



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Good Old Boy Network

The good old boy network use to be a real dirty word. It meant that people were looking out after each other and doing each other favors on the fringes of what was ethically correct. The implication was that if you were a good old boy, you got what you wanted and if you weren't, you didn't. The good ol boy network had a connotation of impropriety.

My, how the times have changed. The concept of networking has now come back in a different fashion. People are now strongly encouraged to have networks. The networks consist of not only men but women, and sometimes the network consists of both. Contemporary networks are designed to exchange information but they are not necessarily designed to exchange power or influence. They tend to be used to solve problems instead of peddling influence. As a result they are now looked upon as amoral and a method of communication. In a sense the concept of a network has evolved into a need instead of an advantage. The concept of networking today more or less implies that if you don't have a network that there is something wrong with you.

The reality is probably somewhere in between these two positions. It is very difficult these days to have any clique that restricts its membership survive very long. I believe that there are some limited membership networks. If they still do exist each is vulnerable to a degree that they fail to be aware of what is going on outside their clique. Eventually they will be rendered useless. I also believe there are very few people who have the "perfect network" which allows them to obtain any bit of information they need. The key to furthering you own use of the network concept is to apply some energy to its creation and maintenance.

Everyone should have some form of network and the more organized you are in approaching that process, the more likely you will find that the network will assist you in being successful in problem solving.

Think for a few moments. Who do you know? Who knows you? What kind of information exists in your network now? What do you know that you can contribute to others? If I were sitting in your office conversing with you about a particular problem, you might recall bits and pieces of conversations you have had with other people that may bear on that same problem. Your memory can play tricks on you in the form of allowing you to forget that you know someone who deals with a particular topic or it can mislead you into believing that someone knows something they don't.

A good network is no accident. It comes about as an individual begins to organize information they have about themselves and those that they interact with on a regular basis. One of the more interesting tools that have brought about an increased capability in this area is the computer. For example, there are at least two computer programs that can help you organize your network.



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The first is a simple database. Regardless of the software name, a database allows you to place information into a file in which you can establish certain parameters. For example, a database can be created that has names, addresses, telephone numbers, fax numbers, business and home addresses, even the names of wives and family members. That database can be manipulated to sort the information by alphabetical or zip code configuration.

If you take that data base one step further and merely add a one or two field of code regarding the areas of expertise of your friends, you have the beginnings of a more powerful network. For example, I have a great deal of interaction with people in the sprinkler industry. In my data base on my computer I have names and addresses, of course, but I have further added a couple of fields which discriminate between those people who are in the manufacturing of sprinklers vs. those who are in the code development process regarding use of sprinklers.

The result is that when people come to me asking for assistance in a particular field, I can assist them in finding appropriate contacts by calling up the data base and asking the field to sort and select according to those codes.

Another software program that is useful is called HyperCard. This program is very creative in that it allows you to create "stacks" of information that will help you sort and select data that you have entered. By establishing criteria for the retrievability of information, you can improve the information sharing capabilities of your network.

For example, you can have a stack of cards that does nothing but list names and phone numbers. However, that stack can be linked with additional information that you have acquired from working with other people. You may find a person's name and address in the HyperCard system and then by clicking open another stack you may be able to access information about projects, programs or activities that that individual has been involved in with previous contact with you.

Of course, people are going to ask, "What if you don't own a computer?" Well, computers are immensely useful in separating and sorting information rapidly. They do have one downside. Someone has to enter that information into the computer. That can be time consuming and if you lack clerical support that can be difficult. Let's take a look at another technique that will expand the retrievability power of your network. It is as simple as having a Rolodex and always asking everyone for two business cards instead of one.

The use of Rolodex is self-explanatory but it is important to realize that rotary Rolodex systems are much faster than card files. Information can be retrieved from the Rolodex faster than a conventional



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filing card system because you can rotate the deck file much more quickly than finger your way through cards

One idea that helps in building a network is to always ask for two business cards when you first meet someone. The first business card should always be filed under whatever alpha criteria you wish to use, i.e., their last name or the name of their business. Now for the second card. Turn it over and in big block letters at the top of the business card write down the area of expertise or subject matter that this person has helped you or could help you with in the future.

You can obtain a secondary Rolodex and divide it into subject matter areas. The first Rolodex allows you to flip through quickly and find a person by name. What if you can't remember their name but you can remember their topic? You go to your second Rolodex and go to the topic file. Another little trick in enhancing this network is to place the Rolodex cards in your second file in clear, transparent carriers. Insert them in the Rolodex file backwards and upside down. You can flip through a topic very quickly and as you roll the Rolodex each card would disclose itself so you can find the name and address as the card fell down on the Rolodex file.

As I was preparing this material I had a discussion with someone who suggested that both of these are a lot of work. Well, that's true. If you have to reorganize everything you have ever done in your entire life, this will take days, if not weeks, to achieve. If you started this process ten or fifteen years ago and maintained it on a daily basis, you will find that these techniques literally take just moments per day.

As of last count, I have approximately 10,000 business cards in my file. I started developing the network system around 1968. I would estimate that I now spend less than five to ten minutes per day updating my network file and adding new contacts to the list. If you want to improve your effectiveness as an individual, starting with the creation of such a system can start with a handful of business cards that you have in your folder today. Ten years from now you will be amazed at the potential power that resides in your files.

If you are lucky, you will find yourself linked with other people who use similar techniques. The cliché of "birds of a feather flocking together" has a corollary. People who fish with nets catch fish - people who _____ work catch information.