Redefining Networking for the Twenty-First Century

- *"I just don't have a year to spend getting up to speed to do*
- *my job," David told me. David had hired me as an*
- *executive coach to help him accelerate his adaptation to a*
- *newly landed position. Instead of the few big and easily*
- *located potential customers he was accustomed to dealing*
- *with for his former employer, he now had to find the best*
- *prospects among a field of thousands of superficially similar*
- *businesses.*
- *Rather than target each potential customer individually*
- *or take a shotgun approach (broadcasting what he needed*
- *across his whole network), we focused on identifying the one*
- *key person he would choose to help enable him to*
- *accomplish his goal. The first step was to identify precisely*
- *what information he needed—one of the standard questions*
- *in the* Right Person–Right Approach method, *which in*
- *this case was "Who are the best potential customers in the*
- *new territory?"—to carry out his proposed strategy in*
- *the fastest and most efficient manner. (The Right Person–Right*
- *Approach method is at the heart of this book.) That led*

us to ask, "Who makes a business of knowing who the

top performers in the industry are?" We followed that

up with "How can I get that person to share that knowledge

with me?"

"This seems impossible," David told me when I

introduced the idea. "If it were that easy, everybody would

be doing it."

I replied, "Well, it's easy if you know how to do it—but

it is *impossible if you don't have the strategy, plan, and*

concept!"

The method we employed involved profiling potential

contacts to determine who would be most likely to have

exactly the right set of knowledge, relationships, personal

characteristics, abilities, and inclination to provide the infor-

mation David needed to narrow down and access the sea of

prospects. But how do you find someone like that? Inspired

and guided by the notion that such a person existed, David

asked industry colleagues to advise him about who

(1) had the knowledge he needed and (2) showed evidence

of a disposition to connect with others. As he framed his

questions in those terms, he realized he actually knew the

answer himself already; his screening confirmed this insight.

He then knew he likely had the right person in his sights.

After that, we designed an approach to the contact that

would virtually ensure willingness to share what amounted

to proprietary information. This was feasible because David

had been able, through his research, to determine precisely

how he could motivate his contact through offering some-

thing of perceived value in exchange for cooperation. At first,

David thought it audacious to approach such a person with

- *such a request. But he soon learned that people could have*
- *very good reasons for sharing information with him.*
- *Bottom line: Much to the amazement of his manage-*
- *ment, David was successful in acquiring the hidden informa-*
- *tion he needed to narrow the field of potential clients from*
- *thousands down to thirty of the most qualified. This dramati-*
- *cally shortened his learning curve and accelerated his time-to-*
- *performance. Within his first six months at a new job in an*
- *unfamiliar sector of his industry, David was able to become*
- *one of the top performers, and doubled his earnings.*

Why Does It Look So Easy?

Some people seem to be able to achieve their business objectives easily. Some people seem to find new jobs effortlessly—and very quickly to boot—whenever they want them. And others can raise funds when they need to do so, even when equally deserving entrepreneurs and charities fail. Is it really that easy for them? Or are they just profiting by blind luck?

Sometimes luck does play a part. But—like David—you can make your own luck, and then reaching your goals is easy, or at any rate a quick process, free of wasted energy. There's a saying: *Luck is when opportunity meets preparation.* Well, it is even more true with the approach outlined in this book.

The key is to selectively engage the right people, making sure you're not simply connected to them, but *well-connected*. If you do this carefully and thoughtfully in service of honest goals—in pursuit of work or opportunities where you can in fact deliver what you promise—you will not only

succeed in achieving your career or business goals, but you will also slice months, even years, off the time it normally takes people to achieve such goals.

Using the Right Person–Right Approach method:

- Busy executives with barely a few hours a week to devote to networking have streamlined the networking process and worked so efficiently that they've succeeded in spite of their busy schedules.

- Shy, introverted people who were uncomfortable asking others to meet with them have managed to present their talents and their assets so compellingly that the people they originally hesitated to approach were now asking *them* for meetings.

