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The HELLO Strategy to Networking

It's all about who you know, says Lindsay Taylor

In October this year I had the pleasure of presenting my “HELLO strategy to networking” to an auditorium full of PAs, EAs and Admin Professionals at the much-revered UK office* show in London. My audience were hungry to understand more about the topic and, having been complimented many times in my career for my “natural ability to network”, I was only too keen to share some skills and knowledge.

My first presentation slide was simply the word “Networking” displayed in big bold letters and I put the question to my audience “what does networking mean to you?” My question met with some interesting responses.

Firstly, networking was divided into social/personal networking and professional networking. It was further divided into “online” networking and “face to face” networking. Online networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Whatsapp and Pinterest were mentioned. It was when I probed for more information on the face-to-face element of networking that the audience interaction shifted up a gear. There appeared to be some uncomfortable shuffling of bottoms on chairs before one PA shared:

“Networking is a bit daunting. Walking into a room full of people you don't know – that's scary. It frightens me.”

This comment was met with many nods from the audience. Granted, many of my audience had chosen to hear me speak because they already had a dislike, a fear or very little experience of networking. They wanted skills and learning to overcome this dislike or fear. They wanted to understand how to ensure every networking opportunity was the very best it could possibly be. I wondered how often this “fear” of networking was holding back lots of PAs from tapping into a valuable way of ensuring they could progress in their career.

And networking is indeed a valuable way to progress in your career. According to research from The Institute of Employment Studies,



career progression can be attributed to three elements, these being performance, appearance and networking. Performance accounts for 10%, Appearance for 30% and Networking for 60%. How incredible is that statistic? 60% of your career progression is down to networking. Isn't it also rather shocking that performance accounts for only 10%. We need to live by the adage “it's not what you know, it's who you know” maybe...

Just a few weeks before the office* show, I wrote an article entitled “To Tweet or not to Tweet, that is the question...” (available on my blog page www.yourexcellency.co.uk/blog). As part of this article I compiled a contact sheet of PA Networking groups across the UK and Ireland. This document demonstrates that the benefit of networking has been identified by so many of you which is fantastic and the information

has been fed into the impressive global list of PA Associations and networking groups which can be accessed on Executive Secretary's website (www.executivesecretary.com/associations).

I emailed the organisers of the UK-based PA networking groups to ask for their feedback on the benefits of networking and I am delighted to share these with you:

“I believe a PA network is a supportive group of professionals with a common interest in sharing information and services through regular communication for mutual benefit. The network allows us to build our contacts amongst a group of people who understand the demands and pressures of our profession. It can give individuals who may be the only PA in their office a sense of belonging. It allows us to share best practice and grow ideas for

greater success. We gain a greater insight and awareness of other business industries, sectors and cultures, and are brand ambassadors for our own businesses in doing so. A PA Network is a platform for inspiration, motivation and allows PAs to build their confidence so as to be able to grow in their roles. Being part of a PA Network can provide learning and development in a way that no training course can. And, as well as building professional contacts, many long-term friendships are created. Taking the first steps to join a network can be scary, but you're safe. See networking as an investment. It's never too late to be what you might have been – life begins at the end of your comfort zone!"

Kelly McAulay, Lanarkshire PA Network, Scotland

"We've created a community and support network; I've made new friends, it's a great learning and development tool and it teaches us to value our profession."

Debs Eden, Bristol PA Network

"In our current climate it is essential that PAs continue to adapt and grow to meet the needs of businesses. I believe that PA networking provides an opportunity to develop and connect with peers. We also have a large amount of VAs who attend our events for which networking is a vital connection in the current corporate climate. We provide a platform for information sharing and an informal setting to grow as professionals. Another vital component of our group is for people moving in or out of the area or those looking for new employment opportunities. It's great to be able to link people together with possible job opportunities."

Gemma Nicholls, Newcastle PA Network

"The benefit of PA Networking is that you become part of a community of like-minded people who understand the job you do and the challenges you face in the role. Being able to learn from and share within that group is invaluable."

Catrin Morgan, Cardiff PA Network

"The benefit of Guernsey PA Connect to our members is that we provide training and development, networking, the opportunity to hear speakers that you may never have heard of and to communicate with fellow PAs. Above all, I would say the benefit is fostering confidence and a belief that the PA role is something to be proud of so we no longer say 'I'm just the PA'."

