



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 17: INGA CARBONI – STRATEGIC NETWORKING

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from all across the world. We share the strategies and tactics that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, you've heard the phrase, it's not what you know but who you know. In recent years networking has become a hot topic for professionals in all fields. Our guest today takes that concept a step further as she discusses Strategic Networking. Dr. Inga Carboni says intentionally managing your strategic network is imperative to a successful career. Carboni is an Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. She works with corporate clients of all types as well as MBA students, teaching them how to network strategically. Here's our conversation with Professor Inga Carboni.

Ken White

Inga, thanks for being here. Tell us what are leadership networks.

Inga Carboni

Leadership networks are networks that are constructed to optimize the ideas, the perspectives, and the insight that people receive from them. So when leaders are constructing their networks, they're making sure to reach out to people at every level of the organization and in different pockets of the organization as well. And we're finding that people who do that are more likely to be tapped as top talent. They're more likely to get promotions. They're more likely to get raises. They're more likely to be involved in innovation. So leadership networks have a specific look and feel to them.

Ken White

Who should be engaged in creating a Leadership Network? Who within the organization, for example?

Inga Carboni

Anyone who wants to be a leader. You should start right when you join an organization and never stop until you leave the organization and your networks are extending beyond the organization, so really you never stop.

Ken White

And it's not just mentors I'm seeking.

Inga Carboni

No, no mentors are helpful, and they're valuable for lots of different things. But what you're looking for is insights into the organization, and you want to know what's going on in accounting. You want to know what's going on in sales. You want to know what's going on in production, and you want to know how the people at the top are thinking, and you want to know how the people on the floor are thinking. It's gathering insights and perspectives, and these will help you in lots of different ways. For instance, you can't plan a strategic initiative unless you know how it's going to affect all the people in the organization. So setting up these leadership networks is critical to being able to take leadership action.

Ken White

What's it mean to design a strategic network?

Inga Carboni

So one of the keys to designing a strategic network is to make sure that you're reaching out to people who may not know each other. So you're reaching into different pockets of the organization. And I mean that in the sense of different areas of the organization but also unconnected areas of the organization. So you're really getting perspectives that belong to, say, all of accounting, but you're getting them from, you know, Bob or Jill in accounting. You're not getting them from a whole cluster of people. So strategic network is designed so there's lots of pockets that you're dipping into, as well as holes between those pockets.

Ken White

What's it mean to network strategically?

Inga Carboni

Networking strategically means to be thoughtful about it, and that can be uncomfortable for a lot of people to think about. What am I going to get from my social relationships, or how can I learn from other people and be thoughtful about how I interact and meet other people? But the truth is it's part of our business life, and social capital, which is what comes

to you through people that you know is more important really than human capital. And what I mean by that is knowing other people and being connected to other people will get you more influence and will get you more power in an organization than simply your technical skills.

Ken White

I remember when I was a young professional. A mentor said to me have a PR day once a month. Just get out there and talk to people and be seen and learn. Is that similar?

Inga Carboni

Yeah, that's a great idea, and it's a great start. To do it strategically, you'll be targeting certain people or at least certain areas of the organization so that you're sure you're going out and talking to people, but you're making sure that you're talking to people who are in different areas in the organization and you're doing that really specifically, and that can be hard. You know you're in marketing, and you want to talk to someone in manufacturing. You're going to have to find a way to make that connection.

Ken White

And how do I know that the people I'm talking to are probably the best people for me?

Inga Carboni

Well, first of all, you want to talk to people that you like interacting with. That's fine. But you know, there's a pretty broad range of people that you like interacting with, and people come together over shared interests and shared activities. You'll know it's the person that's right for you to be talking to because they'll be giving you a different perspective than you have on it. On something so very simple, you could be taking a look at just organizational level. You could also be taking a look at departments or functions within the organization, but you can also think broader than that. Am I talking to men as well as to women? Am I talking to older people as well as to young people? Where are the holes in my network, and how can I strategically fill them?

Ken White

How much time should we devote to this?

Inga Carboni

A lot of time. Jack Welch said that he devotes 70 percent of his time to people interactions. The higher up you go in the organization, the more your time should be spent interacting with people. And it's got to start right from the get-go. It can't be an add-on. It's got to be part of your work. And you'll find that when you invest this, it pays off dividends. So work that might be hard to process becomes a little easier for you

because you've built up these relationships, so it will save you time in the long run. But it's hard to shift your mindset to a focus off your technical skills and onto your social interactions.

