Networking Tools – Strength in numbers

Networks are increasingly important at every level in today’s society. Being connected to others is how word gets out about you (referrals), how you find out about and meet people who share similar values, aims or objectives and how you share information or collaborate by pooling human and other resources.

Networking has long been used in the business sector where it is considered one of the most cost-effective ways of generating business compared to advertising or public relations. It depends more on personal commitment than money. It is about building strength in numbers and getting to know people who can help you personally and professionally.

For women in the political arena, where being known and getting your voice heard counts towards votes and influence in decision-making, networking is critical. By networking you increase the opportunities to make your advocacy campaign message heard more widely and be echoed and supported by others.

“The value of networks is the diversity of people you can reach and connect with.”

Personal one on one networks

Personal networks usually develop where people share common interests or goals or as a result of knowing the same people. This includes networks of family and friends. Each one of us already has a personal network – like a small community -- people we can call upon personally and professionally and who can call on us.

But networks have to be worked on. As a politician you need to cultivate a wide network of people with different specialist skills and knowledge. We come across such people in our day to day lives and sometimes in unexpected places. Don’t miss the opportunity to get to know them. If you are introduced to someone interesting or meet someone on your travels, ask for their business card or contact details. Give them yours and ask if you can contact them to further discuss your area of common interest. Follow up with an email or phone call to let them know you would like to keep in touch. Keep a file of your contacts with a little note to yourself so you remember what their specific skill, profession or area of interest is. You can refer back to it later when you need information or assistance in your advocacy work.

Within your personal network there are certain types of people you should have who are most critical to your success. These include:

A Mentor – someone who has reached the level of success you aspire to. A mentor does not have to be someone in your chosen field of work. Learn from their success and their failures and seek their wisdom and knowledge. You may already have such a person in your life who you have known for a long time. But unless you recognise them as a mentor you will not be able to make the best use of them by seeking their guidance regularly.

A Coach – this is someone who comes into your life at different times to help you with critical decisions and changes and who offers an objective viewpoint.

An Industry Insider is someone in your chosen field, in this case politics. This person will have expert-level information or access to it and can keep you informed of what’s happening now and in the future. Use them to sound out your ideas and they will let you know how well the idea fits within the current political environment.

The Connector is someone who has access to influential people, resources or information. As soon as they come across something related to you, they will contact you. Connectors find unique ways to make connections, get resources and opportunities that most people would otherwise not recognise.

The Visionary is someone who
inspires you to achieve your goal.
One personal encounter with a vi-
sionary can powerfully change the
direction of your thinking and life.

The Mentee is someone you can
mentor by guiding and helping to
shape them based on your own
experiences. Having someone to
mentor helps you to get through
your own obstacles and chal-
lenges because you know that
someone is watching and learning
how you do it.

With the exception of the Industry
Insider, these key people can be
from any sector or community and
not necessarily involved in your
line of work. They may be religious
or business leaders, village elders,
humble women and men who are
inspired to help others or anyone
at all who you connect with.

Professional and special inter-
est networks

These are groupings of people
around a professional area or
special interest that are already
established or which you and oth-
ers could establish. An example
would be a network of women in
politics that would bring together
seasoned and aspiring women
politicians.

Professional networks are aimed
at building strength in numbers.
It is a way of bringing together
people whose paths would not
otherwise cross at a social level
but who work in the same sector
or have the same special inter-
est. An example of a common
professional network would be
a businesswoman’s network. By
coming together regularly, mem-
bers of such a network are able to
share and learn from each other’s
successes and failures, connect
for business transactions and
referrals to other businesspersons
and networks.

There are many networks
dedicated to a special subject
of interest, ranging from envi-
ronmental protection, arts and
culture, volunteerism to hobbies
and many more. The great thing
about special interest networks is
that the membership is so diverse.
One special interest network can
have a membership that includes
industry leaders, students, media
workers, politicians, religious
leaders and development workers,
amongst many others from the
cross sector of society. An exam-
ple is Rotary Club, which is about
volunteerism and service to the
community. Having access to such
a wide range of contacts is invalu-
able professionally and the work
such networks do is highly re-
garded locally and internationally.
Because networks like Rotary are
huge and international in scope,
your membership will open you up
to other people globally who you
may not otherwise have a point of
connection with.

Membership to professional or
special interest networks is some-
thing you should mention in your
Profile as it highlights your com-
mmitment to leadership and public
service as well as illustrating your
personal brand.

The value of networks is the diver-
sity of people you can reach and
connect with. As such, don’t limit
yourself only to your profession.
You are a politician but you may
also be a businesswoman or a
church member and there is much
to be gained and to contribute in
terms of ideas, perspectives, re-
sources, knowledge and informa-
tion by connecting with others.

Social on-line networks

Social on-line networks offer the
benefits of diversity because the
Internet gives individuals from all
around the world access to social
networking sites. This means that
although you are in Mozambique
or Swaziland, for example, you
could develop an online friend-
ship with someone in Denmark or
India. Not only will you make new
friends, but also you just might
learn from how they do things.
One of the best special interest
social networking websites avail-
able is International Knowledge
Network of Women in Politics. IKNOW
Politics is an interactive
network of women in politics from
around the world who share ex-
périences, access resources and
advisory services, and network
and collaborate on issues of inter-

While there are many social
networking websites that focus on
particular interests, others do not.
Usually, anyone can join these
networks. Once you are inside this
online community, you can begin
to create your own network of
professionals or friends.

Among the most useful networking
websites are LinkedIn, a profes-
sional networking website, and
Facebook, an open social website
that also allows you to develop
your own special interest or pro-
fessional network once you have
joined.

Facebook can be a helpful tool in
your advocacy work as it allows
you to post new information,
photos or links on your advocacy
area, regularly update members
of your network on new develop-
ments in your advocacy cam-
paign and receive comments and
input from your online network.

Twitter allows you to post and
receive regular updates, com-
ments and very brief information
(such as links to a news report)
in short message service (sms)
format known as “tweets” to your
network. It is especially valuable
in this modern age where busy
people want to receive and send
information quickly and in brief.
It is especially popular because
it is accessible on many of the
modern mobile phones so many
more people can access Twitter
instantly.

As with any other kind of network-
ing, there are dangers of online
networking. As long as you are
cautious to not give out too much
personal information and are
aware of who you are talking to,
you should be able to safely enjoy
social networking online.