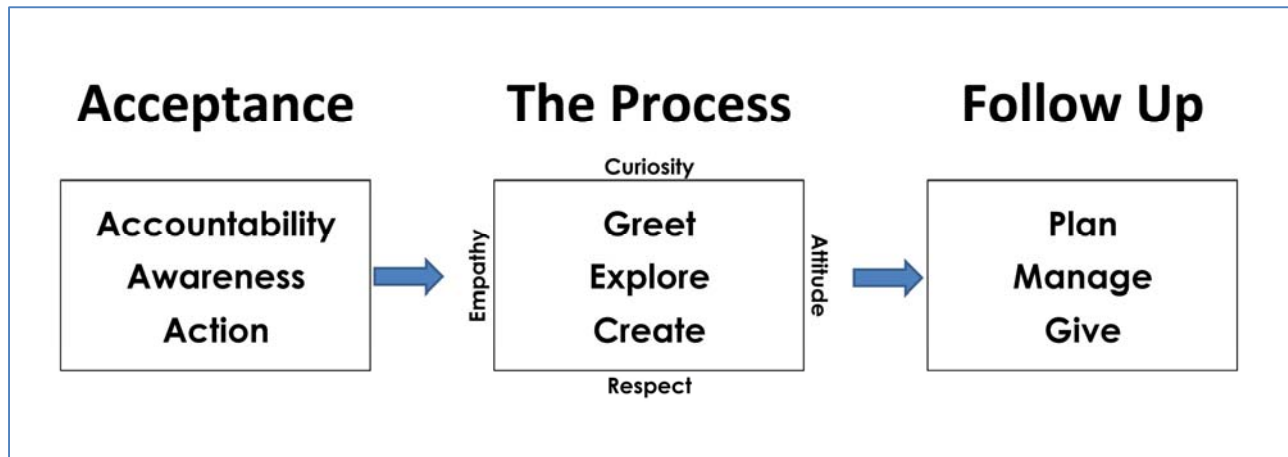


Authentic Networking System



The System

The Authentic Networking System consists of three components: Acceptance, The Process, and Follow Up. Sounds simple I know, but there is more to it. Each of the components can be broken down into pieces. Each of the pieces are just as important as each component itself.

The system needs all the components. Without all three, networking won't be successful or at least it won't be sustainable. As we meet people it won't always be rainbows, unicorns, and sunshine. There will be times when relationships struggle, meeting new people is uncomfortable, or events don't go as planned. Having a system in place helps us figure out what can be done differently so that we can keep the faith and continue to grow or cultivate our connections.

Acceptance

Acceptance is about coming to the realization that our decisions and actions play a role in how we do with networking. It's realizing that we ultimately hold the key to whether or not we are effective with making connections with others.

This can be a touchy subject because it's a double edged sword. On one hand, it means that we are accountable – we are what we do and if something doesn't go well, we have to own up to the idea that the responsibility for performance is on us. On the other hand, it also means we have the power to make the change, need to be aware of any changes, and that we actually take action to that end. It means that other people can't prevent us from making a difference in our lives. We hold the keys. The question is: do we use them?

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The Process

The process is what we all understand networking to be: meeting people. I feel that it can be broken down into steps that help determine where we can do better when it comes to initiating, creating, and cultivating relationships.

The process cannot stand alone however. It must be wrapped with C.A.R.E. to be effective, because if we don't care as we meet new people through The Process, the connection risks being superficial and not sustainable.

C.A.R.E.

C.A.R.E. is meant to be both a word and an acronym. You do truly have to care for The Process to be effective. If we attempt to connect with others without truly caring about them it won't work. First of all our efforts will be hollow and not fulfilled. Secondly, those with whom we connect will see right through us and pick up on that "vibe."

C is for curiosity. We need to be curious about the person we are meeting. A is for attitude about networking. We need to be willing to embrace the serendipity and possibilities that networking brings. R is for respect. We need to respect the person we are meeting in all the ways that can be conveyed through a conversation and intent. E is for empathy. We need to show empathy towards people we meet – and to that end – realize that empathy is not only for sad things, but also for simply feeling what others are feeling whether it be happy, amazed, frustrated, or otherwise.

At the end of the day we simply need to care to establish any kind of relationship.

Follow Up

What's the point of meeting someone if we don't do anything with it? I think this is a critical question. It is also really important for us introverts who strongly prefer time to ourselves. How is this balanced?

It's balanced by a deliberate approach to managing time and effort. Part of following up is not only letting people know that you appreciate them, but also being sure to keep in touch. At the same time, anthropologists have been saying for a long time that we can only really maintain so many (about 150 -200) people in our close network. Follow up takes this into account.