- Inexperienced students just out of school have convinced people in high places to work with them to achieve their early career objectives.

Once people learn the Right Person–Right Approach method, they don't go back to their old ways. Unlike so many new approaches or new grips or new swings, it is easy to put into practice. And all you need is one 450-yard drive to lock that experience into your networking memory. It is a reliable relationship-building road map for those seeking to achieve virtually any business or career goal; for example:

- Gathering critical market research and intelligence
- Generating client referrals

- Fundraising

- Performing a job search

- Making hiring and other personnel decisions

- Engineering a career change

- Performing due diligence

- Preparing for and engaging in interviews and negotiations

- Selecting vendors

- Making the transition into a new role or job

- Speeding up the sales process

Tasks like these come up over and over in the course of a career, some of them every day. From attorneys to research scientists, from entrepreneurs to managers, from veterans to rookies, the Right Person–Right Approach method provides a framework that enables people to precisely articulate objectives, find someone who can provide real help in carrying them out, and engage that person's interest in support of their goals.

What's Wrong with Networking Now?

As unemployment rises and prospects for increasing sales or raising capital grow scarcer, the element of fear can creep in. In the last few years, almost everyone has felt it, and people everywhere are looking for ways to help alleviate it. Meanwhile, employers have been asking their people

to become more resourceful, to do more with less, and to do it with a smile.

The best way to succeed in such a demanding and hypercompetitive environment is to make partnerships—synergies with colleagues, with vendors, with competitors, with anyone who might share a common goal and can help build mutual success. Such partnerships require strong, meaningful relationships, but networking to build real relationships is becoming a lost art just when it is becoming more and more widely viewed as the key to success in the twenty-first century, even in fields far removed from sales and other areas where human interactions are at the forefront.

For example, years ago when Stephen R. Covey cited a study about the performance of engineers with Bell Labs/Lucent, the researchers had found that the most successful engineers were the ones who reached out most to internal and external helpers, often picking up the insights they needed to complete a project within a day. (Others took rather longer than a day to work out the solution on their own, and some never did so.) This difference was so marked that success levels correlated with access to other people with relevant knowledge—and not with experience or education in engineering.

And Jeff Dyer and Hal Gregersen, the grad school professors who run the "Innovator's DNA" Web site (http://innovatorsdna.com), agree. Among the key skills that make innovators stand out from the crowd, they list "finding and testing ideas through a network of diverse individuals to get radically different perspectives"—that is, networking.

Prior to the Internet–cell phone–immediate and universal access revolution, networking was largely accomplished one to one, with a view to establishing mutually beneficial and lasting relationships. What passes for social networking in the business world today has almost nothing to do with that. Instead, it is increasingly about accumulating as many connections as possible via Twitter and LinkedIn and Facebook and similar social networking sites (SNSs). More and more people are spending more and more time texting and instant-messaging and tweeting and linking their way through the day in the fond belief that all this effort enhances their social networks.

Don't get me wrong. Online social networking is here to stay, and it can be very valuable; it just doesn't serve well as your only form of networking. Why? This new and rapidly changing networking environment has created a situation in which many people are scrambling to connect with as many others as they can, in whatever ways they can, in an effort to promote a "personal brand" and thus stand out from an increasingly large crowd in an increasingly competitive environment. But all this effort is producing little by way of measurable results. Increasing the number of contacts in a virtual network tends to come at the expense of building mutually beneficial relationships with specific people. It is too easy to indulge in one-to-many messages and bypass the more difficult—and often difficult-to-justify—time-intensive exchanges that lead to real connection and exchange of measurable value.

Unfortunately, the pure friend-link-and-tweet school of social networking makes it all too easy to reduce your chances of achieving your career and business objectives

rather than enhance them. Of course, it can and does produce results for people, but it leaves too much to chance. Incautious broadcast networking can contaminate your network, as you will shoot yourself in the foot if you are unclear about what you want and why you are worthy of help, or you approach people in a one-way exchange, or both.

