

Networking:

A New Word, A Different Game

For years, women have been outside an informal, unconscious, and private male system of communication. Today, they are forming their own system, and it is formal, conscious, and public.

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Last year, at a remote site in Washington, 60 educators—all women—gathered at the annual conference of the Northwest Women in Educational Administration (NWEA). The topic was "Preparing Women for the Principalship." Each participant had been selected by her school district to attend. For three days, these women, all aspirants to posts in school administration, were given tips from female principals, support and encouragement from male superintendents, and advice from personnel directors. They talked with one another, criticized resumes, exchanged phone numbers, and offered information about available jobs. Such interaction is referred to in the current idiom as "networking."

For those grammarians who cringe at our propensity to change nouns to verbs, as in "to network" or "networking," I tried to trace the word's etymology—but with little success. Network is a biological term, more recently a computer term; but *networking*, or *to network* does not yet appear in any contemporary dictionary I checked. Nor does it yet appear in esoteric etymology books. I still don't know where the term came from nor how it has become part of our common language.

One guess is that "network" was coined by the women's movement in this country. Women professionals in both the public and private sectors have long recognized a ladder of career advancement that has worked to the advantage of men and to the disadvantage of women. The Buddy System, the Old Boys' Network, or the Old Boys' Club are constructs and catchwords that don't require elucidation. Popular trade books such as *Games Mother Never Taught You* (Harragan 1977), *Paths to Power: A Woman's Guide from First Job to Top Executive* (Josefowitz 1980), *Making it in Management: A Behavior Approach for Women Executives* (Fenn 1978), or in education, *Women Getting Together and Getting Ahead* (Smith, et al. 1982), describe those processes and lend advice to women who aspire to upward

mobility. Networking books, such as those by Welsh (1981) and Kleiman (1980), present pages and pages of state-by-state listings of women's networks, ranging from the National Identification Program for Women in Higher Education Administration to Women Professionals in Petroleum to the Women's Cycling Union. Women have initiated and diligently set up a *replacement strategy* to keep from being circumvented by the Old Boys' Network.

Old Boys Vs. New Women

Kleiman describes the male network well in *Women's Networks* (1980):

It is secret and it is informal, but it is such an inbred, automatic response that men don't think twice about it. Good Old Boys don't say, "Well, today is the day to pick one of our own as the new vice president in charge of transportation." They just do it. Men grow up knowing all about how to network. They play team sports. They are taught to collaborate and work with each other. They learn not to hold grudges. They learn to share. Along with reading, writing, and arithmetic, they absorb the fact that *they need each other*... (p. 3).

There are obvious differences between the Old Boys' Network and women's networks of the '80s. The system that has worked so well for men has three primary characteristics: it is *unconscious*, it is *informal*, and it is *private*. Women's replacement strategy of networking has none of these elements. Women have consciously duplicated an unconscious process, formally constructed an informal association, and publicly operated a private system. Women growing up do not absorb the male lesson that *they need one another*. For women to network they must consciously acknowledge that (1) "I am a woman," and (2) "I am a woman who must connect myself to other women."

In contrast, men joining openly, formally, and consciously to advance themselves is awkward and embarrassing, not to mention illegal. Men don't like it because it smacks of opportunism, egoism, and self-interest. A conference on "Preparing Males for the Principalship" just would not fly. If most past conferences on "Preparing for the Principalship" have been implicitly male, it's because that's how the Old Boys' Network works. In reality, that's how power in social systems works.

We can also see the differences in the male and female systems by the naysayers. Men do not say, "Men do not need to help each other and I will not accept your help, advice, or information." There are women, however, even those who have risen to the top, who believe their femininity has made no difference. These are women who disassociate themselves from women's interests or women's networks; they proclaim that there is no need for a female association. Many even pay homage to the Old Boys' Club for their status positions. They are probably right; they are the few exceptions allowed through the unconscious, informal, and private male system. Any group in power can tolerate a few exceptions, particularly when the exceptions embrace the views of those in power. However, when the exceptions become a critical mass that endangers the power of male domination, then we should expect to see a closing of the ranks.

Men and Women Together

Among the provocative and eloquent writings of Jesse Bernard is her article "Homosexuality and Female Depression" (1976). She explains how women have become disconnected with one another through the rise of the isolated nuclear family and the devalued status of women in society. She associates these social factors with female depression. Networking is not only a replacement strategy for the existence of the Old Boys' Club, but an opportunity for women to seek sisterhood and establish female bonds that encourage self-esteem and confidence. Networking not only assists in career advancement, it can be a boon to the female psyche. Bernard says that networking is an alliance to affirm and legitimize female identity.

Certainly women don't and can't network with just other women because men still hold the power positions in most organizations. Men are an important part of networking: they have the experience and status and they can give sound advice. John Erickson, a superintendent of schools in Oregon, a feminist, and the only male to stay the full three days at the NWEA conference, delivered a speech about the "Politics of Educational Adminis-

tration." In it he betrayed secrets of the trade, offered insights, and gave helpful advice. He didn't pull any punches. Liking the administration game to playing hardball, Erickson admonished, "If you can't play, get off the field." Women can play, all right, but even with equal opportunities for girls in athletics the game they're taught to play is—you guessed it—softball.

So what should women do? We cannot consciously replicate the unconscious. We cannot informally construct the informal. And we cannot publicly operate the private. But we can at least acknowledge that what we are doing is *not* replicating the male system. Women are not the only ones who have been circumvented by the unconsciousness, informal, and private Old Boys' Network. Excluded also have been people of color, people of certain political ideologies, religious persuasions, and sexual preference. Perhaps women's replacement strategy of a conscious, formal, and public system will encompass people of many different attributes and views. Then, when we've combined hardball and softball players on the same baseball diamond, maybe we'll invent a new set of rules. □

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