

This booklet by Patricia Wagner and Leif Smith was written for use at conferences. We had been running the Office for Open Network, in Denver, Colorado, since February 1975, and people were asking for something in writing that would help make their conferences into the same kind of information exchange they had found at our Office for Open Network Open Houses and networking workshops. The booklet was originally published in 1980, and over the next few years about 7,000 copies were distributed. It's pretty simple and a lot has happened since then, but we still find the five rules of networking useful. We hope you enjoy it!

Pat & Leif, Denver, Colorado, January 1999

---

## **The Networking Game**

*For everyone who asks  
friendly questions  
about anything*

### **The Rules**

- **Be useful**
- **Don't be boring**
- **Listen**
- **Ask questions**
- **Don't make assumptions**

Network - Lines of communication connecting a set of points

Network - A pattern of human interaction characterized by a process of information exchange usually leading to other human interactions and/or material, service, information, monetary or spiritual exchanges. - Richard Haight

The information explosion overwhelms us; a splintered society confuses us. We sometimes feel as if we are on a tightrope with few options. But each useful contact we make becomes a node in a safety net, and we have discovered that it is easier to make non-fatal mistakes over a net than 300 feet above bare sawdust.

The Networking Game is the art of discovering patterns in the world and making useful connections for ourselves and for others. It is about weaving new options into our safety nets.

Question: What are some of the most important quests in my life right now?

Networks are processes, not institutions. They are not clubs, schools, libraries, or computer systems, although networks do exist within and among institutions, and computer systems may serve them.

Networks are based on the interests each individual pursues; in fact, we like to think of people as explorers with many kinds of quests. The best kinds of institutions, to our mind, offer ample opportunity for people to follow their personal exploration. Those opportunities allow networks to grow and the game to flourish. But calling an institution a network does not automatically create one.

We don't intend to tell you what your quests should be. You may have an immediate need, like finding a babysitter or a place to eat lunch. It might be a larger goal, such as changing jobs or finding friends in a new city. Or you might be following a lifelong dream, like studying a new field of biology or building a home. We feel that what is most important to you are your own quests, quests which change all the time. This book is a tool to help you on those quests, no matter how large or small.

Question: Why did I come to this conference? What does the conference mean to my quest?

### **Conferences as Quick Forming Networks**

Conferences are wonderful opportunities to share useful information. The designers of the conference have gathered a group of people to listen to experts and to learn. Now, the experts can be good timesavers; they have experience and wisdom, and they help us see the world in a new way. But experts can never replace our own eyes or our own visions.

Look around you. What brought all these people here? What are they thinking about? What do they have to share? There may be one speaker, or a handful, or even dozens you might like to talk with and listen to, but you also have hundreds of opportunities to connect with the other participants. This book is about being at a conference and making good use of your time as a networker.

How do I explain networking to people? How do they explain it to me? Does it really make any difference?

Scribble in this book. Fill in the pages. Exchange books. Write down names and phone numbers. We know this is a very small book; feed it and exercise it so it can grow.

Now that you have heard from us, we would also like to hear from you. Use the form at the back of the book to tell us about your own Networking Game and how you play. We would like to use the information in future publications.

Pat Wagner  
Leif Smith

*All real living is meeting - Martin Buber*

## **The Rules of the Game**

### **Rule Number One: Be Useful**

You have a great deal to offer your fellow explorers: ideas, phone numbers, benign gossip, a critical anecdote, a book title, a location, a number. The trick is to be useful. Good networking is good guessing, you know; it is an art, not a science. However, you can be more useful if you keep track of at least some of the information you have by writing it down. A phone number list made at leisure can be a valuable tool in the middle of the fray. It is easy for the best of us to forget our own phone number, let alone the number of that important contact in Canon City, Colorado.

You really don't have to remember everything and write it all down to be a good networker (or as Leif has named such people, a good weaver). You simply have to know how to tell your game partners where to find the information. Your usefulness might be reduced by burdening yourself with too much information; learn to travel light. It doesn't help to know everything if you can't tell your fellow explorers the useful things they need to know for their quests.