Much of the communication and so-called networking that takes place on social networking Web sites consists of what Scott Berkun identifies as nothing more than "noise." As he explains in a blog entry charmingly titled "Calling Bullshit on Social Media," the majority of this activity involves "people forwarding things they were forwarded that almost none of them appear to have read." These eager forwarders seem to think that frequency and quantity are the most important qualities in their communications with their networks. What they don't realize is that their untargeted attempts at connecting with others quickly and impersonally can become annoying at best—and a liability at worst. If you say the wrong things to the wrong people at the wrong times often enough, it won't be long before you turn them off—permanently—to the point where they'll remember your name for all the wrong reasons.

Not that there's any built-in problem with promoting your brand and developing a large number of Internet "friends." You don't have to stay away from social networking sites; they're playing an important role in how people connect with each other these days. But more often than not, this casual, virtual approach will not help you achieve your specific business and career objectives.

Not always—as the saying goes, "Even a blind pig finds an occasional acorn"—but broadcasting your profile to others you've come to know remotely through the Internet produces results only sporadically. Although it may feel exciting to engage in the online social networking scramble, you don't need to hunt blindly: there's a much better way to get what you want. The Right Person–Right Approach method will teach you how to target your messages so that virtually every one of them communicates something important and meaningful—and goes to specific people in your network rather than being broadcast far and wide. But beyond that, it will teach you the strategies and techniques to be successful in achieving your business and career goals in the shortest possible time.

What Is the Right Person–Right Approach Method?

The Right Person–Right Approach method for using social networks to achieve business and career objectives grew out of my consulting practice, which is unique in many ways. I'm an executive coach *and* an agent. That is, rather than simply advising people how to progress, I also serve a role much like that of a sports agent, helping put clients in front of the right enablers and decision makers and working with them right through to the point where they close the deal and secure the partner, funding, job, client, or whatever goal they are pursuing.

Taking on both of these roles means that I put my own relationship capital on the line with every one of my clients. Of the many definitions out there, I prefer

the one that regards *relationship capital* as the store of goodwill that builds up between contacts and associates through mutually beneficial exchanges. The need to preserve relationship capital means that I've had to develop a framework that works every time; after all, many of the people my clients engage with are either already valuable parts of my network or potential additions to it, and—as I've learned to my cost—any misstep will lead to erosion of key relationships. So I get a lot of practice in helping to identify exactly the right person for someone to talk to and in guiding people to exactly the right approach, so that both parties achieve an outcome that's mutually beneficial.

All this isn't something I was taught or that I do by instinct, though I did start out with a strong desire to make connections—that is, to introduce everyone to everyone else. I learned networking the hard way.

After starting out in the executive search industry, I decided to move into outplacement—not only was it steadier work, but it was also better suited to my temperament. I'd discovered that I was a closet coach. In executive search, you're supposed to be more transactional than relational (and I say this with the utmost respect for my many search colleagues); the idea is to find the best candidate for the job and then move on, without trying to coach anyone on career development, and for sure without trying to coach anyone you've already placed. If the fee was paid and the guarantee was up, it was all over. No more hand-holding. But I couldn't resist spending inordinate

amounts of time advising people, even though my boss frowned on it, so I had to do it in hiding.

Executive outplacement, by contrast, took the opposite view—to help the person find the job, you had to be willing to do some work on the person, too. In other words, it was a business that actually paid people to do what I was sneaking into my practice.

So I did the logical thing: I went to the Directory of Executive Outplacement Consulting Firms (www. Kennedyinfo.com), listed all the best outplacement firms, and then asked my dad, Elliot—who was with the management consulting firm Harbridge House—whether he knew anyone who could help me get in to talk to any of them. He told me to call one of his friends at the search firm Korn Ferry, who likely knew people in the business.

