

## 5 Questions The Best Networkers Use To Break The Ice

Ask any professional who has either climbed the corporate ladder or built their own, and they'll tell you there's no use in being lonely at the top. One of the most effective and impactful ways to excel in your career — regardless of industry, skill set, or function — is to create lasting bonds with like-minded individuals. This makes networking one of those necessary evils that should fall high on your list of career-building priorities.

Even so, motivational speaker and workplace expert Amy Cooper Hakim, Ph.D., says many workers get anxious in these pressure-filled settings, regardless if the elbow-rubbing is done online or in person. This might be because they're not handling the interactions in a way that stimulates and fosters a conversation.

"It can be incredibly uncomfortable to strike up a conversation when you are new to a group. At a networking function, we are meeting so many people that it is hard to keep track of who's who. Some hand out business cards and take business cards without making eye contact or conversing because they are more interested in giving a card to everyone than they are in making a true connection," she explains. "Some people shy away from deeper dialogue for fear of being rejected or pushed to the side when someone more important surfaces."

Here, a look at most compelling ways to widen your circle without, ahem, being #awkward:

Breaking the ice with a LinkedIn connection: Do your research

Thanks to clever email marketing deployments, LinkedIn makes it super simple to add everyone in your contacts to your network. While a click-of-a-button to bulk invite everyone you sort-of-kind-of-know might feel like a no-brainer, associate director of marketing communication at Captivate, Raquel Hudson begs to differ.

Instead, your friend requests should be targeted and specific, and based on thorough digging into a person or a company that you'd genuinely like to connect with. Hudson says to research a recent industry-related article that shares insight into their line of expertise as part of your intro message. "Be sure to include a question that encourages them to respond and hopefully start a dialogue. This may be the easiest ice-breaking environment because you have the option to draft and redraft before sending," she adds.

With a friend-of-a-friend: Don't bury the lead

When one of your well-connected, ever-generous pals "has just the perfect job opportunity!" for you and encourages you to email someone they know, you might struggle with what to write. Here's where Hudson says it's important to skip the flowery, indulgent niceties and get to the point. You can either ask your friend to make the introduction directly or include his or her name in the subject of your email. This makes it much more likely they'll open your pitch.

Career expert Jennifer Hill also suggests creating a draft that will build a symbiotic relationship that's mutually beneficial for your new friend-of-a-friend connection. So, ask the person you already know to share some personal insight that will help you get your foot in the door. "The most effective way to network is to find out what really matters to that person and then find a way to contribute or share with

another person in a meaningful way. Once you have done so, you have set the foundation for a symbiotic relationship,” she says.

At a networking function: Work your way out — and be bold

You have your nametag pinned perfectly, a glass of somethin’ something’ in hand, nothing in your teeth and you’re ready to start mingling your way to a better job. But, uh, where do you begin? Hudson suggests taking micro steps outside of your personal comfort zone by introducing yourself to the person who is nearest to you. “A simple ‘Hi my name is ... what do you do?’ always works,” she says. “People love to talk about themselves, so this listen closely and you’ll likely have something in common or at least you can ask for more detail which keeps the conversation going.”

Before you even leave the office to head to the event space, Hill says to try out one of her go-to tools that requires little effort: Wear something bright that sparks conversation. “One of my favorite things to wear to a networking event is my blue suede shoes. Both men and women will come up to me to discuss the shoes,” she explains. “This creates an immediate opening to naturally connect with someone without having to worry about what to say to open up the conversation.”

At a function on behalf of your boss: Define the goal

Thanks to a last-minute deadline, a personal diversion or their waning interest, but it’s 5 p.m. and your manager wants you to take their place at a networking happy hour. Before you agree, ask a pointed question that gets to the goal of the evening. Are there certain people you should speak to? A company that’s making waves in your industry? New business opportunities? Then, attend with a positive attitude.

“Do a quick LinkedIn search so you can put faces to names and approach the right people with confidence,” Hudson says. “You can approach other attendees with a joke like ‘so did your boss make you come to this event too or are you the boss who is making everyone attend?’ ”

In a new industry group: Find the happy people

Switching industries requires frank perseverance and the ability to self-motivate with a whole new learning curve. But Hakim says meeting others in the field you’re hoping to break into will help to give you stamina.

That being said, if you’re a former teacher walking into a room full of front-end developers, it’s normal to feel a tad out of your league. That’s why she says to find the happiest-looking folks and — wait for it! — smile! “Make eye contact and introduce yourself. Share that this is your first event and that you are eager to meet new people. They will likely introduce themselves and also ask you more about yourself,” she adds.

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