Question: What are some important names and phone numbers I want to have on hand for the conference?

Another occupational hazard of being a good networker is not allowing other people to be useful to you. We all know people who will not let us give them anything. After awhile, the flow of communication can become stifled. The Networking Game can then turn into an Institution in which there is only one player surrounded by spectators. The walls are in place, and the well-meaning weaver might never know what happened.

If you do not allow other people to be useful to you, you place an enormous burden of debt on your game partners. They may not feel comfortable about asking for information because the exchange is one-sided. It was the Chinese, we believe, who said, obligation is a curse: it is certainly not a useful emotion to feel obligated to another human being.

One of the best ways we know to be useful to yourself and to others is to let them be useful to you.

Question: How can I allow others to be useful to me?

One thing nice about networking is that it allows for many quests to flourish in the same space at the same time. You see, the Networking Game is not the same as a formal group process; you do not have to agree on an agenda before you do something.

It is true that many networks have a focus of some kind, usually based on place, like a neighborhood organization; an interest, like a network based on the study of French intensive agriculture; or an intent, like a group working to keep a historic building from being demolished. But you really don't have to get anyone or any group of people to agree to anything to be a useful networker. You might find a group of people with the same basic notion about the world, but they might have many ways of pursuing the same vision. The Networking Game is not about convincing people or getting them to agree; it is simply about being useful to people, one at a time.

This simple idea is one that sometimes gets forgotten when someone discovers how powerful networking can be in spreading new ideas. However, we believe that the strength of networking lies in the subtlety of the process; it is not as successful when used as a bludgeon.

Question: How do I tell when to stop helping people weave their networks and let them pick up the loose threads for themselves?

Question: What are my favorite sources of information? How can I best help others use them?

The third hazard which we would like to caution you about is taking care of people. This is a role which is performed by many formal and informal structures in society. It is a role many people play very well, and it is a very important one. However, we personally don't think that taking care of people is the same thing as networking.

If you like the idea of being an explorer, and if you respect and appreciate other explorers and other quests, you will find yourself being of great service.

But it is sometimes possible to help too much. We question the usefulness of not allowing fellow explorers to find their own way. It is one thing to pass out fish; it is another to teach fishing. In the game, you might choose to give your partners the phone number rather than make the phone call for them. You can suggest to them where to find the

phone number, rather than look it up for them. Just ask yourself, if you are feeling particularly burdened by other people's requests, if you have not become "too useful" to them. In other words, have you denied them the pleasure and problems of their own quests?

Question: I'm on a desert island with only five quarters. Who would I call for interesting conversation? Why those five people?

Question: What does the most boring networker I know do to be boring?

*One person's music is another person's noise.*

### **Rule Number Two: Don't be Boring**

A serious occupational hazard for people who want to network information is that of becoming boring. In the Networking Game, articulate people can show off their speaking abilities, and people with good memories can show off their mental lists of phone numbers. But, again, we must come back to the balancing point - are they being useful?

We have noticed, in the course of managing our own networking office, that three contacts are often more useful than thirty. The quality of the information is the most important factor, always. If you are not sure that the contacts you have mentioned are going to be useful, you might add a couple of extra names if you think they might lead somewhere. But try to avoid drowning the person you're supposed to help.

Question: Where are my best warehouses of information - libraries, archives? Who are the best networkers on their staffs?

Notice we have made a point of separating the functions of a librarian or archivist from that of a networker. It is not impossible for someone to perform both functions; many people do. The key is to always ask yourself if you are being useful or just showing off. You must determine for yourself the balance between strong information and actively using it; there is no magic formula.

Question: What are some ways the people I connect into my own network can be of value to those with whom I connect them?

Question: When a networker sends someone else to me for information, what do I hope they will have told this person about how they might be of value to me?

Question: What can I ask for in exchange for my information so I don't get burned out?

