

Why Your Inner Circle Should Stay Small, and How to Shrink It

HBR: March 07, 2018

When it comes to networks, the bigger the better, right? Not necessarily. Carefully curate your most trusted, inner circle and you'll be surprised at how much more valuable you'll become to the larger community of people in the world who care about the same things you do.

We live in a time when “bigger is better” is the prevailing assumption when it comes to, well, just about anything. So it's only natural for us to want to supersize our network of connections — both online and off — because the more people we know, the greater our chances of being exposed to opportunities that may lead to professional advancement, potential mentors, material success, and so on. But in fact, being what we call a “superconnector” has nothing to do with supersizing your network. Rather, it's about surrounding yourself with a carefully curated group of people who you admire and respect and with whom you share common beliefs and values — people who will set the tone for the foundation of your larger network filled with people who provide value to one another. And that core group should be a lot smaller than you think.

We're all time-deprived; it can be daunting to have to manage work, family, and the “spare” time we spend on the necessary evil we call networking. But networking doesn't have to be so time-consuming. If you're like most people, you have built your network haphazardly, connecting with anyone who will communicate with you. You probably have a hard time saying no to people. And as a result, people you barely know are probably making demands on your time and, like a true mensch, you may be accommodating them. But your undiscerning generosity may be self-defeating: by giving your time to fifty people rather than, say, five, you are making far less of an impact in the world than the sheer volume of your network would have you think.

“It's important to consider the five people who are in your inner circle, because they are going to deeply and profoundly influence you,” says Darrah Brustein, founder of Network Under 40. Networking events are Brustein's lifeblood, but she often does a little relationship housekeeping, keeping in mind that “people are going to draw snap judgements of you” based on your inner circle. That doesn't mean that you should try to populate your inner circle with high-profile contacts whose shine will rub off on you; it means seeking out, and nurturing relationships with good, smart people who, says Brustein “can help you to be a bigger and better version of yourself.”

In other words, you need to be ruthlessly selective, because everyone in your core group also has an inner circle with which you will ultimately be connected, and those people will have an inner circle, and so on. Through professional speaking, business development on behalf of The Community Company, and mentoring aspiring young entrepreneurs through groups like Junior Achievement, I interact with tens of thousands of individuals every year, but there are only a handful of people and activities I make time for religiously. For example, every two weeks, I have lunch with a college friend and fellow entrepreneur who always keeps me grounded; every quarter, I meet with another entrepreneur friend who is running a complex global business and who reminds me to think big. A close group of friends from high school keeps me humble and connected to my roots, and almost every weekend, my wife, our four children, and I make family memories by exploring a new part of New York City. With each of these people, the conversation is unfiltered and trust is absolute. These people are part of the rock-solid foundation that has led to my success. I choose them, not to the exclusion of all others, but because they make me a better person for the thousands of others with whom I interact.

So how do you go about building your own strong foundation? First, assess yourself. Are you in control of the relationships in your life, or are you ceding that control to others? That standing lunch date, or the conference you've attended for years because your pal is involved — when is the last time those interactions either provided value or allowed you to give value? Do you come away energized or drained? If you are not deciding the rules of engagement and making deliberate choices about who you are spending time with, then you need to take back that control. Start by making a plan to lessen your time investment in people and activities that make unrewarding demands on you until you can fully withdraw from the person, commitment, or activity.

Secondly, assess your habits and activities. What activities did you take part in over the past week? What was worth your time? What wasn't? What would you definitely do again or invest more time in? What would you cut entirely? And ask yourself if how you're spending your time is aligned with your most deeply-held values. If it's not, then drop it, even if that has the potential to put you in an uncomfortable position with friends or colleagues.

Last of all, assess others. Who did you recently spend time with? What types of people do you want to spend more time with, and what types do you want to cut out entirely? Remember that relationships should not be transactional — the idea is not to spend time only with people who you believe can help you. Rather, consider the long-term value of building mutually-beneficial relationship. Superconnectors are always on the lookout for ways to help others, not because there is the expectation of reciprocity, but because being useful and generous builds social capital by making you valuable and memorable.

As you shrink your inner circle, you'll begin thinking of yourself as the architect of your environment. As you forge deeper, more authentic relationships with smaller numbers of people who are genuinely important to you, you will gain more context into their wants and needs, and they will likewise develop a fuller understanding of you. That will give you a stronger foundation on which to build a larger community that benefits from knowing you and your inner circle. You may never have a supersized network, but you'll be well on your way to being a superconnector.