Donna Olliver, Guernsey PA Connect

"I believe that a major benefit of PA networking is support. Our network has some amazing

members and we provide a support network for PAs in all sectors."

Caroline Renouff, Guernsey PA Connect

"The benefits of our PA Network are enormous – we have created a community where we can share best practice and support each other. This really raises the profile of our profession and our annual conference, where we invite along inspirational speakers, is a key date in our members' calendars."

Catherine Thomas, NHS PAs for Excellence Network (Wales)

"Networking has helped build confidence. Having worked in an organisation for the best part of 20 years, I knew I was good at the job I do, but often wondered if I was only good in my own role, and wasn't sure how I would compare with other PAs in other organisations, in other sectors. Having spoken to lots and lots of PAs, I see that we have similar challenges, and the fact that I have been able to assist other PAs in finding solutions to some of their own challenges has made me feel much more confident about my own abilities. Networking – interacting with others, meeting new people – in itself has helped build confidence. I feel much more comfortable meeting new people. It has even caused me to attend other business networking events outside of the PA network, leading to more introductions/connections."

I have been introduced to different ways of working and different technology used by other PAs, which I have been able to bring back to my own organisation and share. Similarly, I have been able to share best practice tips and recommendations for technology/service providers. The benefits of this are two-way. I have delivered value to my organisation in introducing new ideas, and have represented my organisation well when able to share best practice tips which might be introduced and cause efficiencies in other organisations."

I have benefitted from some fantastic development/training. I have identified leads for my own organisation and connected relevant parties so that they might do business together. I have a broader understanding of our local business community; what's happening, what challenges local businesses are facing, and what organisations we could do business with."

I have raised my own profile, and that of my organisation, enhancing its employer brand."

I have made a lot of new friends, and have had a lot of fun!"

I understand how challenging/tiring it can be for my boss to attend networking events, and can better prep him for events, knowing what is helpful for me when I attend events, and help him with follow up."

Kim Glover, Exeter PA Network

I'm sure The Institute of Employment Studies statistics and the above comments have convinced you of the benefits of networking and you've identified a PA Networking group near you that you can join – but what about the "how to network" knowledge that you want?

This is where I'd like to introduce you to The HELLO strategy, a simple acronym that will help you put into practice strategies and thinking to ensure your networking opportunities are the very best they can be. Whilst the bias here is on face-to-face networking, many of the tips shared in this article can be implemented when networking online too.

The HELLO strategy to Networking H is for Honesty

So, let me ask you a question and I'd like your honest response.

<p>Honesty Engaged & Engaging Listen Learn Outcome</p>

Imagine you are about to walk into a large meeting room on your own ready to network with a group of people you've never met before. How many of you would be daunted by this prospect? Nervous or frightened? Physically shaking even?

1 Take ownership of your feelings

More of us need to take ownership of our feelings when we do feel daunted – or nervous or frightened – or whatever word you would use in such a situation. It's okay to feel the emotions you are feeling when you are in a situation that is outside of your comfort zone. It is human nature.

By being honest with ourselves about how we are feeling we can then truly understand our "starting point" for any situation. We are then in a better position to know what strategies, thinking or skills we can put into place to help ourselves.

2 Change your label

Psychological theory advocates that we often label our emotions and feelings in such a way that

is detrimental to us. If you label your feelings as “nerves”, if you say “I’m really nervous” you have applied your interpretation of “nerves” and “nervousness” and all the negative connotations associated with these labels. It is more useful for you to change the label to something with more positive connotations, for example replacing the word “nerves” with “energy” or “excitement”.

F E A R has two meanings.

Forget Everything And Run
Or
Face Everything And Rise
The choice is yours.

One of my favourite, most powerful “change your label” swaps is “problem” or “difficult” to “challenge” – we are all up for a challenge rather than feeling bogged down in something that we’ve labelled as a “problem” or “difficult”. Give it a go!

3 Do some “Eeyore” thinking

Eeyore, the adorable donkey from AA Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh* is famous for his “negative” thoughts – rather “doom and gloom” thinking.

I invite you to do some “Eeyore” thinking before networking. Ask yourself “what’s the very worst that could happen at this networking event?”. Then ask yourself “is that *really* likely to be the case?”.

Then pin your tail back on with a satin pink ribbon and move away from the little black rain cloud to put into practice the rest of the strategies outlined here!

