Is anyone else sick of the word “networking?”
I know I am. When I meet a new person that I want to get to know -- either personally or professionally -- the specter of networking rears its ugly head. If I'm interested in them, I wonder if they're wondering about my motives, especially if I know they're well-connected in business.

If someone acts super-interested in me, I face the same suspicions. Why do they care? I sometimes wonder. Do they want to be friends or do they want to add me to their Rolodex, or more recently, their “contact management” computer program?

Stop “managing your contacts.” I know that this is contrary to every bit of career advice you've received in the '90s but trust me, the future does not belong to networking; it belongs to something much deeper, to partnerships/alliances/communities. Building these kinds of relationships is a skill that successful entrepreneurs have naturally.

Let the difference in those words sink in. Networking has acquired a superficial meaning. It's the word linked to using people. It's the word of takers. I know many bright, capable people whose careers have stalled because even though they believe that they should engage in networking, something in their soul rebels. These are caring, connecting kind of people. The idea of networking leaves them cold.

The future, I believe, will not reward superficial connections. If you want to thrive in your industry or profession, think deep, think long-term, think partnerships/alliances/communities. Think giving, not taking.

Partnerships/Alliances/Communities imply equality — especially equal initiation and participation — as opposed to networking which implies one person latching on to or using another. These words symbolize long-term, deep commitments to other people and organizations.

I don't mean to suggest that you must stay with your present employer, boss or coworkers for life, but even if you leave, would it serve you and them to leave on the best terms with a commitment to maintain your relationship, to continue to include them in your community?

I must confess that my bias on this issue comes from a philosophical perspective. I believe that we have a responsibility to respect and serve and assist others on our path through life. We are all connected in a fragile web, whether we like it or not. I view the World Wide Web as a wonderful (if flawed) reminder of this truth. If we don’t take care of our connections with others, these
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precious, connecting strands tend to tangle or break. When we disconnect from someone – because of unresolved conflicts or lack of attention – we are both lessened.

How Do We Develop Partnerships/Alliances/Communities To Support Our Careers?

When you meet someone new and interesting, or when you hear about a great organization, think: how can I help this person or group? What do I have to offer that could help their long-term needs and mission? What kind of partnership could we create together? How can we work together to contribute to the larger local and world community? I have a friend who worked for years in a firm where she had conflicts with many of the associates and partners. Somehow, through skill and hard work, she managed to rise to the partnership level. Even then, I listened to her rave on about not liking this person or that person. I tried to urge her to work out her conflicts with those people, but she thought she could avoid the issue. She was shocked and devastated when one day her partners asked her to leave the firm.

Sometime later, I asked if she thought the conflicts could have contributed to her split with the firm, but she denied the connection. The moral of this tale to me is this: don’t think that you can hide your true feelings forever at work. Try to respect everyone, but if you can’t respect them, let them pass out of your life. Don’t build partnerships with people you dislike. If you can’t find a way to work out conflicts and respect your coworkers, bosses or owners as fellow human beings, leave.

If we think we can hide these feelings and that they won’t hurt us in our working relationships, we’re fooling ourselves. As Emerson said:

“Who you are speaks so loudly I can’t hear a word you’re saying.”

That’s my rule. I simply don’t work with people or organizations that I don’t genuinely like and respect. I don’t try to get to know someone unless I see the potential for a long-term partnership/alliance/community. Luckily, I have learned to appreciate many diverse thinking and working styles; most people interest me – even when their values and personalities are different than mine – more than they irritate me. A kind of detached amusement at the flaws and personality quirks we all share as fellow humans bumbling along this strange path called life is an attitude we can all develop, I’ve discovered.

People today in our mobile, disconnected, distracted society are hungry for community. If you lead with your heart and have cultivated the heart of a warrior so that you’re not injured by every slight, you’ll see opportunities to build community everywhere. Do it, even if you can’t see any immediate payoff for your career.

Thirty years in the world of work in many different kinds of jobs, professions and businesses has convinced me that soul leaders – who build deep connections with people, no matter what their skin color, their position, and whether they walk into a room or wheel themselves into a room – come out winners in the long run, both personally and professionally.

And really, what do you want on your tombstone: she was a great networker or she was a great community builder?

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