

Building Alliances at Work – Getting Help Before You Need It

The Fast Track May 23, 2014

One day, inevitably, you're going to need someone's help at work. If you don't have the authority to tell someone what to do – you aren't the boss – then you'll need them to want to help you. Here's a few ways to accomplish that, without feeling smarmy in the least bit.

You can call it “creating good karma,” if you like. Or “being a nice person, on principle.” Or “creating work alliances,” or “networking.” But whatever label you give the practice, it's never a bad idea to create a connection with people whom (a) you can help and (b) who might be able to help you, someday.



There are pragmatic reasons to do this, outside of the spiritual payback of being a kind and caring person. For one: It makes sense to build a support system among your colleagues before you need them. When you – inevitably – need help from someone in another department, it's a lot easier to ask when you already know the individual, and when she cares about you enough to want to help.

After all, says Heather Stagl, author of *99 Ways to Influence Change* and Coach for Organizational Change Agents at Enclaria, “We're more likely to help our friends than our acquaintances, and more likely to help our acquaintances than people we don't know at all.”

“Networking” isn't icky.

Some of you are cringing. The notion of “making friends” with conscious awareness of your ability to help one another makes some people uncomfortable. They see it as an example of the sentiment behind the quote attributed to French dramatist Hippolyte Jean Giraudoux, “The secret of success is sincerity. Once you can fake that, you've got it made.”

But it doesn't work that way. When you are truly interested in someone else (either one-on-one or as part of a team effort), it feels good to make friends. The only difference is that, in this case, the friendship also includes enlightened self-interest.

“If you develop a personal connection, empathy, and understanding with another person, they are more likely to help you, despite everything else they have on their plate,” says Enerpace executive coach Elene Cafasso. When you’re friends (or at least allies) with work colleagues, they know that you understand their world, and they appreciate that you would adequately and appropriately represent their needs as you move your project forward. And, says Cafasso, “They knew I had, or would, do the same for them when needed.”

Build a culture of helping others

I like to think that, in most companies, it’s not that startling for people to want to help each other, even when they work in wholly different departments. The company is supposed to share the same values, after all, and most of us are nice people. You (and the managers who provide the corporate vision) should build a company culture in which it is expected team members will help each other out of a jam.

When you *do* get that kind of “We’re in it together” group behavior, the attitude becomes part of the tribal belief system and is reinforced by peer pressure. If you’re lucky enough for team members to have a tacit understanding of their shared goals, it’s far easier to create people-connections that – to use the in-buzzwords, though here I mean them explicitly – foster collaboration, build trust, and make people feel safe enough to share aloud a “dumb” (but innovative) idea.

As a general rule, you should be responsive ahead of time. Treat other people in the company with respect and help them if they need it, within reason. Establish a reputation as a helpful person on a helpful team. Coworkers are more inclined to help when the culture of your team is to help others.

But... maybe your situation is far from ideal. How do you build these alliances across the business? Here’s a few things that might help.

Number One with a bullet: Offer help.

Want to earn someone’s affection? Make his life easier. The people I know who are most-beloved and best-connected are all generous with their time and attention. Nor do they wait to be asked: They all offer to help the people they know, even acquaintances.

I don’t mean to say that you need to volunteer to take on a huge project for somebody you barely know. In most cases, it’s just a matter of learning what matters to the individual, and letting her know about an item of interest. In any given week, I forward a dozen e-mail messages with a cover note saying, “Hey, isn’t this something you’ve been working on? Maybe this data is helpful. Anyway, it made me think of you!”

What’s important is that you do something to help your colleagues with *their* needs, long before you need to ask for help with your own. “Sometimes it’s a listening ear, sometimes it’s ‘roll up your sleeves’

and help them get their deliverables done,” advises Tom Cooper, principal at the Bright Hill Group. “They need to know that you’re not thinking of them as a cog in a machine, that you think of them as a person who matters.” That shouldn’t be any great difficulty. After all, your colleague *is* a person who matters – and helping good people is always rewarding on its own merits.

Express appreciation

Breaking news: People like to feel valuable and appreciated.

Duh.

But somehow, people rarely take a moment to say Attagirl, as if offering a colleague praise is more dangerous than criticizing. Gosh, what’s wrong with saying you noticed that someone did a good job – particularly when it’s obvious that they put heart and soul into it?

Many of us are so focused on doing our jobs with precision that we look first at the errors (our own, not just those emanating from the Accounting department or Marketing) and we put our attention on correction. Or we assume, “It’s just their job!” and (like this scene from *Mad Men*) the paycheck should be all the Thank-You someone needs.

But even though we know *we* respond best when people tell us we did well, we often are reluctant to say so to others. I’m not sure why that is.

If you want to build relationships with people across your company, take a moment to say Thank You. Don’t wait for your colleague to do something exceptional. Right now, *yes right now*, write an e-mail message to someone in another department, saying something like, “I was thinking today about how often I drop a request on you out of the blue, and how cheerfully and quickly you always respond. Like [recent example]. I may not always remember to say Thank You, but I want you to know that I noticed and appreciated it.”

Three sentences... and it’ll make someone’s day. It cannot sound insincere because it *is* sincere. And you betcha that, six months from now, if you ask for that colleague’s help with your project, she’ll be delighted to say Yes – even if she has other demands on her time.

“Flattery gets you nowhere? On the contrary, it works pretty consistently,” says Stagl.

Praise publicly

Even more useful: When someone does go out of his way for you, give them public recognition, especially in front of his boss. “Publicly recognize them in either a mention in your project proposal, Thank You Note to their superiors, and/or a gift of appreciation,” suggests business and career coach Laura Lee Rose.

“Master networker” Larry Benet calls these “magic moments” that you can create for other people. He explains, “When you create magic moments for others, not only will you feel good, but the people you’re coming in contact with will feel good, and it will have a ripple effect.”

Eventually, you will need to call upon people in another department to help you out, when your need is a distraction from their jobs. In that case, the other person has to want to help you. By following a few of these suggestions – which make the office a friendlier place no matter what! – you might find it easier to get that help when you need it.