4 Use online networking to help you network face-to-face

Tap in to the online networking platforms available to you to prepare yourself for face-to-face networking. Plan your networking experience and live by the adage “failing to plan is planning to fail.”

Research the name of the networking group organiser(s) or anyone you know who is going to be at the networking event. Find these individuals on LinkedIn. LinkedIn profiles will provide you with an image of that person so at least you’ll know what they look like when you enter a room full of faces.

Check out the networking groups website page or Facebook page. Read their latest Tweets to find out what’s happening for them and to get a real sense of who they are, what they believe in and how they like to work.

If you know someone is going to be present at the networking event who you want to meet, ask the organiser if they’d introduce you to them.

5 Buddy-up

Is there someone else who can go with you to the networking event? Or that you can meet there? Use each other as a “comfort blanket” when you’re in a room full of new people – just make sure you don’t “cling” to the comfort blanket and keep in mind your reasons for networking (which you can read more about in O is for Outcomes).

6 Prepare and practice your “Elevator Pitch”

An “Elevator Pitch” is a brief speech that will introduce you to your fellow networkers. The name derives from the notion that your speech should be delivered in the short time period of an elevator ride, usually 20-60 seconds.

In the context of PA networking face to face, think about the information you want to share (name, company, role, career/PA experience, your reasons for being at the networking event etc). Keep your language as jargon-free as possible – there’s nothing worse than someone talking in a tumble of acronyms and getting to the end of their elevator speech with you being none-the-wiser for who they are and what they do!

Seal your message with a KISS

Keep
It
Short &
Simple

X

Remember, Einstein famously said “If you can’t explain it to a six year old, you don’t understand it yourself.”

“Practice makes perfect” so practice your elevator speech – with your networking buddy or a friend who will give you open and honest feedback or in front of a mirror when you can give yourself open and honest feedback.

Break the ice and create great rapport with your fellow networkers by using humour or sharing your true feelings with them. For example, sharing “this is actually my first experience of networking and I’m finding it a little outside of my comfort zone” proves to your fellow networker that you have embraced the H of the HELLO strategy and identified how you are feeling!

E is for Engaged and Engaging

1 Communicate with impact

In the late 1950s Harvard Professor Albert Mehrabian introduced a theory that face-to-face communication when sharing our feelings and emotions could be split into three areas, or the three Vs of communication – the Verbal (the words and vocabulary we use), the Vocal (the tone of voice we use and how we deliver our message with our vocal chords) and the Visuals (how we communicate through our body language, physiology and what people *see* when we communicate).

Mehrabian attributed percentages to these three areas according to the importance of communicating our message. Verbal accounts for 7% importance in getting our message across, Vocal for 38% and Visual for 55%. To deliver the most impactful message we need to ensure all three areas of communication are “aligned” or “congruent” so we truly “say what we mean and mean what we say.” Then we will be truly optimising the engagement of our listeners.

Always consider the networking experience as a two-way process. It’s an opportunity for you to share things about yourself and also to learn from others. To demonstrate to your fellow networkers that you are engaged in what they are saying, maintain eye contact, nod your head, smile (tap in to the 55% visual clues of communication) and ask questions to probe more into what they are sharing with you.

“Say what you mean and mean what you say”

2 First impressions really do count

Human nature is such that we form 90% of our opinion of someone in the first 90 seconds of meeting them (predominantly based on what we see – Mehrabian’s 55% Visuals theory in practice!). Be aware of this and think about *how* you are going to arrive in to the networking/meeting room. As all eyes are on you as you enter, what do you want people to think about you based on what you are wearing, how you are standing/walking or what facial expressions you are displaying?

3 Strike a pose

Check out Amy Cuddy’s Ted Talks video about “power posing”! Social psychologist Cuddy introduces us to the theory that standing in a posture of confidence (even when we don’t feel confident) can affect testosterone and cortisol levels in our brain and will impact our chances for success. Superhero costumes are optional of

course (remember the 55% Visuals!). Getting yourself in to the right “frame of mind” by posturing means you will be in a good place mentally to create that impact and approach every situation with the very best attitude and personal strength.

4 “Get out clauses”

Unfortunately not everybody is aware of the HELLO strategy to networking – they aren’t aware of the ideas I’ve shared and they won’t therefore be putting them into practice. Some people’s elevator pitch will be longer than any elevator ride you’ve ever taken... some people won’t have considered the “two way” element of networking...

