

## The Secret to Networking: To Thine Own Self Be Shrewd

### IN THE NEWS



*Liz Levin (Former WTS International president), Photos © John Livzey, 2015*

There are many schools of thought about networking. Some experts recommend leaving your comfort zone and forcing interaction. Other experts encourage using sales techniques to ensure “meaningful contact” with potential employers and clients. Still other experts see networking as a rite of passage in the aggregate where you must just “put yourself out there” no matter what the circumstances may be, how it’s done, or how effective the results. Liz Levin thinks differently.

“Networking to-do lists often contain things like: go around the entire room, meet lots of people, practice and deliver your elevator speech, drop important names, and hand out business cards. And when we ask, ‘Who are the good networkers?’ People most often say, ‘Salespeople—people who are extroverted, smooth, slick, and smiley. Someone who has a strong pitch.’ But many people, particularly women, stop and think, ‘That’s not who I am. That’s not how I connect with people. That’s not how I build comfortable relationships.’ And therein lies the source of discomfort many people feel about networking. It doesn’t have to be that way,” Levin says. “In fact, I think people are *less* powerful when they network in someone else’s style. The strength is in developing your own style and perfecting that.”



Levin would know. A professional with more than 40 years’ experience and a longtime WTS member and former WTS International president, Levin served on the boards of directors of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. She also was a founder and served as chair of the Massachusetts Government Appointments Project (MassGAP), an organization advocating for women in government. Recently, she co-authored the book, detailing the rise of 18 pioneering women in the male-dominated transportation industry.

Levin is shown in the photo above with co-author Grace Crunican, general manager of Bay Area Rapid Transit. On September 30, Levin and Crunican hosted a WTS Los Angeles panel and roundtables featuring women transportation executives profiled in their book *Boots on the Ground, Flats in the Boardroom: Transportation Women Tell Their Stories*.

Levin also founded Liz Levin & Company, a management consulting company that serves transportation, design, and environmental communities today. But Levin specializes—and has throughout her career—in leadership, organizational development, change management, and strategic planning. And she has devoted much of her career to the study and application of how professionals interact, particularly women.



“All of us can visualize good networkers. And that can help us describe what our own big-picture networking plan is, the *why* and *how* of it. If you really get in touch with who you are and what you can do well, that resonates and there will be plenty of people that will be interested in you. When people get in touch with themselves and network in a way that is comfortable for them, it works really well. Generally speaking, women can and do have a different model for networking.”

But these are not abstract generalities. Levin believes in the power of specificity for the process. She offers real-life examples of her philosophy.

“I talked with Joy, a transportation professional with a lot of good ideas. She comes to a networking event prepared and purposeful. She knows who she wants to see and how they can help her. She approaches those people, explains her case, and asks them for something they can do to advance it. And then she’ll leave the room after she’s worked it her way. Then there is Deb. She works for an aviation company. She’s introverted, but she’s great about speaking on trends at airport conferences and is viewed as an expert. People come up to her after programs because she’s a highly knowledgeable speaker, and that’s when she feels comfortable establishing relationships.

“Juliette is a politician running for office. She networks for votes, so she identifies groups that she wants to meet. And she uses the group to introduce herself to others. She wins people over because she listens, is responsible, and has good ideas. Amy came to town to look for a job. She identified professional organizations where she might meet people she liked. At the meetings, she volunteered to register attendees. I met Amy at a desk where she was signing people in. I subsequently helped her get three jobs because she was so enterprising and her spirit captured my attention.”

But this idea of individualized networking is not just for women, Levin says. “Many men are not very comfortable with the traditional sales approach either. They, too, feel comfortable when they customize their approach to who they are and that’s how they handle it. And that’s how we have to handle it too,” she says.

“Clark is a paraplegic and an activist for the disabled. He networks to advocate. Though it’s difficult for him to talk, he always approaches people and speaks out on mobility issues. People listen. They understand. They find him inspiring and they act on his suggestions.

“In all of these cases, the people are successful networkers because they know *why* they’re networking and *how* to network in their own style. They connect meaningfully because they are relating to people organically, based on their individual strengths. And that makes all the difference.”

With examples as illustration, Levin believes each person should honestly reflect on her or his strengths and weaknesses. Then, set about crafting a plan that exploits strengths and compensates for weaknesses while staying within your comfort zone. That is exactly what she did.

“My strength has always been my business and leadership ability, particularly working with people. In planning out my career, I focused on being involved in organizations where I would meet colleagues in the business—like the Environmental Business Council of New England—meet colleagues and

Post Date : Sep. 13, 2015

regulators—like WTS International—and be connected to women—like MassGAP. I joined the boards of those organizations so that I could work directly with the leadership and make a valued contribution. That built great networks for me. As a result, people wanted to talk to me when I entered a room, and I left with friends. That made networking very easy for me.”

Most importantly, Levin emphasizes a mantra-like refrain when networking—be true to yourself when making your plan.

“If you just try to be like one of the guys, you’re competing uncomfortably on someone else’s playing field. It must be about who you are and what you do that is valuable. Your plan must resonate with you. It’s got to be about you and in your style or you’re not going to be very successful. And there are strategies that help make it a lot easier. The two that I’ve found most useful are preplanning and just having wonderful conversations.

“When it comes to preplanning, think about how to use the time at an event. Many people obtain the event list earlier to identify people they want to meet at an event. They do research. In some cases, call people in advance and say, ‘I understand you’re going to be at this event. I would love to get five minutes with you there...’ That makes the person feel that their time is important to you.

“You can also preplan the kind of conversation you would like to have. What issues do you want to raise? Is it about a job opportunity? About doing business? You can plan all of that. If it is still uncomfortable for you to move around the room and meet people, ask a friend to come with you. They can even introduce you to people.”

Still, some people feel most uncomfortable talking with someone they don’t know. Levin offers a solution for that as well.

“One of the networking myths is that people must do all of the talking. But you can have a wonderful conversation just by asking questions and listening. Show your interest by asking open-ended questions. People like to talk about what they do and who they are. Engage them that way. You can also ask about career advice, work-life balance, what school they attended, or even about a specific issue or trend in their field. Asking questions is a great way to connect with people.”

But Levin cautions that getting started isn’t the only aspect of a conversation networkers must address.

“Think about your exit strategy from conversations. People can have interesting conversations for about five or ten minutes, on average. But if you’re talking to a person for 15 minutes or more—unless they’re really engaged—that could be too long. Remember, that person is there for everyone. End conversations before you’ve overstayed your welcome. You can usually sense when that is, but keep it in mind just in case. My favorite strategy is to say, ‘Thank you. I appreciate meeting with you. I want to stay in touch and I’ll give you a call.’ Leaving things on a strong note is good.”

Levin also recommends following up conversations and meetings with the aforementioned phone call or a handwritten note or something that’s innovative, but representative of who you are. Again, for her keeping it personal is the key.

“We can each network well. We can each develop a big-picture plan with active strategies. If you know yourself and what makes you special and interesting to others, you can be the person you envision who networks well. Networking is like public speaking or writing: you get stronger as you gain more experience. So don’t worry about falling down on occasion or a contact opportunity that is not going as you hoped. Go and steadily build relationships wherever you go, and do it in your own authentic style that will be there with you throughout your career.”