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Accountability

The first element of Acceptance is Accountability. We are the product of our decisions and values. We decide to put one value in front of another. Yes, there are circumstances presented to us all, but we still apply our values and beliefs when it comes to what to do.

This is critical because if you don't accept this accountability – if it is always someone else's fault or decision – how can you change it if you don't own it? This can be sobering and also be tremendously liberating. You can make a difference. You just need to make that decision.

Awareness

The second element of Acceptance is Awareness. We all have strengths. We all have weaknesses. We all preferences, tendencies, accents, and quirks. Being aware of these can be important when it comes to networking because it can make a difference in how we communicate and connect with others.

To be aware means to pay attention to whether or not we are being heard. Whether or not our message is getting through. Am I speaking too softly for the environment? Am I an introvert and need to prepare for events differently? Am I focused or distracted from the events of the day? Do I have an accent or vernacular that is difficult for another person to understand? Any or all of this or more could make the difference.

Action

The last element of Acceptance is Action. If we don't take it, we likely won't experience the results we seek. If we don't initiate something, nothing likely is going to change at the pace or in the direction of our choosing. Additionally, if something isn't going our way, taking action is also the means by which *that* is changed, too.

It's important to remember Action is more than just reactionary. Action is also anticipating, planning, seeking, thinking. If we desire change, we must take action in a number of ways because sometimes the change we seek requires growth. Growth will likely require learning or stretching, neither of which will happen without our doing something about it.

This can also be a tough one because results are not guaranteed. We can't get bogged down with analysis of what action to take for too long (how long to take is a whole different topic), but we want to at least have a reasonable chance of success. Alas, the answer may never be clear, but as Jim Collins wrote: "Life offers no guarantees. Still, we must act."

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Curiosity

Curiosity is the C in C.A.R.E. Hopefully, it's pretty obvious why this has to come before The Process in the Authentic Networking System: we need to be curious about the other person to engage in a conversation and to elicit responses. Without curiosity a conversation dies fairly quickly. Without it, the conversation and information is one sided. Not much going on there.

The less obvious reason I think curiosity is a part of C.A.R.E. is because it's one of the ways we can demonstrate that we care. Asking about someone else shows interest. Asking about someone else shows that you want to get to know them. And it's not only just about their job, but how they got to where they are, why they like what they do for recreation, or what they've learned along the way. Everyone has had different experiences. Ask someone about theirs. You never know what you might learn.

Attitude

Attitude might be the surprise component of C.A.R.E. The Attitude I speak of is the attitude we have toward, or the way we think about networking. When it comes to the uncertain nature of networking, having a good attitude about it will help quite a bit when connecting with others. A doubtful outlook on the prospects of networking or an overall sour demeanor will show through as conversations happen with others. I'd go so far as to say we need to embrace something bigger.

I suggest we embrace the notion of serendipity when it comes to our attitude about networking. All we know is what we have right now and to think of what is possible when considering who it is possible to meet should really brighten everyone's attitude. Sure we have to go out and find, or trust that we'll find these people, but consider for a moment all the experiences you've had along the way.

Life is a journey. I suggest we embrace the notion that amazing things can happen when we put ourselves out there to be touched by serendipity. We just need to have the right attitude and go do it.

Respect

Regardless of where someone is when we meet them or what differences we hold, respect for one another is crucial when considering The Process. We all have different experiences that have led to different perspectives and different attitudes and different situations. We need to appreciate that, regardless of how someone else comes across to us, they are still a person and, in my humble opinion, still worthy of respectful treatment and behavior.

This is the other side of Awareness. While we have our own ways, so do others. Just because someone has a different opinion, different way of speaking, or may have a different way of doing things, it doesn't mean he or she doesn't deserve at least our respectful attention. Even in the rare circumstance of someone being incompatible with your values or beliefs, we can still be respectful with either the conversation or with the disengagement.

Empathy

Appropriately battling clean-up in the C.A.R.E. line up is empathy. Empathy is the bond. The bond between us that comes from understanding how someone is feeling or where they are coming from. Empathy conveys that we have been heard and that we matter to the other person.

The moment you don't think this doesn't come before the process, consider a conversation that lacks one participant's empathy for another who shares troubling news about a mutual acquaintance. The person observing the other's apparent lack of concern will not go unnoticed. Having relationships means we need to interact and to interact without empathy can lead to friction which disrupts the relationship or keeps a relationship from forming.

As I mentioned before, this is not all negative either. Consider that empathy is shown when we share someone's excitement over an accomplishment or amazement of a serendipitous moment (see Attitude from my previous post). When we think of caring about someone else, empathy plays a pretty big role in how that is shown.

