



# Learning to connect

Networking is essential to gain leadership roles but can be daunting for introverts. These tips should make it easier.

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Networking can be a challenge for introverts. Its connotations with needless self-promotion can present a daunting hurdle for those who prefer quieter social interaction.

But if you aspire to higher leadership, networking can't be avoided – it is crucially important for career progress. So, are there ways for introverts to find their networking groove? The answer is yes, though careful planning is essential.

Susan Cain's influential 2012 book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* provided inspiration for introverts around the world. For many, it relieved them of the heavy expectation that they needed to change (and become inauthentically extroverted) in order to advance their careers.

Indeed, noted introvert Bill Gates has called Cain's related TED Talk his all-time favourite. Cain's more recent attention to the Quiet Revolution website is one of an ever-expanding range of advice and support tools available to introverts navigating career and workplace complexities.

But networking remains a challenge, and insufficient attention to it can limit career progress. A recent LinkedIn study showed that 70 per cent of professionals were hired at a company where they had a connection.

So, how can it be tuned to the needs of introverts? Here are seven ideas to help

locate and lock in an introvert-friendly networking groove.

## 1. Rethink 'network'

The first step is to reboot your networking definition. A good starting point is the dictionary definition: "A group or system of interconnected people or things." You are already part of a network, which you can cultivate. You have the power to deepen and broaden that network by exploring your interests.

## 2. Add breadth to your depth

Expertise, depth and enthusiasm in specific areas can come naturally for introverts. Sharing content on social media, such as LinkedIn and other professional forums, and inviting comment from others can help add network depth. Dorie Clark from Duke University says: "If you're a thoughtful curator of the best ideas in your field, even if you're not developing them yourself, others will start turning to you for guidance."

## 3. Plan and commit

There is still a need to step into face-to-face networking opportunities, be they formal or informal. To relieve the "pressure-to-attend" that introverts often apply to themselves, Cain recommends putting in place a personalised "quota system", such as one event a month.

## 4. Step into conversations with curiosity

Cultivating networking-friendly conversational skills may be more liberating than you expect.

First, remove the pressure that self-focus can bring (for example, "I won't know what to say!") and shift your spotlight to the other person. Be curious and engage them with open-ended questions. A good place to start honing your skills is at your workplace. You never know where a simple "How was your weekend?" inquiry might take you. Clark's suggestions for conversation starters at formal events include: "What's the coolest thing you're working on now?" and "How did you hear about this event?" She also has a fail-safe option: "I don't know anyone here – can I talk to you?"

## 5. Body language

A more extroverted leader I know expressed her frustration with the introverts on her staff with an exasperated: "I just cannot read them!" The simplest way to be read positively is by leading with a smile. Pairing a smile with expansive body language, as recommended by Harvard's Amy Cuddy, can also increase your confidence in unfamiliar conversational territory.

## 6. The event

If going solo, getting to the event early can provide a chance to establish rapport with organisers and other early-birds – a fast-track to the in-crowd. If joining later, Cain employs a "searching for kindred spirits" approach where she looks for fellow soloists. If you wish to join others, a pair of people in a "V" formation, rather than talking face-on, is likely to be easier to join.

## 7. Support

Support can come in a number of forms:

*Wingperson(s):* The saying "opposites attract" is often true when it comes to introverts and their extrovert colleagues. Ask them to attend events with you. Alternatively, you may wish to reach out to peers who may be similarly introverted and potentially interested in the same event. There is strength in numbers.

*Independent support:* Find a mentor who knows your style or engage an experienced executive coach to support you. Growth will be initially discomfiting, and coaching can help you recalibrate and stay on track.

*Yourself:* Networking will be taxing, and introverts need their solo recharge time. Don't ease up on self-care as you navigate new frontiers.

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