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John Poole
704-456-7968
john.poole@visitcabarrus.com
visitcabarrus.com

Educational Article

Best practices for inclusive, in-person networking

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Best practices for inclusive, in-person networking

In this new season of awareness around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), people are paying increased attention to the diversity of not only their work environments but also their personal and professional networks. Here's how to diversify your connections through best practices for inclusive, in-person networking.

Note: As you move through these recommendations, it's important to remember that diversifying your network it's not an act of charity or social justice. It's an act of business acumen. Why? Because a diverse network helps you tap into a broader, deeper range of perspectives, skill sets, and communities so that you can be sure you're listening to the best advice from the best advisors, not just the ones that are easiest to access. In other words, diversifying your personal network does not mean changing your standards for quality or your expectations for success. It means expanding your own opportunity to choose the best people as mentors, proteges, colleagues, associates, and advisors.

Why diversifying your network is imperative

There are a multitude of fiscal implications to building a demographically-representative personal or professional network, but one of the most impactful comes from a study done by The Hackett Group, which shows that procurement organizations that embrace supplier diversity generate [up to 133% higher return on investments](#) compared to organizations that don't. There are multiple [qualitative perks](#) too, which include growing new skills, obtaining new leads and referrals, and receiving feedback and coaching from new sources.

Think of your professional network as your personal version of [supplier diversity](#) and seek to create a group that represents the diversity of the many communities in which you live, work, and play. Remember that diversity means more than race and gender. Other dimensions of identity to consider are age, skill set, generation, ability, ancestry, religion, sexuality, neurodiversity, socioeconomic origin, family structure, education, and more. For instance, are most people in your network working as leaders within their organizations, or are you including entry-level professionals? Is your network representative of multiple family structures, or is almost everyone married with children? One way to explore the existing diversity in your network is by completing this [free, printable Trusted Ten exercise](#).

Best practices for inclusive networking

(1) Unpack your biases

Biases – defined as a disproportionate weight in favor of or against an idea, person, or thing – are natural and inevitable. But, [even unconscious biases, which operate reflexively within our brains, can be mitigated and overcome](#) if we are aware of their existence and sensitive to situations where and when they are activated. Test your own unconscious biases with the free online quiz from [Project Implicit](#) to be more aware of how your automatic, unchecked cognitive

processing might be interfering with your best intentions to create a more diverse network. Then, make space and time to explore unconscious bias through education and [skill-based training](#).

(2) Focus on authenticity

As [The Diversity Movement CEO Donald Thompson](#) explains, “the easiest way to open a conversation is with a sincere compliment. It’s a way of giving something away without looking for anything in return. It doesn’t have to be anything significant, but “I enjoyed your podcast this week” or “that book you wrote years ago really made an impact on me” can easily open the door for connection. Sometimes that’s where the conversation will end, and that’s ok! Remember that you are looking for authentic relationships, not salesy or manufactured connections.”

Before you start networking, stop to consider what, specifically, you are looking to accomplish and who might help you get there. Are you looking to create opportunities for your business, or push yourself toward personal growth? Would it help you to have new connections in a specific industry or profession, like marketing, real estate, finance, or tech? Great networking does not mean casting a wide net but rather intentionally growing authentic connections that are mutually beneficial and enjoyable.

(3) Learn about inclusive language and behavior

The most important thing you can do to be more inclusive is [educate yourself about other people’s experiences](#). Commit to your own continued education, and don’t underestimate the value of your example. Learn and use [best practices for respectful, inclusive language](#), and when you don’t know how to address a person, remember that it’s ok to ask. Say “Hi. I’m _____ and my pronouns are _____. May I ask your pronouns?”

The golden rule of inclusive language is to put [people first](#), keeping the whole, complex person at the center of your language and using their descriptors only afterward, as adjectives not nouns. For example, you might say “person in a wheelchair” instead of “disabled person.” The exception to this rule is when someone refers to themselves in descriptor-first language. It’s always safe to mirror the language someone uses for themselves.

Also, only mention what’s relevant to the conversation. In most cases, it will be irrelevant to mention a person’s race, gender, or other dimensions of diversity. You can simply describe them by their location or clothing instead, such as “the person in the corner by the window” or “the person in the bright blue shirt.”

(4) If you’ve searched, search again

Again, as Donald Thompson puts it, “[networking is about expanding the concentric circles of your already-established relationships](#). Work outward, starting with your inner circle.” In that context, one way to start diversifying your personal and professional network is by openly naming your commitment to diversity and your focus on inclusion to your close advisors and colleagues. Say “I’ve noticed my personal and professional networks are more homogenous than I’d like, and this year, I want to be more inclusive. If there’s anyone you think I should talk to or know, I’d really appreciate the opportunity for connection.” Also, consider whom you are already using for professional services like legal advice, financial advice, or fitness advice. How might you expand these relationships and surround yourself with more diverse advisors?

Close the loop

If you’ve found folks at an event or in another professional space that you’d like to include in your personal network, the most important piece is to make sure you follow up. Use platforms like LinkedIn or personal emails to send a timely, thoughtful note that encourages ongoing communication and keeps the door open for future collaboration. The idea here is to leverage organic moments in order to be more intentional in the future.

And lastly, show yourself some grace. Your efforts toward inclusion don’t have to change everything all at once. What’s most important is that you commit to continuous learning and take small steps to get started today.

About The Diversity Movement

The Diversity Movement is a results-oriented, data-driven strategic partner for organization-wide culture change through diversity, equity, and inclusion. Our team of experts provides a customized mix of online learning, tools, events, and consulting services that help our partners create future-focused, employee-centered cultures and better business outcomes.

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Association Executives of North Carolina

Mailing Address: 514 Daniels St., PMB #352, Raleigh NC 27605

Phone: 919.848.8255 | Fax: 919.848.8525

