

# IT'S ALL ABOUT INTEGRITY

by Donna Messer

**There is a new buzzword taking the world by storm: Integrity. In today's ever-changing world, we need to revisit the people we know, that in the past we have held in high esteem. No longer does position equate to respect and trust, now everyone has to earn that respect.**

How do we revisit and find out who is willing to communicate with us, to share their information? Strange as it may seem, it's still called networking—only this time it's for insight and integrity, not just for resources or contacts.

As a journalist, I have been interviewing high profile men and women and asking them to talk about themselves and their core values. It has been important to me to get to know not only the professional being, but also the personal one. The one who is a family member, a friend, a volunteer, and a responsible community citizen. With this new era, my role has become even more valuable as I travel across the country searching for that new culture of integrity. The word has lost meaning over the past decade and many of our colleagues have stopped practicing that important and ethical art of networking.

I have developed a rapport with the individuals who grant me interviews; because these are the men and women who have agreed to share not only their professional bio, but also their personal mandate. My referrals for them are always ethical and never without their permission.

I compare the challenges that are occurring in networking to what has been happening with Bill 198, which calls for compliance and transparency within our public corporations. It requires everyone from the top down to be willing to show and tell the world all about themselves and their relationship within the corporate world.

While compliance is critical, it is just one step toward a greater reward. Having strong ethics, good governance, and reliable reporting can lead to the bigger benefits of enhanced operations, reassured stakeholders, restored corporate culture, and even potential long-term cost reductions. I compare using Sarbanes-Oxley and the Canadian equivalents, as a methodology that is building a bridge to better business performance. Corporate leaders who embrace the spirit of the requirements will get a re-energized company, reassured investors, and maybe even reduced costs. That is what ethical, effective networking needs to replicate. We should be building bridges to better business wherever we go, providing our contacts with transparency.

Networking has taken a huge step forward, crossing the barriers of buying and selling, and moving into a world of trust, integrity, and ethics. Today, networking is getting to know each other, to become comfortable referring, not just because you belong to a referral network, but because you have taken the time to get to know each other and have willingly shared critical information that makes it a more transparent introduction.

Again, the new rules of networking call for strong ethics, good governance, and reliable reporting. No longer do we refer just because that is what networking is supposed to do. Now we use a system that gives everyone the chance to really get to know who we are dealing with.

## The Six Steps to Compliance when it comes to networking with integrity.

- 1. Opportunity.** Recognize that whenever you meet with someone new, you have an opportunity to get to know that person. Not just a quick business card exchange, but an actual conversation where you can take the time to find common ground. Once you have identified the commonality, you can move towards building a bridge between yourself and that person. People like people who are like themselves; they buy from them, sell to them, and they refer them.
- 2. Reconnect.** You have had the first encounter, and have decided it is worthwhile to follow up with another meeting or conversation. How should you make that next connection and where is the value for each of you? It's all in the planning. You have found common ground; use it to make the next encounter profitable. Share a resource that has merit, perhaps an article or an upcoming event. You know how to connect, you asked at your first meeting and learned e-mail was the communication tool of choice. You reconnect using where you met the first time in the subject line. This helps bring back the memory of your first encounter.
- 3. Commit.** You have scheduled a meeting, you want to build a bridge that will provide an entry into a new market, meet new colleagues, and even provide opportunities for business development. This meeting cannot just be for what you want; it has to be valuable to both sides of this new connection. You must commit to sharing not only relevant and timely information; you must make sure that you have permission to do so. When you meet, bring with you verified contacts that are willing to be referred. Start the conversation with the words "how can we help each other, and mean it!" Honour and integrity must be a key component of your meeting. Provide a bio of yourself and your company and ask for a similar package from your new colleague. Recognize that this meeting is not just about business, this meeting is about friendship, trust, and a new culture of integrity.
- 4. Strategize.** Making full use of a new contact makes good sense. Do a little strategizing before the meeting. Who do you know that might be a valuable contact for your new colleague? Make those connections in advance and ask for permission to make the referrals or introductions. This will not only make the meeting more profitable, it will establish a relationship that is based on an ethical arrangement where referrals are already in place.
- 5. Negotiate.** As Canadians, we often assume rather than speaking frankly. We need to establish just what the roles will be for each side of this new connection. If we are comfortable with our newly found colleague, it is acceptable to make suggestions that might not already be apparent. As an example: I'm in the manufacturing business and my market has so far been Canadian, I'm ready to move into an international market, and I need contacts that are honourable and ethical in this new arena. By asking for referrals, and for actual introductions, you are setting the stage for reciprocal arrangements for the other side of this new connection. It is simply an old proverb with a new twist, "Ask and you receive, knock and the door will be opened." This will only work if you are able to provide the same or similar services for each other. Networking with integrity, cannot be a one-way street, there must be a win on both sides of the introduction.
- 6. Communicate.** Once you have established the relationship and that trust factor is part of your arrangement, let others know that you have found a company, a colleague who has high integrity, and is worthy of knowing. Third party referrals are the best way for any business or individual to build the bridge they need to more profitable connections. Effective networking starts by building rapport, it progresses to exchanging relevant information, it moves on to finding profitable solutions for both sides, and it always maintains a high level of integrity, making ethics a top priority.

Networking with integrity is the future. Strong ethics, good governance, and reliable reporting, is what ethical, effective networking needs to replicate. **E**

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