So I called the guy, identified myself, and said, "Hey, my dad said you might be able to help me. Do you know anybody at these companies?" I reeled off the list. He thought a minute and lobbed me a referral to Warren Radtke, founding principal and managing director of Right Management Consulting's Boston Office—the most successful office out of one hundred worldwide. I'd identified Right Management as one of the firms I really wanted to work for.

I phoned Radtke and told him I'd like to work for his company. It was my lucky day; I later realized that he was humoring me—he could surely tell by my voice and approach that I was a wet-behind-the-ears young guy—but he agreed to see me. I thought I was Super Networking

Man—three connections and in! I was already picturing my office, with my feet up on the desk.

But when I met with him, as soon as we got past the pleasantries, five minutes into the interview, my ego began to shrink. Radtke peppered me with question after question about the outplacement industry, about his company, about the kinds of things I expected to do in the job I was seeking—and I didn't know jack. After letting me squirm for a few minutes, he put *his* feet up on his desk and said, "Kid, when you have learned everything you can possibly learn about the outplacement business, the forces that are driving the business, the technologies that are shaping the future of the business, the economics that are affecting the business, all of my competitors and how they differentiate themselves from one another, the sources of information you need to know about the business, and the thought leaders in the industry, then give me a call and maybe we can talk some more."

And that was one of the biggest favors anyone has ever done for me. Not that I recognized it at the time, of course. I slunk out of Warren Radtke's office like a dog with its tail between its legs, wondering how I could ever face my dad or his friend who'd given me the referral. How could I tell them what had happened? Well, it finally occurred to me: I could concentrate on the bright side—he hadn't told me to get lost; he'd told me to do some stuff and get back to him—and that was all anybody else needed to know. Besides, maybe taking that attitude would even do me some good. That was my true nature reasserting itself—as one boss often assured me, I'm a delusionary optimist.

Anyway, as soon as I got home, I began to call anyone I could think of who knew anything at all about the outplacement industry. Hundreds of calls later (remember, I was a recruiter; I already had a cauliflower ear from that job's required hundred-plus calls per day), I managed to land meetings with twenty-one people who were willing, if not necessarily able, to help me try to bone up on the intelligence I needed to gather so I could go back to Radtke and request another meeting with a straight face.

Did that get me what I needed? Hardly. Outplacement wasn't all I didn't know jack about—I also didn't know how to screen these people to find out if they would be able to provide the right information, so I just talked to all the ones who would talk to me and asked for whatever they felt like offering. And for a long time, I didn't even come close to accomplishing my objective.

Again, the sheer volume of my aimless, misdirected, and unfocused calls—which I could make based on my hard-earned experience—was my only advantage here.

The first twenty people I begged for help responded by telling stories and doling out little bits of data, none of which came together and added up to anything useful. Finally, and basically by accident, I got lucky again. I wound up sitting across a desk from Ginny Rehberg—president and CEO of Rehberg Management Group, a Boston-area executive coaching, outplacement, and career consulting firm—who happened to be exactly the person I needed to talk to. She had the information and the contacts I was looking for, and she was willing to sit down with me and give me what she knew (and I didn't) that I needed.

She said, essentially, "OK, here's who you need to call and here's what you need to know, and here's exactly how to approach them to demonstrate that you know everything you would be expected to counsel their client about." She spent more than an hour and a half with me, and at the end of our meeting I had seven names. More important, I knew enough about what each of those seven people had to offer that I could ask them the right questions. Over the next month, I managed to gather the intelligence I needed.

I finally mustered up the audacity to circle back to Warren Radtke again. Well aware that I had been given a rare second chance in this world of job interviewing, I knew this was my last shot. I asked for the second meeting he'd (sort of) said he would grant me. When we got together, I thanked him for the exercise. "Here's the information you recommended I find out about the industry," I told him, proceeding to present a thorough report as scripted by Ginny. Then I said, "And here's a list of companies you don't have as clients, and here's what I think you need to do to get them as clients, and here are all the decision makers at those companies who will return my call within twenty hours."