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Greet

The Process has to start somewhere and it starts here, with Greet. Simple, right? Well, in some cases it gets over complicated. I truly believe that by breaking down The Process, we can look at this element in all of its simplicity: Find someone and say hello. At the same time, what's involved with that? Finding someone means having the courage to approach a stranger or a group. Saying hello means speaking and being able to articulate an introduction.

Again, this can and should be simple. Prepare for approaching a stranger or group by mentally preparing with selecting a Networking Play. Yes, if nerves are causing angst, pick a systematic way to proceed and make it a process. Same goes for the introduction: "Hello, I'm [insert your name here]. How are you?" will do nicely (I don't believe in the 30, 15, or even 10 second intro's at this point). Lastly, the physical... smile, eye contact, and firm handshake.

The thing about this is that whole "stranger" or "group" part can really mess with the mind when it shouldn't. We're all at events for the same reason: to meet each other. So why not dive in? It's all part of The Process.

Explore

Once "Hello" is covered, next up in the Authentic Networking System is to explore the world of your conversation partner. I've read lists of ice breakers that run the gamut as far as types of questions to ask, but from my perspective there are some questions fresh relationships just aren't ready for yet so I feel that limits are appropriate.

Getting to initially know someone, especially in a business networking environment, can effectively be done by sticking to F.O.R.M.E.L.: Family, Organization, Recreation, Message, Event, Location. Almost all of these topics are safe territory for initial conversations. All except Family. Family is ok *only* if the other person mentions it first (ie. "The family and I went to Chicago last week."), otherwise best to avoid for reasons I'll save for another time.

The rest are complete fair game as far as inviting conversation or asking deeper questions. This is the small talk that so many people lament, but if we listen, this is also where to gold in getting to know someone is. If we listen for what people don't say as much as what they do say, opportunities for people to explain themselves and share more about themselves appear. And when they do, we can create the bonds and connections from which relationships are established.

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Create

The bonds and connections between people are created when we can relate to one another in some manner. We're not completely done yet with a fully established relationship, it is only the *creation* of it, which is the final element of The Process. Just to be clear, The Process is meeting people. Getting to know them. The deep stuff, if it develops comes later.

For now, Create means to find those things that allow us to share experience or have an association with the other person. If you and I have been to the same place, we share that experience. If we have the same penchant for a food or hobby or sport, we share those experiences. Bob Burg calls these Mini-Associations, and they are what help us feel that we are not alone – we are part of something more. Albeit, extremely small, but again, it is only just created. From here though you and I could talk for hours about personal development, the Outer Banks of North Carolina, or brew pubs. Because you and I can relate, we have created a bond that allows for something more to possibly grow. Which is a really good thing.

Plan

Planning is perhaps one of the few things the Authentic Networking System has that I hear others rarely speak of. This is the first element of Follow Up and this has to do with being quite deliberate with your networking. Now, this can be taken as far or as lightly as you wish, but I would argue that it is worth anyone's time who's calendar is complicated.

Planning is about looking at networking being a part of what you do as a professional and making it intentional. How many times do you want to have coffee with someone each month? Do you have tickets to a pro team that provide great conversation time? Golf much? Host your own networking lunches? On top of all this, how many people would you like to keep in touch with on a regular basis? These folks will take some of those slots for coffee, sports, and lunch. Next question: How many new loose ties, new connections do you have time for or want to make time for?

There are no wrong answers here. Only your answers. It is your time – own it. At the same time, it should, in my opinion, be balanced out with opportunity cost of not meeting new people: what are you missing out on by not meeting new people?

Again, I don't hear too many other people talking about this, but it is worth bringing up and it is a part of this system.

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Manage

Now that you've figured out how much time you have to meet people and cultivate relationships, how do you manage that? You name them. The second element of Follow Up is putting names in the calendar so that you keep them in your life.

I think about it from a perspective of monthly, quarterly, semi-annually, or annually. You can obviously do it any way you prefer, but the idea here is to recognize there are people you want to have around you, want to be influenced by, or simply enrich your life. If this is the case, put them first. Manage your networking time instead of just let it happen around you.

Give

The final, and most important, element of the entire Authentic Networking System, is saved for last. Give. It may be saved for last, but in actuality it should be practiced throughout. Giving is what makes networking work. By giving to others we not only find fulfillment, but we put good back into the world.

We never know when something as simple as taking the time to talk to someone or a shred of wisdom or, to a closer contact, a heart-felt hug might make an enormous difference. It may be a pint of blood, a referral, an anonymous donation, or a random act of kindness. But any of these could bring brightness, life, or joy to someone else even if we never hear about it. Again, embrace the serendipity of what is possible and give.