Ken White

So networking strategically, we had a podcast just a few episodes ago with Dave Cote, who's the CEO of Honeywell, and he talks about, you know, walking the talk. That's really what we're talking about, right? I mean, he was getting out there talking to people and doing this on a regular basis.

Inga Carboni

Yeah, I think that's a related idea and also really valuable, and the idea is that management by walking around getting to know people and connecting with these with people from all different areas. I'm talking about something very similar in terms of building relationships but simply more strategic in being thoughtful. It's not just you're bumping into people and building up, for instance, strong relationships in your department, which is valuable, but that you're reaching out, you're really thinking about how can I make this the most strategic network possible and how can I design it strategically. Oddly enough, or maybe not so oddly, strategically designed networks will also help you think more strategically. So you'll be more informed by different perspectives in your organization, and you'll be able to bring those to bear on strategic initiatives.

Ken White

This can't be a one-way street. I have to offer something.

Inga Carboni

Oh, sure, sure. That's one of the big myths about networking is that it's using people and it's manipulating people. Go in with giving. All right, go in thinking what can I give to people. What kind of information would be interesting to people? What kind of time should I be spending with people? Go in thinking giving. The reason that works is because it really is true that what goes around comes around. And what you give comes back to you sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Leverage is something we call the principle of reciprocity. We have sort of hardwired into our brains that if people give to us we want to give back to them. And it makes us like people more. So always be thinking about what you can give. Don't be counting what you're giving and trying to tally scores and things like that. You can trust that what you give will be returned to you. Like I said, either directly or indirectly. But networking poorly is manipulative, and it's trying to get things from people. And people come onto that so quickly, and it'll bite you in the back.

Ken White

Well, and I think the workplace is changing right we're more open-source. It's more collaborative. And so I can understand why people would think, boy, this is sort of selfish. I'm out to get, but that isn't the case because the people I'm interacting with hopefully are gaining something from my knowledge and my experience at the same time.

Inga Carboni

Oh sure. And that's something you should be thinking about too. What can I share? What do I have to offer? Have I worked with this client before? Can I offer that help to somebody in my company that I know is dealing with this client now? Do I know a language that might be helpful to somebody in dealing with their client or in dealing with other people in the organization and also sort of extracurricular stuff, you know? Do I know a sport really well? Do I know about all the great eat places you know around here, or do I know the latest movies and where some really neat funky independent movies are playing? Those are things to share, especially as you get to know people and know that those are things that they want to hear about.

Ken White

Not the easiest thing for an introvert.

Inga Carboni

No, but the good thing is that the quantity of relationships is not as nearly as important as the quality. And that's something that introverts are really good at. So ten high-quality relationships beat 100 low-quality relationships.

Ken White

What are some of the challenges associated with networking strategically?

Inga Carboni

Well, some of them are within yourself, which is sort of making sure that you adopt a giving mindset, sort of moving yourself away from this is a manipulative or unpleasant kind of thing, also, about real allocating your time. That was a great point that you brought up and that's something that people often really struggle with. But there are specific challenges for certain people. For instance, we know women sometimes get backlash when they adopt this position of reaching out to people in different groups. It seems that people it's a very maybe because it's associated with leadership. We're still exploring that in the research, but maybe because it's associated with leadership and agentic action. Women sometimes get a backlash and are viewed more negatively if they adopt those behaviors, and they sometimes experience it more negatively. There's some indication that women who adopt these what we call brokerage roles these connecting with pockets

that have spaces in between them, sometimes feel more stress sometimes feel less contented with their social relationships. And that also could be due to socializing that it's more likely that women are pressured to belong to a close-knit group than it is to belong to what might appear as a fractured group. They may feel it to be that they're on the edges of a whole bunch of groups rather than connected to a whole bunch of groups. There's also another barrier that makes it hard for women and people from traditionally disadvantaged populations in that when you're connecting with people. You often want to connect with people that you can share friendly relationships with because that's the nature of social interaction. And for some people, those friendly relationships are also relationships where you can get work-related resources and advice. However, if you're a woman or someone from a traditionally disadvantaged population, you are more likely to connect with women and people from your population, and because they're traditionally disadvantaged, they're likely to have less power and resources to offer you. So we sometimes find that, for instance, women will have a set of friends at work and then a set of people at work that they talk to for advice and other resources, and that those two things are very separate. And that makes it harder to reap returns from your network if you're separating out sort of friendship relationships from work-related purely work-related relationships.