He offered me a job on the spot. This despite the fact that I'd been told over and over that I was much too young to be coaching executives and professionals. No one could believe that I'd been hired for that job. If they only knew—it was by pure luck and an inordinate amount of wasted energy that I got it.

Now that I knew firsthand how much of a difference it could make, I began to keep a close eye on the successes

and the failures of my own networking attempts and those of my clients and the hundreds of networkers I was advising and watching. Radtke's company had me conducting a series of professional networking workshops where executives shared their goals and attempted to find contacts who would lead them to the jobs they were looking for, and that became the start of my own research. In the course of observing many such meetings and thinking over what people said and how they reacted to others in the group, I was astonished at the number of weak introductions and lame summaries I was hearing from people who thought they were eloquently stating their needs.

The real moment-of-truth experience—the one that helped me really see how bad most networking attempts were—was when I was a guest speaker for the leading executive networking organization, Execunet. After I spoke, I participated in their standard networking breakout session. It was painful to watch.

The questions seemed simple enough: "Where have you been? Where are you going? And how can we help?" The answers to the last question were vague and uniform, boiling down to versions of "Increase my network in order to find a new position." Few offered to share much in the way of contacts and referrals. Instead, they mainly went on to ask, "Does anyone know of a company looking for a CEO [or a COO or a CFO]?" Predictably, when asked for information in this way, the group would respond with a collective head shake (palpably thinking, "If I did, I'd be there instead of here!"), and the would-be executive would sit down and watch the next person go through the

same pitiful process. They were all wasting their time in the meeting, probably not talking to the right people and certainly not taking the right approach. But it was considered best-practice networking at the time.

Who's the Right Person? What's the Right Approach?

As I started working with individual clients, a pattern emerged. When an introduction or referral led to a hugely successful outcome, the parties could be described in these terms:

- *Knowledgeable:* Successful networkers knew what they wanted and were talking to contacts who had the exact knowledge or relationships they needed.

- *Inclined:* Successful meetings were with contacts who understood the value of investing time helping other people.

- *Available:* Successful connections required the follow-through to deliver—not just a promise to do so that never translated into finding time for a meeting.

- *Like-minded:* Successful exchanges began with a real connection—some commonality between the net-worker and the contact.

- *Obligated:* Successful requests for assistance hap-pened when the contact felt an obligation based on a referral or some previous association with the networker.

- *Motivated:* Successful requests for assistance required more than a sense of obligation, however; the networker still needed to offer the contact a reason to go out of the way to help, to stimulate their willingness to help.

- *Able:* Successful outcomes happened only when both sides managed to do what was needed; the contact had to be able to present their inquiry in a form the networker could grasp, and the networker had to be able to accept help.

If one or more of these features wasn't present, an introduction was likely to fail. That was an important realization for me: often it's not necessarily what you *do* that creates a negative outcome, but rather what you *don't* do. As the framework developed further, I realized that the success of an introduction was essentially certain if all of the criteria in the framework were satisfied. As I gave up my early (delusional) optimism that everyone should meet everyone else, my success rates began to climb significantly, as did those of my clients. Instead of their ranks including some pleased clients and some wondering what I was possibly thinking when facilitating an introduction, more and more felt that each introduction was a winner.

And I started to gain a reputation for making introductions that produced explosively positive results both for my clients and for those they met with. People talked about "lightning strikes events" and "blockbuster introductions."

Why did this happen and keep happening? Those I coached weren't reaching out ill-prepared and at random, the way I had after Radtke fed me my ignorance—they were carefully selecting the right people to talk to. And they weren't following the old "here is everything I've ever done" pitch, or "I'll take anything you can give me" inquiry either. They were finding out what they had to offer as it related to the specific needs and interests of specific contacts and approaching them with a value proposition up-front, establishing that the proposed interview would be worthwhile for the interviewee as a matter of self-interest and not as simple charity.

