

## **The Power of Connection**

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Can you think of a time when someone left the organization—this wasn't a key player (not your CEO or even a VP or Director), just someone down on the org chart. They weren't the keeper of the institutional knowledge, just an admin or worker who didn't seem to have much power at all. Yet when this person left the organization, things fell apart. Departments didn't talk to one another, things fell through the cracks, deadlines were missed, and the organization became more dysfunctional than it already was. What happened? A key connector—someone who had power of connection—left the organization.

This type of power is one we rarely talk about when looking at organizational dynamics, yet one that is powerfully in play. The type of power we most often recognize is the power of position, embedded in the hierarchy of the organization. While this is very definitive, it is nonetheless limiting, since we are not often the boss or have the ultimate power in the organization. It is also limiting in that Generation Y tends to devalue position power. They tend to roll their eyes, sigh, and shrug their shoulders when dictated by position power (you've experienced this if you're a parent of teenagers). Positional power also creates hierarchies, or status distinctions. These distinctions cause those with less status to be fearful and mistrust those with more status, causing dysfunctional work teams according to David Rock's research (*Your Brain At Work*).

The second type of power is intellectual capital, or "Know-How Power," and relates to our education, experience, competencies and abilities. You call a plumber because a certified plumber knows how to unclog your disposal. You hire engineers because they know how to engineer, and welders because they know how to weld, and administrative assistants because they know how to keep track of their bosses, and HR professionals because they know how to keep their companies out of legal hot water.

But there is a third source of power that we rarely talk about, identify, much less document, and that is social capital, or the power of connection. This is most often recognized when it is missing in an organization. For example, can you think about a time when a decision was made without the input of certain key individuals? These weren't individuals with positional power or institutional knowledge, yet they were able to derail the change initiative because they were key connectors who didn't provide input for that change.

## **Social Capital Analysis**

There is an entire body of work devoted to the topic of connection and trust, and that is the work of Social Capital Analysis. First of all, social capital is defined as the power and strength of connection in an organization. Social capital analysis is the process by which the social capital in an organization is identified, mapped, documented, and quantified.

This is the work of Dr. Karen Stephenson, the pioneer in Social Capital Analysis. She began her career as a quantum chemist, then switched to anthropology when she began to notice that the patterns of people interacting in her lab (as viewed from her office from above) looked a lot like the chemical reactions she was studying. She began to wonder about the similarities and if there were equations or algorithms to predict patterns of interaction and connection. Some 30 years and 500+ cases later, we have a body of knowledge about social capital that organizations are now beginning to study and leverage.

What you now know is that social capital is beginning to be noticed, studied, documented, and measured. So shouldn't you care about developing more social capital—more connection power—in your work?

### **The Value of Connectors**

What we are also learning about those who have strong social capital—connectors—is that they make things happen inside of organizations. For example, Stephenson has found that getting 5% of an organization on-board with a cultural change can make that change a reality if you focus on getting the right 5%—the connectors—on-board. This means that by having more social capital, you are most likely to be the trusted, go-to person that could make things happen, and make change stick. We also know that connectors are able to be the glue that holds organizations together, by being the key link in the connection of departments that are siloed, or in getting communications circulated. They are the ones that can make innovation a reality.

### **Who are Connectors?**

Malcolm Gladwell (*The Tipping Point, Outliers, Blink*), states that Connectors are people who get things done through others by serving as a “pocket of trust.” They “are far more important than we would ever have imagined - the people who know everyone in some oblique way may actually run the world. In a very down-to-earth, day-to-day way, they make the world work.”

It was Gladwell who learned of Stephenson's work and connected her to a Leadership Philadelphia project in 2006—The Philadelphia Connector Project. “The City of Brotherly Love” was struggling to develop cohesion and build civic engagement, and decided that by identifying key connectors it could accelerate the change it wanted to accomplish.

Aren't the Connectors the likely suspects—the ones that are often named to the published lists of the “100 Most Influential Leaders” and the like? Not necessarily. In Philadelphia's case, there was only a 1% overlap in a previously published list of 100 influential leaders and the list of the Connectors identified through Social Capital Analysis. “The real connectors are often not the ‘usual suspects’” states Dr. Stephenson, “but are those people who quietly yet effectively make change happen and get things done. They fly under the radar.” In fact, in similar community connector projects (there have been projects in Louisville, KY, Portland, OR, and in the Bluegrass region surrounding and including Lexington, KY), the program has been launched by using the theme of identifying the “everyday heroes.”

### **Connector Competencies**

What are the common competencies in those who are Connectors? Liz Dow of Leadership Philadelphia, and author of *Six Degrees of Connection*, identifies common themes with which she resonated as a Philadelphia Connector: Community Catalyst, Other Oriented, Network Hub, Navigating Mazes, Empowering Passion, Curious, Trustworthy, Optimistic, Results Achiever, and Self Starter.

