



Professional Networks:

Building relationships in different networking settings

Professional networking for non-profits can be defined as developing relationships with people that have a vested interest in shared causes or initiatives. This definition does not address network structures or governance. There is a clear difference between creating and managing a network of affiliated organizations and what we will be discussing here: engaging in professional networks through relationship building. For example, a network for youth service providers may consist of a diverse group of people with varying levels of knowledge and experience. Likewise, the organizations they represent are diverse in their mission, size, and resources. There are no specific requirements in terms of organizational structure or affiliation status. However, both the people and the organizations they represent are aligned in their service to youth in the community. In the context of professional networking, people and organizations are building relationships that enable them to serve youth effectively and efficiently in their shared community.

The purpose for building relationships through professional networking is widely understood: You can accomplish more together than you can alone. The following adage (author unknown) about relationships exemplifies this:

"If you want to go somewhere fast, travel alone. If you want to go somewhere far, travel together."

Networking Basics

- **Listen-** Actively listen to what people are communicating. What projects are people working on? Who is interested in what?
- **Build trust-** Maintain confidentiality of information.
- **Offer assistance-** Find ways to offer assistance and solutions no matter how small.
- **Communicate assets and ask for assistance-** Understand what you have to offer and what you need help with.
- **Cultivate win-win opportunities-** Who can benefit from what? Make connections between people in and out of the network.
- **Build the relationship over time-** Maintain open lines of communication and periodically check in.

Networking Venues

- **Collaborative Online Networks-** Continual advances in collaborative technology (i.e. social media, web 2.0, online platforms, etc) have provided new tools for people to develop relationships and networks. These applications also allow for people to target specific demographics and populations with ease (such as volunteers, donors, students, etc). Professional networking is still about building relationships and understanding the nuances of that relationship. Relationships built and maintained over an online platform (such as Facebook,

LinkedIn, etc) utilize different methods of communication and knowledge sharing. Developing an online presence requires combining relationship building with knowledge management.

- **Professional Networking Groups/Associations-** These can be daunting based on how large the group is and how much time individuals are given to speak. However, the value here is that these groups tend to be very focused and committed to developing relationships. By nature when professional networking groups/associations meet, they want to communicate assets and needs.
- **Community Forums and Meetings-** These can be low or high profile opportunities. Be prepared to discuss your organization with people that may not be familiar with who you are and what you do. Present information that raises awareness about what your organization does.
- **Economic Development and Chamber Events-** Venues where the private and public sector intersect are good places to build new relationships and discover opportunities outside of your normal operations.
- **Conferences and Workshops-** There are numerous opportunities for professional networking: organized networking sessions during and outside of the conference/workshop, speaking opportunities, panelist discussions, presenter/trainer opportunities, etc. The key is to take advantage of these opportunities and to be available in and out of scheduled conference/workshop times.

Networking Resources

Here are a few national networking resources that will help you to build relationships and discover opportunities for networking. Look locally for professional networking groups and conferences/workshops.

- **Collaborative Online Networks:** [Causes](#), [LinkedIn](#), [MySpace](#), [Twitter](#)
- **Community Forums and Meetings:** [National Association of Counties](#), [National League of Cities](#)
- **Economic Development and Chamber Events:** [Listings of State Chamber Offices](#), [US Economic Development Administration](#), [State and Local Government Listings](#)