That developed into the Right Person–Right Approach method (the name I've used for it ever since). The Right Person–Right Approach method is sometimes described as contrarian, and in an important sense, it is just that: it suggests that if you want to build relationships and achieve career and business objectives, you don't need to expand your networks until you're connected to thousands of people in the hope that one of them will help you. Instead, you need to find the one right person who can fulfill that role, who can enable you to achieve a specific objective.

I call that right person—and there's at least one for every viable business objective—a *critical enabler*. For a productive and mutually beneficial exchange, a critical enabler must, first and foremost, be (1) knowledgeable; that is, must know things or people that you need to know or reach and cannot get to on your own without a great deal of time-consuming and frustrating research in unfamiliar territory. A critical enabler also needs to be (2) inclined

to assist you, (3) available to offer help, and (4) preferably like-minded as well—that is, someone who has something in common with you. These four factors seem obvious when stated in so many words, but in practice they're remarkably easy to neglect unless you sit down and focus on them specifically.

Identifying the right person is not enough, however. You also need to make your approach in the right way so as to develop a real connection with them—to be *well-connected*. The foundation of the right-approach component of the framework is a concept I call *progressive reciprocity*. A gesture of progressive reciprocity is an up-front gesture, an offer of something of genuine value to the other party, set out before you ask something for yourself in return. This offer says, "I'm not your typical one-way networker who is just out to get what I can from you and then bolt without offering something in return." It's the antidote to what I call *obligatory reciprocity*—the widespread practice of halfheartedly offering to help someone out *after* you've asked them to help you—which I see out there all the time in most business exchanges.

Human nature plays a big role in the Right Person– Right Approach method. For instance, although many people tend to hold their networks close to their chests, the Right Person–Right Approach framework makes it possible to identify specific kinds of people likely to be willing to open their networks and provide information that will help you achieve your business and career goals. When you lead with what you might have to offer and you clearly describe what you need, you open up new ways to

make contact with the people who otherwise wouldn't be motivated to help you or even know how to do so.

The method works well enough that I've begun to write language into my coaching agreements that says, in effect, "I guarantee that you're going to be able to walk away from every deliberate networking effort with tangible, measurable results if you employ the principles of the Right Person–Right Approach method." That is, these days I promise every one of my clients that they'll get a *bona fide* lead or useful piece of intelligence from almost every person they contact using this method, as compared to perhaps one out of twenty using conventional approaches. That's how much I believe in it; that's how reliable I know it to be.

One of the things I hear repeatedly from my clients is that they've rediscovered their "networking confidence" or discovered confidence they never thought they could have. They've finally found something that lets them feel confident and excited that they're going to succeed virtually every time they reach out to people who can help them get where they want to go.

So What Does It All Mean?

To sum up, over the past decade or so—with the enormous explosion of electronic connectivity—people have largely lost sight of one of the most important reasons for networking: to connect on a fundamental level with other people through value exchanges. It is true that something

quite extraordinary has been gained through this almost infinite electronic interconnectability, but something important has been lost in the process.

But not irrevocably lost. The framework in this book will enable you to reestablish old contacts and spark new contacts with a select group of knowledgeable people with whom you share a common value as the most important aspect of effective and fruitful networking. It emphasizes the measurable *quality* and not the *quantity* of your relationships in an era in which people too often mistake the fact that they can have 1,722 online "friends," none of whom they really know, for value-based networking.

The following chapters outline, step by step, how to use the Right Person–Right Approach to accomplish your business objective effectively and efficiently. I encourage you to use *Well Connected* as a practical handbook and to identify one of your own specific career or business objectives early in your reading of the book and follow it through the process as you read. When you've completed this book, you'll have that same confidence. You'll have a road map to guide you through every critical career decision, from whom to hire to what vendor to choose to how to raise capital, and you'll have a blueprint for success in making every critical future career transition and achieving every key business goal.