Be prepared if you get “stuck” with someone who isn’t engaged or engaging. Have ready some select phrases as your “get out clauses” to ensure you don’t spend the entire networking experience with that one person, who, if we are totally honest with ourselves, we really don’t want to spend all evening with. Be polite but firm – for example you may want to say:

“It has been very interesting talking to you/ listening to you/learning about you. I am going to move on now. I wish you all the best with your business/career/position.” Or...

“I came with a networking buddy and guest this evening and have just seen them waving to me – do excuse me...”

L is for Listening

Listening is the key to creating and maintaining rapport, and an absolute essential skill for any networking opportunity. It is also a skill that many of us could improve on.

The crème de la crème of listening involves listening with your whole body and then mirroring or matching the person we are listening to in order to create and maintain rapport, based on the popular saying that “people like people who are like themselves.”

We can use Mehrabian’s research as a basis for putting this “whole body listening” into practice.

1 Listen with your ears to the Verbal element:

We all have a preference for phrases, terminology and favourite sayings. Our own personal interpretation of vocabulary may be very different to someone else’s. Notice what specific words and phrases the person you are listening to has used. Pick out particular phrases and words to repeat back when talking

to them. Based on the popular saying “people like people who are like themselves”, by using the same “language” and words as the person you are listening to this demonstrates your respect for what they are saying. You are keeping the conversation “clean” by using their language without “dirtying” the conversation with your own preferences. This accounts for a lot in creating and maintaining great rapport and ensuring you optimise your networking experience.

2 Listen with your ears to the Vocal element:

Listen to how someone is using their voice. What tone of voice are they using? What emphasis are they placing on words with the intonation of their voice? How fast or slow are they speaking? What volume are they using? What does this tell you?

3 Listen with your eyes to the Visual element:

Based on Mehrabian’s research we know that 55% of communication comes down to what we see – the Visuals. As a listener we can assess a lot from noticing what is happening in a person’s body language including their physiology (facial expressions), gestures and movement. What can you see happening? We can listen with our eyes and use this information to be curious about what is going on for that person.

L is for Learn

Every and any situation is an opportunity to learn and networking is top of the hierarchy in terms of learning experiences. You are standing in a room full of individuals who have knowledge and information that you can potentially tap in to and learn from. Remember, every person you meet knows something you don’t.

1 Pre-networking

Ask yourself “what is it that I want to learn at this networking event?” When you have a clear idea of what it is you want, or need, you are more able to move towards achieving that very thing. Read more about identifying your Outcomes in the “O” of the HELLO strategy.

2 Post-networking

Give yourself feedback by asking:

- What did I learn?
- How can I put this learning into practice to benefit myself, my manager or my organisation?
- What went well?
- What did not go so well?

Be open and honest with yourself in identifying what you will do *more of* and what you will do

less of when you network again. Next time what will you *continue* to do, *stop* doing and *start* doing? This will ensure your networking experiences are absolutely optimised based on every experience.

O is for Outcome

1 Do some Tigger thinking.....

Very often we hear people talking about what they “don’t” want – “I don’t want to be overweight” or “I don’t want to have a holiday in rainy England any more.” This type of thinking is called “away from” thinking. When we make these “don’t want” statements our minds create a representation of the things we do not want – in effect we are doing some “Eeyore thinking”.

By thinking about what we *do want*, similarly our mind will create a representation and start to recognise it. This type of thinking is called “towards thinking” or, introducing a Winnie the Pooh analogy – “Tigger thinking”. Establishing what you “do want” enables us to be motivated, clear and precise and it can give us a sense of direction or movement, similar to our bouncy, energetic tiger in the form of Tigger.

2 Use precise language

Once you’ve identified what it is you want to get out of the networking event, you need to use precise language to articulate this.

Always start your outcome statement with “I will...” By using the word “will” you are introducing a definite action (rather than “I’d like to” or “I want to”) so it becomes a motivating fact in your mind.

So, there we have it: the HELLO strategy to networking.

<p>H onesty E ngaged & Engaging L isten L earn O utcome</p>
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As with any new skills and learning that you’ve taken on board, the next step is for you to implement this learning, so I encourage you to put the HELLO strategy to networking into practice and wish you every success!



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