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Your Competition Is Your Community

A practical guide to building strength through connection instead of secrecy

PAY IT FORWARD with Mark Gilbert

There's a belief that quietly runs through a lot of businesses:

The people doing what you do are your competition, and you should keep your distance.

I understand why it feels that way. But in my experience, it's backward.

I'm a people person to begin with, and one of the things I learned early in my career is that you really have no competition. There are plenty of people in the same industry as you. That part is true. But if you're good at what you do, and you have confidence in it, those people are not a threat. They're allies. And once you start treating them that way, the whole shape of your business changes.

This guide is about why that shift matters, and how to actually make it.

Confidence changes how you see everyone else

The starting point is confidence in your own work.

When you're unsure of your value, everyone in your field can feel like a rival. You guard what you know. You worry that if you share too much, someone will take your clients, your ideas, or your edge.

But when you trust that you're good at what you do, that fear loses its grip. You stop seeing other professionals as people trying to take something from you, and you start seeing them as people who understand your world better than almost anyone else. That's a rare thing. Most of the people in your life don't fully get the day-to-day realities of your work. Your peers do.

That shared understanding is the foundation everything else is built on. And it's worth remembering that confidence isn't arrogance. It doesn't mean believing you're better than everyone else in the room. It means being secure enough in your own work that another person's success doesn't feel like your loss. That security is what makes generosity possible.

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What you actually have in common

Once you stop viewing your peers as threats, it becomes obvious how much overlap there is.

You share the same problems. You share the same interests. And very often, you're searching for the same solutions. When you talk to someone doing the same work, you're not comparing scorecards. You're comparing notes.

That's where the value shows up. Instead of solving every problem alone, you get to learn from people who have already faced it. You get to hear what worked, what didn't, and why. And you get to offer the same in return.

There's also something steadying about it. Running a business can be isolating, especially when you're the one everyone else looks to for answers. Having people who genuinely understand what you're dealing with, and who you can be honest with, takes some of the weight off. You realize you're not the only one wrestling with the same questions, and that alone makes the work feel more manageable.

Bring your peers together on purpose

I didn't wait for this kind of community to appear. I built it.

I started the first bookkeeping-only firm in New York, back before anyone was talking about fractional bookkeeping. We only do transactional bookkeeping, no taxes. Over time, I found myself surrounded by people who could easily have been seen as competition.

So I did the opposite of what you might expect. I got all of them together and said, let's start an organization to support each other. Let's talk about the common problems, and let's be honest about what solutions actually worked and what didn't.

The lesson here is simple. You don't have to hope a community forms around you. If the people are there, you can be the one who brings them into the same room. It doesn't have to be formal, and it doesn't have to be large. What matters is that someone takes the first step and creates the space for those conversations to happen. More often than not, the people you invite have been wanting the same thing and just didn't know how to start.

Talk openly about hiring

One of the most valuable things we discussed was staffing.

In a small business, finding qualified staff is one of the biggest challenges there is. It's hard to know who will actually work out, and the cost of getting it wrong is high. So we talked about it openly. We shared the times we brought on someone who looked great on paper and did not perform the way we hoped.

That kind of honesty is hard to come by. Nobody likes to admit a hire didn't work. But when a group of peers is willing to be candid about it, everyone gets to make better decisions with less trial and error. A conversation like that can save you months of frustration and the real expense of a bad fit. What would have been a painful lesson learned alone becomes a shared piece of knowledge that protects the whole group.

Protect each other from difficult situations

The same honesty applies to clients.

If one of us had a bad experience with a client, we would let the rest of the group know. Not to gossip, but to protect one another. If a client had already burned one professional, the odds were good they'd go looking for someone else. So we made each other aware. That way, if that client came knocking, you could recognize the situation, handle it properly, and protect yourself if you still decided to work with them.

None of that sharing made any of us weaker. It made all of us more prepared. And it's a good reminder that community isn't only about trading tips and encouragement. Sometimes the most valuable thing a peer can give you is a heads-up that saves you from a situation they already lived through.

Knowledge is power, and sharing it is an asset

If there's one idea I want you to take from all of this, it's this:

> "KNOWLEDGE IS POWER, AND SHARING IT IS NOT A THREAT. IT'S AN ASSET."

The instinct to hoard what you know feels protective, but it's a smaller way to operate. When you share what you've learned, you don't lose it. You strengthen the people around you, and you build the kind of relationships that come back to support you later. A community built on generosity is far more durable than an advantage built on secrecy.

There's a compounding effect to it, too. The more openly you share, the more people trust you, and the more they bring back to you in return. Over time, you become a hub for good information rather than a person on the outside looking in. That reputation is worth far more than anything you could have protected by staying quiet.

Pitfalls to avoid

As you build this into how you work, a few things are worth watching out for.

Waiting for permission

Nobody is going to organize your community for you. If you keep waiting for the right moment or the right person to start it, it won't happen. Be the one who reaches out first.

Only taking, never giving

A community only works when people contribute. If you show up looking for answers but never share your own experiences, people notice, and the goodwill dries up fast.

Confusing sharing with gossip

Warning a peer about a difficult client is protective. Talking about someone to make yourself look better is not. Keep the intent focused on helping, not on scoring points.

Keeping it too formal too soon

You don't need bylaws and a membership structure to start. A single honest conversation is enough. Let the group grow naturally before you add any structure.

Where to start

If you want to build more community into the way you work, start small. Set aside 30 minutes this week and work through the following:

Exercise

SET ASIDE 30 MINUTES

1. **Reach out to one peer.** Identify one person in your field you'd normally think of as competition, and start a genuine conversation with no agenda beyond getting to know them.
2. **Name your shared problems.** Write down two or three challenges you're facing right now, like hiring or difficult clients, that a peer would recognize instantly. These are your natural starting points for conversation.
3. **Share something first.** Offer one useful lesson or experience before you ask for anything in return. Generosity sets the tone and makes it easy for others to open up.
4. **Map your resources.** List the government and private organizations relevant to your work, and pick one to actually explore this week.
5. **Make one connection ongoing.** Turn a single conversation into something that lasts by suggesting a regular check-in, even if it's just an occasional call or message.

Summary - At a glance

- *Confidence in your own work is what lets you see peers as allies instead of threats.*
- *The people in your industry share your problems, your interests, and your search for solutions.*
- *You can build the community yourself instead of waiting for one to appear.*
- *Talking openly about hiring and difficult clients helps everyone make better decisions.*
- *Knowledge is power, and sharing it strengthens you rather than weakening you.*
- *The community extends beyond your profession to the wider resources available to you.*