Another way to be boring is to stop thinking about both ends of the transaction you are setting up. You might kill a wonderful relationship with a unique resource by relying on it too heavily. What an awful feeling when you learn that someone dreads hearing from you or the people you send. Are you making more work for a good contact, with no thought to some kind of emotional or material payoff for them? Are you sending too many of the same kinds of requests to the same person? The connection should be useful, or at least of interest, to both parties.

One way to avoid this kind of mistake is to encourage people to think about how they can be useful to each other. Suggest that they might offer something in return for whatever they receive in the exchange. This is especially true if the resource person is someone who makes a living from networking, such as a consultant or advisor. Although many people must charge for any information they share, others are quite interested in useful trades of time, goods or information. The point is not to send a group of people out into your personal information pool to leech off of your friends and associates. Very boring.

Question: I spend one meeting period at the conference listening very carefully. I try not to think about what I would like to say. I just listen. What did I learn that was useful to me?

*The gods send thread for the web begun. - Ancient Greek saying.*

### **Rule Number Three: Listen**

To be useful to someone is to listen and to know them well. But receptive and imaginative listening is not an art taught in our culture. Many of our institutions tend to foster an us-them mentality. Networking reveals that the situation is never so simple. The assumption we make in our network office is the person who comes to us for information knows more about their condition than we do. So we must listen very carefully, without prejudice, to what they have to say.

We have learned that listening creates change in ourselves and in others. We listen because we want to learn something new, because we want to stretch our own boundaries, because we want to grow. We listen because we don't want to stop the flow of information in our direction.

Listening is part of the process of invention.

Question: What are some facts about my background and experiences that might bias my view of the world.

The most important trick is to listen from the other person's point of view before you listen from your own. Ask yourself how you would understand what you are hearing if you grew up where the person speaking did and shared the same experiences.

If you listen before you speak, you create the chance for something very like magic to happen. Networking magic takes advantage of differences among people by rearranging the world into shared patterns, which are often startling and exciting. These patterns can open new possibilities. But unless you listen with all your power and alertness you will never know what magic might have been found.

When you listen, you decide to set no limits about what you are willing to learn. What you want to know may be around the next corner, but unless you listen you may never find it. People who know everything don't listen; they don't have to. They attack the problem with mouth open and feet flying. They are impervious to change, new information and ... Magic.

Question: What are some friendly ways to share information with a shy person, a know-it-all, a scared person, someone who does not speak my language well?

People who begin their sentences with "You Know What YOU SHOULD Do ..." are not only disrespectful of other points of view, but ten to one they don't listen very well either. It is rare that someone wants a command from another person: more often than not a friendly clue is much more useful to a quest. (When someone asks us if we know what we SHOULD do, we want to answer YES, and close the conversation.) Sometimes, the language you use shows if you are listening well.

As we mentioned before, group processes sometimes assume you can't do anything until everybody agrees. Networking assumes that many different things can happen at once. When you are listening to someone, you are collecting information and you do not have to agree with them. That means you don't have to convince them of anything or get yourself into long arguments. All you have to do is be useful.

You can also save yourself time if you listen, especially if you discover that the person has already tried all the things you would have mentioned, plus a few you never heard of before.

Question: What are some friendly questions I could ask some of the people around me which no one else is asking? For example, "Why ...?"

*Getting lost is half the fun of getting there. - Esther Wagner*

#### **Rule Number Four: Ask Questions**

There is nothing more valuable than finding out what's true, therefore, it can be an extremely friendly act to ask good questions. Questions need not be traps, nor masks for psychological games, nor a way of making someone feel bad. Think of a good question as a way to test your own assumptions about the world, particularly if you disagree with the person you are talking with.

For example, if you want to make the maximum use of disagreement without being limited by it, ask a question. Assume that the person has some information you need, ask them for that information. Ask them where they found the information, how they came to that point of view, why they stick with it.