Beginning Summer 2012, Hanna Resource Group will be embarking on a study of the Connectors from the four community connector projects to determine the common themes in those named by their peers as Connectors. The early hypothesis is that many of the themes indicated by Dow will resound with other communities' influencers. The key competencies reviewed will include trustworthiness, accessibility, and influence.

## Trustworthiness

Stephenson notes that trust seems to persist as a common theme, and in fact refers to her “Quantum Theory of Trust” as the universal thread that ties Connectors to their organizations and communities. Stephen Covey, in his book *The Speed of Trust*, identifies behaviors that are linked to trust. “Trust is established through action,” states Hank Paulson, US Treasury Secretary.

One of the interesting concepts of trust is that it is never bought and always earned through consistent behaviors over time. To determine your trust quotient, answer these questions:

- Are you reliable? Do you consistently deliver what you promise (or more)? Do you show up when you say you will? Can others count on you?
- Are you honest? Will you tell the truth, even when it is uncomfortable (for you or me)? Can I count on what you say?
- Are you transparent? Do you have a hidden agenda? Do you “lay your cards on the table”? Do you say what you mean and mean what you say? Do you walk your talk?

## Accessibility

David Rock (*Your Brain at Work*) explains that being in a relationship is as essential to the brain as food and water; in fact, Maslow might have been wrong in that social needs are every bit as important as basic survival, since the brain interacts with social needs using the same networks it uses for basic survival.

When we see someone as a friend, our brain tells us to move toward that individual. And, when two people interconnect thoughts and goals, oxytocin—a pleasurable chemical—is released (it’s the same chemical released when a small child reconnects with his mother). Oxytocin is released when people dance together, play music together, or work together. This is why facilitators like to use icebreakers—we start to see others as friends, and by working together, we get a good buzz from the oxytocin.

Being accessible to others, then, is more than connecting on LinkedIn or Facebook. It means having a human-to-human connection that allows us to have these deep and ancient needs met in very real ways. We can move from foe to friend and become accessible by engaging in some pretty basic behaviors: shaking hands, swapping names, discussing something in common. A study by Gallup showed that companies that encouraged water-cooler conversations exhibited greater productivity because they were addressing the need for this connection.

Sandy Allgeier, author of *The Personal Credibility Factor*, talks about our invisible fences, and how we often construct barriers to others that limit our accessibility and therefore our connection. “Typically, we build our fences when we lack confidence for some reason,” states Allgeier.

To determine your accessibility quotient, answer these questions:

- Do you truthfully care about others? Do you genuinely ask about how others are doing, about their friends and family, about their life and interests?
- Do you respect others? Do you treat others as you would like to be treated (or better yet, how they want to be treated)? Do you listen to others? Do you value others’ input?
- Are you in service to others? Do you give of your time and energy without an expectation of a return?
- Have you armed your invisible fence, or are you open and confident with others?

## **Influence**

It's fun to be around positive, happy people. And it's also contagious. Our brains are wired with mirror neurons, such that we tend to match someone's sincere smile. Therefore, we gravitate toward those who can make us feel better because they are happy, content individuals.

We are also status-driven, and will go to extreme measures to preserve our status. We'll pay a lot of money for the prestige of a Starbucks coffee; we'll stand in line to get a signed copy of the speaker celebrity's book, even when we have no intention of reading it.

Talking with a person of higher status invokes a threat response. Being excluded creates activity in the dorsal portion of the brain, which is involved in the distressing component of pain, explains Rock. Experiencing an increase in status generates dopamine and serotonin, making us feel happier, and cortisol levels decrease, a marker of lower stress. We can get on a high by finding a niche where we are superior—this is why it's so important for us to find our core competencies so we can “shine.”

We influence others (and give them an emotional “high”) when we give positive feedback, focus on their achievements, or acknowledge our own shortcomings (we are putting down our status and elevating that of others). When we tell someone, “I've had a similar problem, and I know how difficult it can be” it not only demonstrates empathy, but also raises their status.

To determine your influence quotient, answer these questions:

- Are you a source of positive energy? Do you genuinely smile at others? Are you a source of contagious enthusiasm?
- Do you help others preserve or up their status? Do you attempt to make others feel acknowledged and important?

## **The Power of Connection**

Now imagine if in every part of your life, you made it your work to “make someone's day.” How powerful would you be? How much would people count on you, depend on you, rely on you, seek your counsel, if they knew that every day you could be counted on to uplift them in some way by your interaction?

Using our power to help others is a behavior demonstrated by the top CEOs, as outlined in Jim Collins' *Good To Great*. He discusses how Level 5 Leaders (those who lead the most successful companies) are different from those in the comparison group, and identifies these key differences: demonstrates a compelling modesty; shuns public adulation; never boastful; relies on inspired standards and not charisma to motivate; channels ambition into the company and not the self; sets up successors for even greater success.

You, too, can be a Connector, and be a powerful player in your organization, in your community, and in your life. Will you choose to invest in your own social capital to drive results, make a difference, and realize your goals? You have the power.

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