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What Is a “Golden Network” of Contacts and How Can You Develop One?

What is the world view when you are at the top of a powerful organization?

Michael Lindsay is a sociologist and author VIEW FROM THE TOP (2014). This is a ten-year examination about how leaders influence their organizations, communities, and society. Five hundred and fifty leaders participated in the study, including two former presidents of the United States, 80 U.S. cabinet secretaries, 250 CEOs including 20% of the CEOs of Fortune 100 companies, and 100 leaders of the world's largest nonprofit organizations.

This elite group represents .003 percent of the United States population and yet they have a disproportionate impact on the world's collective future.

The 550 interviews were transcribed and coded along 122 variables to map demographic, social, educational, lifestyle, career, and network profiles. Responses to interview questions were compared to the public information available about their leadership. The information in this book is thus both quantitative and qualitative.

Below are some of the key themes.

It is Gratifying to Invest in Young People:

Mentors are critical catalysts to help aspiring young leaders make the ascent up the organization hierarchy. The value for young people to cultivate mentors is obvious. What is interesting about VIEW FROM THE TOP is the degree to top leaders find it gratifying to mentor the young. The author writes:

"I assumed they were saying this because it seemed like a nice sentiment. But I always sensed something more meaningful under the surface. I'm now convinced that the most gratifying part of leading a major institution ...comes from relatively small deeds. And the most common being investing in young people."

In other words, young people need mentors to help them move up through the ranks. And powerful people need mentees to find meaning for their lives.

The challenge for young professionals is how to be perceived as worthy of mentorship. Fifty-one percent of leaders mentioned a specific mentor they had when starting a career who was critical in changing the trajectory of their professional lives.

Reach for the "Golden Network:"

Mentors introduce young professionals to higher level social networks. And then the young professional learns how to leverage this new network. Rising leaders seek out opportunities to build higher level connections. They understand the connections between personal relationships and successful leadership.

The best leaders deliberately seek out variety in personal networks, rather than limit networks to one business sector, one golf club and one church. This focus on an eclectic, diverse contact network is what the author calls "embracing the liberal arts approach."

At the highest levels of power, the elite are part of a complex matrix of networks that reach across institutions, sectors, and geographical boundaries.

Cultivating Networks at Lower Levels:

Golden Networks sound like the glitter of power. Under the gold is a complex web of lower level networks that leaders also cultivate. Nearly all the leaders interviewed could identify at least one person lower down the economic ladder that they rely upon for advice. This lower level network includes friends, relatives, high-school coaches, and ministers.

Some people are good at upward networking. Some people are good at networking downwards. A key characteristic of remarkable leaders is the ability to do both at the same time.

There is a section in the book called "Staying Connected to the Ladder." This refers to steps highly effective leaders take to fight against the

tendency to become too insulated from the realities of life. For example:

Brand New Technology, Inc. has a parking slot reserved for the CEO near the front door. But she never uses it. The CEO parks her car in in a slot that is the greatest distance from the front door. As she walks towards the building, she randomly encounters other employees walking towards the building and engages them in informal conversations. Her favorite question is, "What is it about Brand New Technologies that keeps you from getting a good night sleep?"

Another CEO has institutionalized "Soup with the CEO." Once every two weeks, the CEO's secretary will randomly ask an employee if that employee would be willing to meet the CEO for lunch in the CEO's office. For some employees it is the first time that they have ever been into the President's office. It may be the only time they can have a direct conversation with the CEO without violating the company's chain of command structure.

A hospital President has lunch once a week in the hospital cafeteria. Instead of sitting with other senior-level executives, she randomly sits down with patients, physicians, and employees she has never met. Her favorite question is "What's the most important thing we should be doing that we are not doing?"

She finds this approach is an excellent way of getting customer reaction unsensitized by her direct reports. She finds this one question has provided her an early warning system that her formal communications system failed to provide.

Dr. Lindsay described one CEO who visits employees at their offices or cubicles rather than summon them to his office. Through this technique, "he communicated not only humility but also an interest in their working conditions."

You Do Not Need to Attend an Elite Undergraduate College to be Successful.

Nearly two-thirds of the leaders did not attend elite undergraduate institutions of higher education. Fifty-eight percent of leaders participated in student government in either high school or college. Forty-one percent were varsity athletes in high school and 23 percent were varsity in college. Twenty-eight percent of leaders held jobs while working through school.

In other words, future leaders were involved in life beyond formal classroom education.

While most leaders did not attend top-tier undergraduate schools, nearly two-thirds of leaders who received graduate degrees went to a top-10 school.

Implications for Women and Young People of Color.

Dr. Lindsay's book leadership survey consisted of mostly White males. We suspect the dynamics of Golden Networks are similar for women and people of color but harder to achieve.

The good news is that you don't have to graduate from a top-tier undergraduate institution. But getting an advanced degree from one is going to help. Be careful about going into too much debt for that undergraduate program if you fail to get the scholarship you need.

Women and young people of color may have more difficult times finding senior-level mentors. Companies might wish to provide financial incentives for senior-executives who are within five years of retirement to become mentors to women and young people of color. It is a skill that can be trained and does not necessarily come naturally.

References:

D. Michael Lindsay with M.G. Hager. VIEW FROM THE TOP: an inside look at how people in power see and shape the world. New York: Wiley, 2014

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