Show Appreciation to Your Network

Showing your appreciation costs nothing and it can yield much more than not doing so.

I once worked with a fellow named Bill who was always cutting out clips from newspapers. Wielding his scissors he'd remark something along the lines of, "I think Mr. Wittgenstein would enjoy this." Then he'd put the clip in an envelope, write Mr. Wittgenstein's address on it, and mail it out. Snail mail. Bill mailed out clips all the time, and each one was tailored to its recipient's interests.

Quite often Bill would receive replies on postcards along the lines of, "Thanks for the article, old chap. I posted it in the office, and it's generated a lot of talk around the water cooler. Marge sends her regards. Stay young, Winston."

Bill understood something very important. People appreciate being appreciated, especially when the signal of appreciation is costly to the giver. I don't mean financially costly; just that the signal of appreciation involved some above-threshold level of effort on the part of the sender. Bill could've forwarded links to those same articles by email, but those wouldn't have meant nearly as much to the receivers – in fact they'd quite likely feel like spam. Bill had cut out those clippings with his own old school, somewhat rusty scissors, and put them in the envelope himself. The receivers probably understood that, and that's what made the clippings so meaningful. The content was secondary; that Bill made an effort is what really mattered.

Crucially, Bill didn't send clips to people from whom he wanted something. He just sent them to people he thought would appreciate them. Bill appreciated people and they appreciated him. I'm sure folks were always ready to give him a hand. He could pick up his phone and get the name of a contact, a bit of financial advice, a good recipe, or whatever from countless people around the world. No doubt they'd be grateful to help him out because he gave so much without expecting anything in return, because he was *thoughtful*.

A cynic might think that Bill was simply being strategic – perhaps Machiavellian – and that his clippings were part of an elaborate plot to get a lot of people to "owe" him something. I knew Bill well enough to know that wasn't the case: he was actually just a good guy. And I wouldn't want as a friend, a colleague, or an employee anyone whose personal ideology restricts them to the belief that Bill did what he did out of cunning. That sort of belief, I suspect, says more about the believer than anything else: namely that he's not a good guy.

As a professor, I receive a lot of requests by email. These emails follow a standard template:

Dear Professor,

I hope you are still enjoying Singapore. How is everything there? I hope to see you next time I'm on

campus, and catch up.

Also, I was wondering whether you could [insert a request for help here].

Thanks for all of your help!

Joe

Most of the time I haven't heard from Joe in forever, and very often his request is for something reasonably valuable (e.g., a contact in a company he would like to work for, a bit of statistical advice, etc.)

Unfortunately – and this is really disappointing – more than 50 percent of the time Joe doesn't reply to my reply. I don't know how Joe was raised, but where I'm from; not saying "thank you" is a major social faux pas. What the no-thank-you-Joe doesn't realise, I suspect, is that he's the Anti-Bill and people know it. Bill's selfless displays of appreciation build real relationships; Anti-Bill's selfish displays destroy them. No one wants to help out or work with an Anti-Bill, and we all know who he is.

Please be a Bill.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on Twitter and Facebook

Find article at
https://knowledge.insead.edu/blog/insead-blog/show-appreciation-to-your-network-2954

Download the Knowledge app for free