When Networks Become Shackles for Aspiring Leaders

By Martin Gargiulo , INSEAD

Manoeuvering into a position of power requires building relationships that could restrain you later if left unchecked.

Getting ahead requires building professional networks. As I've discussed before, those in a junior or weak position can overcome their weakness and start to move into senior positions by building relationships with those similar to them, which often are more accessible and willing to help. Those relationships are good when you are in survival mode. Beyond that, such bonds may no longer be useful and can in fact be harmful to future advancement.

In **a 2012 paper**, where we studied 1,746 investment bankers, we found that homophily, or the tendency to stick to others similar to oneself, helps junior bankers to get established and start moving up the ladder, but hinders the performance of experienced bankers.

The seemingly stable network structures that confer power to rising professionals can cease to be beneficial once they gain power, trapping them in unsuitable situations. As I alluded to in my **last article**, based on my

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recent paper, **The Power of the Weak**, with SMU Assistant Professor Gokhan Ertug, the power of the weak can thus become the weakness of the strong.

Weak players in organisations can use networks to overcome their dependence on powerful players in four ways: 1) by taking control of resources 2) by getting the powerful to invest emotionally in the relationship 3) building ties with individuals who might have influence over the powerful and 4) forming coalitions to bolster the individual's power base.

But there are several negative consequences of these approaches that can manifest themselves later.

What got you here…

First, these strategies rely on the creation of new social bonds that generate mutual obligations that may continue beyond the situation they were needed for. Secondly, these social bonds may act as filters for the information the individual receives from their network. Third, they can also create feelings of familiarity and comfort that may prevent the executive from continuing to expand their network. This could leave executives "trapped in their own net".

[Editor's note: In a **Knowledge interview from 2009**, Gargiulo explains why managers should differentiate between strong and weak ties]

This is similar to the findings of the **research** by Alejandro Portes and Julia Sensenbrenner, who examined how successful entrepreneurs in ethnic communities often get suffocated by the demands from members of the community, which was initially important for their success. These relationships create a sense of collective identity and loyalty towards the "community", which makes it harder for actors to move beyond these bonds.

No longer "one of the guys"

This presents executives with a conundrum. If the ties that help them survive and succeed today can become a liability for their success tomorrow, they may have to extricate themselves from these relationships. A geographic or departmental move may help, but this is not always an option. Thus, one simply cannot cut ties and suddenly stop behaving like "one of the guys" without paying a price. Escaping the trap of these relationships essentially requires bringing it to a level that continues to be mutually beneficial without

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becoming a constraint. That requires attention and tact.

Research on social networks suggests that the frequency, duration and emotional closeness of relationships determine the strength and the multiplexity of a relationship, which is the tendency to have many kinds of relationships with the same party; a personal as well as a professional one for instance. These are the dimensions you may need to work on to be able to expand your network.

Not all relationships will be equally easy to relax, however. Specifically, relationships with similar others and those sharing common third parties are particularly sticky. Ties with similar others are easier to form but may be more difficult to weaken, especially when the characteristic shared by the two parties is rooted in a common cultural identity, such as being a member of a minority. People in weak positions should use homophily carefully and selectively as it can act as a barrier to renewing your network.

Relationships sharing common third parties are also easier to form, because the common friend may help form the relationship in the first place. They are also stickier, because attempts to loosen up ties may encounter resistance from the common third parties. This is a situation many of us have experienced at work: it is easier to say no to the demands from an isolated person than to the demands of a cohesive group.

But perhaps the most important and least noticed barrier to renew one's network resides in the executive's own mental toolbox. The ease and the initial effectiveness of forming bonds with similar others or with people with whom they share common third parties may lead executives to continue using the same tactics, despite having moved to positions of autonomy or seniority that should put them beyond the "survival mode". This is akin to a "competency trap" holding them back from building the networks needed in more senior positions.

Paradoxically, the easier it is to form a relationship in the first place, the harder it is to loosen it up later. Mindful of this, executives can try to avoid overinvesting in professional ties that may be hard to weaken when they are no longer mutually beneficial. In the same way that excessive trust can lead to detrimental outcomes for the trusting party, overinvesting in homophilous ties with members of a cohesive group in early stages of a career can become a trap that prevents executives from adapting their professional networks as they develop as leaders. Keeping in mind this "dark side" of

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networks is essential for executives who wish to expand and renew the “social capital” of their networks.

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