If we didn't know better, we could say that great forces are consciously at work in our society to force people to hate each other, to force people apart. You can fight that kind of disintegration by asking questions, particularly the kind that no one else will ask.

Question: What are five unlikely questions or comments to share with the people around me?

The art of contrary thinking questions whatever people know to be true. If everyone knows something to be true, it is a good bet that they know nothing of the sort. People who asked those difficult questions about what everyone knew have often been responsible for amazing collective cultural leaps.

A good question is sometimes more useful than a good answer. If you ask a question before you offer advice, you might not have to offer anything more. This kind of questioning is also very useful if you find yourself surrounded by people who agree with you. We do not suggest a rowdy revolution at your next conference, but asking questions about the assumptions your group makes can be useful.

Another use for questions is to help people break out of circular thinking. A simple "Why" can often get people safely off that tightrope we mentioned before.

Question: What are some of the assumptions I think most people have? What is the opposite assumption?

All environmentalists are commies.  
All business people are fascists.

Chemicals are good.  
Chemicals are commies.

Question: What is my favorite assumption?  
Question: How do I know it is true?

*E who does not expect the unexpected will not find it. - Heraclitus*

### **Rule Number Five: Don't Make Assumptions**

We think that successful networkers pay a lot of attention to what their own assumptions are and they always try to see deeper into them. They play a lot of games with supposing that some other assumptions are the ones they really hold, especially if those assumptions might belong to the people they are talking with.

They also assume that anything can be connected to anything else. They are cautious about placing heavy or sticky boundaries between ideas, situations, people or institutions. They think that cats can look at kings, and vice versa, and that the person least like them in the room might be the most valuable to them.

Question: How could five contacts I know about lead to a job?

An explorer who learns to step off the usual path once in a while, who follows up an unlikely contact, is often rewarded in the long run with valuable information and magic encounters.

Say you are going up a mountain. With a telescope firmly planted to your eye, you scan the face of the range for an available path. A friend comes by and gently takes the viewer away, then points to a road twenty feet to the right. In assisting a fellow traveler, sometimes the most useful thing you can do is open up their peripheral visions and allow more options to make themselves known.

Your wild guess about an idea, an image, a person, or a situation may have this effect. For example, a chronic case of narrow networking occurs when someone is job-hunting.

Often a job hunt is a desperate matter with difficult deadlines to meet. So you don't go to a party where you might just meet someone who knows about an opening. Or you don't take your kids to the zoo, where you meet the executive picnicking with her family (who you would never gotten in to see). Don't assume the unexpected can't happen; otherwise, as an ancient Greek named Heraclitus pointed out, it never will.

Try this: Tell five people the same "wild card".

Question: What happened?

Don't assume that because of differences in education a useful connection can't be made. In fact, if you think you have nothing in common with the other person, play the wild card. Mention the book you read last month, the restaurant you ate in yesterday, the mysterious ailment plaguing your guppy. Tell them about the weird result from your last laboratory experiment, or how your son can't find a school to teach him bookbinding. Tell them the strange request you got from another networker twenty minutes ago. The heart of good networking is good guessing, and good networkers take some chances with information, resources and connections.

The wild card can be very useful when you are on a single- minded quest. It is another way to open new paths for your own exploration. It takes a little humility to ask a person who is not at "your level" for advice, but the best teachers do it all the time. The wild card is the idea that sets human networkers apart from computers. It leaps across logic and transforms strangers into friends, enemies into co-workers. It makes a changing world into a challenge rather than a threat to the way we live our lives. It is a gamble, but there is very little to lose.

Question: What are my own rules of networking?

There really isn't very much to the networking rules in this book. All we have tried to do is write down what everybody else is thinking.

One last thing to remember:

*There is more to the obvious than is obvious. -Hanmer Parsons Grant*

Permission is given to view,  
copy, print, and distribute this document.  
Please include this copyright notice.

---

## **Contact**

[leif@pattern.com](mailto:leif@pattern.com)

<http://www.pattern.com/game1980.html>