

Women in Leadership – Networking and Connecting

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Imagine a busy networking event filled with professionals eagerly exchanging business cards and stories. Within the crowd, two women spark up a conversation that would begin a two-decade-long journey of growth, support, and friendship.

This is the story of Emma and Olivia. At the time, Emma was a young professional with big dreams and a thirst for learning. Olivia was a seasoned leader known for her wisdom and keen eye for talent. They had an instant connection – they spoke for hours about their shared passion for innovation and breaking glass ceilings.

Emma reminded Olivia of herself when she was young, filled with potential yet in need of guidance. Emma, on the other hand, saw in Olivia the kind of leader she aspired to become. From that day forward, they embarked on a mentoring relationship that would endure the test of time.

Over the years, Emma and Olivia met regularly, sharing life's victories and setbacks. Olivia's mentorship was invaluable to Emma as she navigated the complexities of career advancement, leadership roles, and personal development. Through Olivia's guidance, Emma learned not just how to succeed but how to thrive in environments that were often challenging for women.

But this relationship wasn't one-sided. Olivia found fresh perspectives and energy in Emma's company, reminding her of the evolving landscape of leadership and the importance of staying connected with the next generation. Together, they explored new ideas, tackled barriers, and celebrated each other's successes.

Their story highlights the profound impact of networking and mentorship. The relationship they built wasn't just about career advancement – it was about creating a support system, learning from each other, and paving the way for more women to rise to leadership positions.

As we dive deeper into the importance of networking for women leaders, remember Emma and Olivia's journey. Their story began at a networking event, but it grew into a lifelong partnership that benefited both their careers and personal growth.

Today, we'll examine the transformative power of networking for women in leadership roles. Our goal is to explore how strong connections and a vibrant network can be your most valuable assets in navigating the challenges and opportunities of leadership. By the end of this lesson, you'll have practical tips and inspiring insights to enrich your networking strategy, empowering you to forge meaningful relationships that propel you to new heights.

So, while Emma and Olivia opted for a traditional form of networking, Sarah, from our next case study, took another approach.

Sarah was a new leader in the tech industry. When she was an individual contributor at her company, she knew her job inside out, but since she joined the leadership team, she has felt isolated in her role at the top. Recognising the need for allies, she decided it was time to build her network. Unlike Emma and Olivia, she didn't attend formal networking events to hand out business cards. Instead, Sarah wanted to take a different approach to forming deep one-on-one connections, seeking out peers from many industries and countries to create a diverse network that reflected the world around her.

She was uncomfortable with the concept of networking at first – there was a common idea that networking was purely self-serving, and this didn't sit well with Sarah. [1] However, she soon realised that authentic networking is about mutual growth and support. Networking isn't just for the extroverts; it's for anyone willing to listen and learn from others.

With this new mindset, Sarah made a plan to reach out to one connection each week and set up a call or a meetup for tea. Some of these connections were people Sarah had worked with in the past, and some were people who Sarah's colleagues had connected her with because they saw a shared interest or career path.

It wasn't long before Sarah also discovered the unique value of networking with other women. Studies have shown that women benefit immensely from a close-knit circle of peers who provide gender-specific advice and support. [2] This inner circle became Sarah's think tank, offering perspectives she couldn't find anywhere else.

Sarah's network was expanding, and it was bringing her more value than she could have imagined.

Sarah wasn't alone. A recent study revealed some striking insights into the power of networking for women in professional landscapes [3]. A whopping 80% of women surveyed have harnessed the power of their networks to land influential roles, including paid board positions and executive titles, not to mention negotiating for the salaries they truly deserve.

Plus, over 70% of these women have used their connections to drive their organisations forward by closing new business deals, rolling out innovative frameworks, steering projects to success, refining processes, or ensuring their teams work smarter, not harder, to save funds.

This goes to show that when women connect, they don't just climb the career ladder; they transform their workplaces and set new benchmarks for success [4].

Thanks to her commitment to networking, Sarah now had a whole new set of tools.

She now had a network to help her generate ideas. Whenever she was stuck, she turned to her idea network for fresh perspectives.

She had also created a network of career influencers. To advance her projects, she leaned on her influence network, fostering advocates within and outside her organisation.

These career influencers also became her career development network, which was crucial for her personal growth, alerting her to learning opportunities. And whenever she was looking for career advice, Sarah found it in her career network, where seasoned professionals guided her.

This new network eventually became important to Sarah outside of her professional life. Beyond work, her social network provided emotional support, helping her navigate life's ups and downs. And most importantly, mentors and sponsors within her network advocated for her both personally and professionally, opening doors she didn't even know existed.

Through her networking journey, one of Sarah's biggest hurdles was her reluctance to ask for help, fearing she couldn't reciprocate. Yet, she learned that networking is a two-way street; her unique insights were as valuable as any favour she might ask for. It took her a while to internalise it, but Sarah eventually realised that, like Emma, just because she wasn't as experienced as many of the professionals in her network, she carried a lot of knowledge that would be just as helpful to others as their knowledge and experience had been for her.

By looking at the journeys taken first by Emma and Olivia, and then by Sarah, we see the strength and resilience of women in leadership who dare to connect deeply with others.

These stories illustrate that by debunking myths, embracing the unique power of female networks, diversifying your connections, and getting comfortable asking for help, you can build a network that not only advances your career but also enriches your life and the lives of those around you.

Now, it's your turn. Take a moment to reflect on your network and make a list of areas where you can deepen or diversify your connections. Reach out to someone you admire for a virtual lunch chat. Join a new professional group online. By investing in relationships today, you're building a foundation for mutual success tomorrow.

[1] *Do You Struggle With Building a Network? 5 Networking Tips for Women*, Centre for Creative Leadership (2020)

<https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/women-is-your-network-working-for-you/>

[2] *Why Female Circle is So Important for Success and Wellbeing of Every Woman*, Les Amis

<https://www.lesamis.cc/blog/why-female-circle-is-so-important-for-success-and-wellbeing-of-every-woman#:~:text=Another%20study%20conducted%20by%20the,women%20without%20such%20a%20network.>

[3] *New Report Finds Women-Led Networking Benefits Individual Careers And Organizational Goals*, Julia Korn, Forbes (2023)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/juliakorn/2023/07/25/new-report-finds-women-led-networking-benefits-individual-careers-and-organizational-goals/?sh=79bc04674bdb>

[4] *Why Women Need a Professional Network*, Committee of 200, Forbes (2022)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/committeeof200/2022/11/30/why-women-need-a-professional-network/?sh=4245697958ca>