

Your Most Valuable Professional Asset!

By Henry S. Givray



often say that two of the most valuable business assets a company can possess are strong partner relationships and the goodwill of others. As an individual professional, the most valuable asset you can possess is a *network of relationships built and nurtured around trust, respect, confidence and loyalty*. I say this because your opportunities, successes and fulfillment in the business world are invariably and intricately tied to other people's actions, reactions and decisions toward and about you. These "other people" include clients, bosses, peers, people who work for you, industry or professional associates, service providers such as attorneys and consultants, and other professional acquaintances and friends.

If you are fortunate enough to have developed such a network of relationships, the dividends are numerous and significant. Note that I am not referring to "networking" where the goal is to go out and meet as many people and make as many contacts for the purpose of generating new business leads, improving your odds of making a sale, uncovering a new business opportunity or finding a new job. Of course that type of networking is important in the business world. However, what I'm referring to is a much deeper set of relationships that are cultivated over time and which endure over a lifetime.

The people in your network of deep relationships will help you grow and improve your personal performance. During difficult and challenging times, they provide an invaluable resource to help you problem solve. They will raise your spirits and comfort you. During times of success and achievement, they will celebrate and cheer you on. This will give you the confidence to achieve even greater. During times of uncertainty, they will encourage you, support you, offer advice and challenge you to explore alternatives. During times of need they will be there for you. They will open doors, offer genuine praise, provide an empathetic ear, be a reference on your behalf, recognize your efforts and results, defend you when others speak ill of you, and care enough to give you honest and direct feedback. I can go on, but the simple truth is that their trust, respect, confidence and loyalty will enrich and fulfill you.

From my experience, people in your network of deep relationships will exhibit certain behaviors toward you. See how many people you know who fit this profile in their interactions with you:

- Trust and believe in you
- Engage in open, frank discussions with you
- Give you the benefit of the doubt
- View small issues as non-issues and big issues as opportunities for mutual problem-solving and learning

- Openly tell you how much they appreciate what you do for them
- Ask for your help with important and/or difficult assignments because they know you will deliver
- Defend you when you are not there
- Refer others to you
- Honor you by asking for your assistance and help on important professional and/or personal matters
- Always show respect for your positions and opinions, even if they don't share them
- Accept your feedback, both positive and negative
- Openly praise your work
- Support your goals and aspirations
- Do not second guess your decisions and/or actions
- Show genuine care and concern for you as a person

Achieving this type of behavior from others is pretty compelling and powerful!

So how can you develop such network? Ultimately success in developing such a network of relationships is about character, personal performance and chosen values such as integrity, honor, magnanimity, fairness, courage and generosity. Over the years I have also learned that there are certain habits and behaviors one can put into action day-to-day that go a long way to building and nurturing the kind of relationships described above. I'd like to share some of these with you. These are my "guiding principles" which I strive hard to practice everyday, continually hone, and never compromise. They may seem obvious and one can argue they should be "no-brainers" for everyone to practice. Unfortunately that isn't the case. My experience is that these principles are more often the exception than the rule. Also, people who are recipients of the behavior underlying these principles, while delighted, are as often surprised.

1. Go out of your way to serve.

Practice "servant-leadership." Coined by author and scholar Robert Greenleaf, servant-leadership is about a genuine willingness and devotion to serving the needs of others. It's about putting service ahead of self-interest. And it's about serving with your heart, not just your brain. As a noted author on customer service wrote, "serving others is not a transaction, it's a bond."

2. Always, always keep your word — no matter what!

Do what you say you are going to do, when you said you were going to do it. Always. No excuses. When



circumstances are such that you can't keep your word, communicate immediately.

3. Tell the truth.

People respect the truth whether it is good or bad news. They may not like the bad news, but they will respect you for telling it like it is.

4. Do what's right versus what's convenient, expedient, popular or personally beneficial.

Most of the time you will know what's right in your gut. When you're not sure, seek out the individuals in your network.

5. Always return ALL of your phone calls and emails within 24 hours.

This is an important principle that is easier to practice than you may think. Make this a very high priority and a habit. If a longer, more thoughtful response is required and your schedule does not allow you adequate time then respond anyway, simply acknowledging that you have received the request and when you expect to be able to fully respond. Then make sure you do it (see #2). The only exception to the 24-hour principle is a call or email from someone you don't know who is trying to sell you something.

6. Communicate with clarity, openness and frankness.

Confront the difficult or uncomfortable issues. Don't let them fester. If done with fairness, openness and objectivity, you will earn respect and trust.

7. Defend others who you know are being unfairly criticized or talked about.

Do it openly and with conviction but not with anger, self-righteousness or emotion. Your courage and sense of fairness will be noticed and appreciated.

8. Show genuine appreciation.

One of the deepest needs in every human being is the desire to be recognized and appreciated.

9. Develop a reputation for hard work.

A strong work ethic broadcasts your genuine commitment to excellence and getting the job done, no matter what. You'll achieve some of your greatest accomplishments during times when you're tired or discouraged but kept on working.

10. Have the courage and wisdom to surface and resolve conflict you have with others or them with you.

As appropriate, advise, counsel and facilitate conflict resolution between members of your team or among members of external teams.

11. Demonstrate diplomacy, empathy and compassion in your dealings with others, no matter how difficult.

Being kind, gracious, caring and non-judgmental towards others builds emotional bonds that last forever and will withstand the test of contention, conflict and dispute.

12. Be accessible to others.

No filters or gatekeepers.

13. Don't make excuses.

Take personal responsibility, say you are sorry, ask how you can make it up and then move on.

14. Make others look good.

Take responsibility to work for the benefit of the other person.

15. Earn respect by doing your homework, preparing your point of view and presenting it with conviction.

Take the time to be thoughtful in your response. But be willing to admit you are wrong when the logic or evidence is on the other side.

16. Put it in writing.

But be brief. There is no better discipline for thinking out a problem than a short memo.

17. When possible, respond to the short requests first.

Suppose you have two requests you need to respond to. The first one will take 5 minutes. The second one will take you 3 hours and is very important. The temptation is to do the longer, more important one first. But if you do, the first person is left waiting 3 hours and 5 minutes. On other hand, if you respond to the first person first, the second person will only be waiting an additional 5 minutes.

18. Always communicate issues or problems promptly and openly.

No surprises!

19. Go for face-to-face interactions if you are trying to build trust, resolve conflict, understand feelings or develop relationships.

Email and voice mail are effective tools for communicating information and facts, but often fail miserably in these other areas.

20. Pay attention to the little things; they mean more than you think.

This is not about showering an individual with gifts. It's more about remembering the little things. Writing a handwritten note. Asking about a loved one or important event. Remembering something important to the individual shows genuine interest.

The value of your professional life and career is not measured by the number of deals you've closed, the impressive titles you've held or the amount of wealth you've accumulated. It's measured through the quality of your relationships, the impact you've made on other people's lives, and your willingness and capacity to serve. As the saying goes, "you reap what you sow." If you diligently and genuinely practice the 20 principles above, what you put in over time will come back to you multiplied! •

Henry S. Givray is Chairman of the Board of Directors of SmithBucklin, the association management and services company more organizations turn to than any other. He served as SmithBucklin President & CEO from 2002 to 2015. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and top national news media. Henry has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings and educational forums that were attended by diverse audiences. Recognizing that growing leaders from within is essential to an organization's enduring success and vitality, Henry created and facilitates two intensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The SmithBucklin Leadership Learning Forum is a nine-month program for top performing employees at various levels within the company. The SmithBucklin Leadership Institute is a six-month experience for board members of SmithBucklin client associations.