"Alliancing" - A New Way to Look at Academic Networking

The excerpt below is from an excellent article, "Alliances Through Networking: It Is Not Rocket Science," by Jaleh Daie. Although written for a science audience, there is very little in it that does not apply to all areas of academia. The full article appears in, The Scientist, Vol:12, #22, p. 13, November 9, 1998, and can be accessed at: http://www.the-scientist.library.upenn.edu/yr1998/nov/opin_981109.html

Excerpt By Jaleh Daie (Copyright © 1998 The Scientist, Inc.)

The truth is that most of us in science and technology feel squeamish about the idea of networking. Yet, knowingly or unknowingly, successful scientists always have been integral parts of several networks. That is how one is invited to give talks, write reviews and articles, or serve on prestigious bodies; it also is how one is nominated for top awards and honors and invited or selected to consider plum assignments and positions. To some, the notion of networking is a bit uncomfortable, but this is because it is misunderstood as exploitative, not mutually beneficial and cooperative. Realistically, networking is a two-way street. It is both collaborative and reciprocal. The main goal of networking should be to develop meaningful relationships that benefit all participants. If that does not happen, the relationships will not manifest as positive forces and will not last.

Networking is about doing unto people as you want them to do unto you. Rather than saying, "How do I get X to do Y for me?", the right attitude is, "How can I help X?" Good and effective networking is about being considerate and courteous to everyone, not just those who are at the top at a given moment.

Networking is work. It is not just a gratuitous concept. It requires time, energy, enthusiasm, sincerity, and consideration. To get a foot in the door, a top education and talent are needed, but moving up is predicated on connections, on people who know that you are a talented performer. When filling positions, it is quite natural for people to look for candidates through their own networks, seeking individuals they know can do the job, or who are able to recommend good people from their own networks.

Networking is about developing communities within which common interests are shared, information is exchanged, and shared, and mutual help is given. Your network includes not only your own personal and professional contacts; it extends to those people's contacts and networks. The novice networker may harbor the misguided notion of having a lot of acquaintances, but real networking is about relationships.

Recently, I've been hearing people use the term "alliancing." Although ungrammatical, this word is useful in subtly redefining the concept of networking by emphasizing its strategic side--the building of a few, meaningful, and strong relationships or allies. To have a strong relationship means being able to count on someone, and someone being able to count on you. The main purpose of alliancing is to seek and nurture individuals who can be advisers, sounding boards, intellectual and social resources, role models, mentors, and friends with whom joys and disappointments can be shared.
Alliancing is an effective approach, because the aim is to develop relationships with a few people who can be counted on, rather than simply generating an overflowing Rolodex. Alliancing (or networking, for that matter) is not a numbers game, and should not be about superficial meetings and insincere platitudes. Nor is it about sheer visibility without credibility, which can be deadly to professional goals. One must be willing to consistently deliver what is promised. It is not necessary to do great and significant things to nurture the network. Small things do count. On the other hand, networking is like doing math. A small, early infraction can derail you. To be truly successful, your antennas must be up all the time, but keep in mind that this does not mean being superficially alert. Like many people, I dread the sight of "human butterflies" with nanosecond attention spans, who collect and give tens of business cards during the cocktail hour, or those who offer the NutraSweet version of affection to people they perceive as useful to their agenda. You can get by only so far with charm alone. Then you have to deliver. In fact, few things turn me off more than "professional networkers," who are attentive only to the "powerful and highly placed," but who look past those they do not consider to be important.

Underestimating and disregarding the junior people or those without impressive titles is the hallmark of phonies, and you can spot them from a mile away. This is not to say that, as a rule, touching base with as many people as possible should be avoided. There is a right time, place, and manner in which to do so. But in many situations, it is far more rewarding and enriching to meet a few interesting people, learn what they do, how they do it, and discover if there is a convergence of interests. True and successful networkers treat everybody with sincerity, courtesy, and dignity, knowing that good manners buy good will. People are like the stock market. You never know who will be up and who will be down the next day. Taking the long view, giving everyone her or his due, is the best way to build a real network and to ensure that things will fall in place for you.