Being a Bridge

By Charles Galunic

Anyone who loves Apple products should profusely thank Bill Fernandez.

Who?

Bill Fernandez grew-up in Sunnyvale California in the 1960's, near the heart of Silicon Valley, well before the valley became a household name. But he did not start Apple Computers. Nor was he their first investor or sponsor. He did work as employee No. 4 and contributed to the development of the famous Macintosh user interface (certainly worthy of thanks). But this is not the main reason we should thank him. Bill was the bridge between Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. Bill lived next door to Wozniak and went to school with Jobs. One day, Bill had an insight:

"Woz was next door, washing his car, and I said, 'You know, you'll probably like this guy because you're both interested in electronics"*

Bill orchestrated the first meeting of the two Steves, which was eventful and very positive. The rest is history. Two wonderfully complementary characters were put in touch, one a genius technician, the other a genius visionary. Without Bill, the two Steve's may never have met, and so probably no Apple.

There may be a temptation to focus on Bill's amazing network, to be impressed by the remarkable and close friends that he kept. At least this is what the current mania around social networking might have us focus on: the end is the network itself, the accumulation of many impressive people, and the possible benefits for the networker. Certainly, Bill managed to build ties to some special people. But the real value-added was realized because Bill was willing to be a bridge- to connect people who he believed belonged together (I wonder if Bill felt less connected to each as a result, although his connection with both certainly continued). This is not necessarily a selfless act—bridges generate kudos from those being bridged, which may serve the bridger very well (Bill got himself a very cool job and place in technological

history). But I think we too often overlook the wider value we can create by taking the time, thoughtfulness, and effort to connect the people we know.

Here's another example, but this story is set in modern times (it happened just this past year). And the medium is no longer someone's garage but Facebook. It was shared with me by one of our EMBA participants, Galya.

"It was in October when this friend of mine posted a picture of a male Labrador (light colored fur, metal chain, this kind of detail) who got lost in Sofia. The next day another Facebook friend of mine posted a picture of a male Labrador, who had been found, close description. I skipped the story in the beginning, but several hours later, when checking on my Facebook again, decided to ask the first friend if the dog was found. She replied that it is not even hers and she was only forwarding an announcement from a friend. So, I sent the announcement in a direct message to the second friend and the next day he replied with thanks, noting that the dog was sent to his home."

So, a beloved lost pet finds his home, following a path which includes a bridge made between owner and finder by someone on Facebook (and in fact residing on another continent—Galya lives in South-East Asia). The media would probably emphasize the marvels of facebook and social networks. But I think the real story is the willingness to be a bridge, to create value by helping people to connect, whether in a garage or through Facebook. We are, and should be, encouraged to build our social network, and often the motive is personal gain. There is nothing wrong with that. But there is much value we can create more generally when we are willing to be a bridge.

Find article at

https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/being-bridge

---

About the author(s)

Charles Galunic is a Professor of Organisational Behaviour and the Aviva Chaired Professor of Leadership and Responsibility at INSEAD.