipline and commitment as you do your business activity. Prove to other board members that you are there to serve the needs of the organization, not your personal interests.

3. Once you have demonstrated your commitment, friendships develop. It is only then that substantive business opportunities arise.

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