Ken White

How do you know if you're not doing it correctly? You know, as someone who teaches, I immediately thought of, you know, when you said people, maybe some women will sit with women. You take students to a conference, for example, and you've been there, there's a thousand attendees, and your students are all sitting together at the table networking. How do you know when you're doing it correctly or incorrectly?

Inga Carboni

Yeah, it's funny. Every time I give a talk to a large group, and they're sitting at those circular tables, I always ask how many of you are sitting with people that you work within your exact department. Almost always, all hands go up. Right. So it's pushes you out of your comfort zone.

Ken White

Yeah, it does.

Inga Carboni

So you'll be doing activities differently. You'll be interacting with people where you sometimes make faux pas. Right. Because they're coming from a different world. So they're sharing a different perspective. There are ways to prepare yourself for that to come up with you know forgiveness strategies for when you make mistakes. But I think probably the most important thing is just to understand that you're going to experience a little

discomfort. It's going to feel a little forced. But pushing yourself out of your comfort zone will help you not only with work but also in developing a more global understanding of people and the world. If you really want to understand the world of knowledge diversity, you got to go out and meet it.

Ken White

Yeah, great. Well, put. Listening skills have got to play a huge role if you're going to network strategically. Any advice you give to people, maybe earlier in their career, who are starting out trying to build that network?

Inga Carboni

Sure. One of the critical skills to build is active listening, and it helps you in all different kinds of ways. But one of the critical ways in terms of networking is it builds intimacy but it also allows you to understand where the other person is coming from. And so if you're thinking about giving, you don't really know what to give if you don't know what a person wants to receive. So active listening is a critical skill, and it involves listening to what someone is saying and really trying to understand what they're saying. It sounds fairly simple, but we don't do this very often.

Ken White

Right.

Inga Carboni

Often we're trying to think of what we want to say next or how wrong they are in what they're saying, but really listening solely to understand what someone else is trying to communicate to you. Their words, the meaning, the emotion attached to them, and then paraphrasing that back and the paraphrasing is critical because there's a running jokes about active listening where you just repeat back what the person said, and we do that with our two-year-olds, but we don't do that with our colleagues and friends. Paraphrasing back shows that I've listened to you intently enough that I can understand your deeper meaning. I know if you're happy about this thing or frustrated about this thing, or sad about this thing, and then you check for understanding, did I get that right? Just if I hear you correctly, what you're saying is this is that right or whatever sort of works for you. You don't have to judge it. You don't have to agree with it. You just have to understand it, and it's a critical skill. It goes also beyond networking. It also de-escalates conflict. It builds relationships on all kinds of levels. But yeah, listening is a critical skill to developing your network effectively.

Ken White

And you mentioned, and I think you're spot on, so many executives, if they're not good active listeners, it's because exactly what you just said, they're thinking of the next thing to say because I'm the boss I've got to say something brilliant right. So I'm actually not listening to what you're saying. Last question for someone who's not doing this what should they what's step one? What do you do to build these strategic networks?

Inga Carboni

Step one is to understand where you're at. You might want to take a look at the people that you know and just or maybe just say to yourself. Who do I turn to for career advice, or who do I turn to understand what goes on around this organization and then look down and see, okay, here's where my pockets are. Here's where I'm not getting holes at all. I turn to is my boss and the other person in my department. And so the first step is sort of understanding where you are. The second step is pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. And the best way to do that is to find a shared activity. In shared activities, you have something to focus on. You presumably have a mutual interest, and you will find people that you feel natural connection with. So shared activities can have a go across a range of things, but particularly when you're starting out in an organization, you know, serving on a task force if you can. Looking to see if the organization does any charity work. Is there can you participate in a marathon for the company? Can you sit in on a brown bag with a for another group? Can you offer to give a brown bag if you're in IT or any area really within an organization you may have expertise that other people would find very interesting?

Ken White

True. Good point.

Inga Carboni

So there's a lots of ways to reach out.

Ken White

If our listeners aren't doing this now. What's your advice?

Inga Carboni

Get started because it's a critical thing to do for your career, and you're going to need to do it for a long time.

Ken White

That's our conversation on networking strategically with Professor Inga Carboni, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of

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