One of my favorite books this year is *Friend of a Friend: Understanding the Hidden Networks that Can Transform Your Life and Your Career* by David Burkus. It's not your typical business self-improvement book. Burkus examines 50+ years of research to argue that *it's not about growing your network—it is about understanding and navigating it.* I recently interviewed David and we discussed networks, beers calls, and the success of General Stanley McChrystal.

Joe: How important are networks to personal and professional success?

David: They are so important that I wrote a book about it. A lot of people assume that networking is something they only need to do when they are looking for a job. But networking is fundamentally about information. Yes, it's information about new opportunities, but it's also information to help you make better decisions and see things from different perspectives. *The quality of the decisions you make and who you get your information from are affected by your network.*

The other thing I think is interesting that doesn't get enough attention is that networks affect more than just your professional life.

There is a lot of research that we unpacked in the book about the influence of your friend of a friend of a friend. So people you may not know directly, but have a friend in common, or in some cases require two introductions before you get to meet each other, still have an influence on certain aspects of your behavior. *The network that you're embedded in shapes some social norms that then shape your behavior.* So we can see influence in obesity, smoking rates, happiness or lack of depression all through knowing something about the network around you.

So, it's not that it only affects you in a career sense; it affects many aspects of our lives. It's the reason I think we need to be more intentional about all of our relationships. We know we need to be intentional about our closest relationships, but this also applies to just about everybody in our network.

Joe: In your book, you discuss the importance of weak ties. What are they and how do those help us?

David: We go back again to this idea that our network provides us with information. The interesting thing about our close ties is that there is a bond there. These are our band of brothers; the people we can be the most open with. When it comes to new information and

new ideas, they tend to think like us, to know everyone else in our inner circle. We tend to share the same perspectives. So we're not getting a lot of new information, insights, or different perspectives from them.

We jump straight from our close contacts to trying to add more people to our newtwork thinking that we can get diverse perspectives. That's actually hard to do. When in reality there are a lot of weak and dormant ties in your existing network that you haven't spoken with in awhile. A weak tie is someone you know, but you don't know that well. These are people you see at work, your kid's soccer practice, church, or the gym.

A dormant tie is someone you know, but you haven't' talked to them in a while. That relationship has fallen by the wayside. This happens a lot to those who serve in the military. You might change duty stations and not see that person again for five or ten years. During that period, they gain new perspectives and information that you might not have.

So regularly reengaging with those weak and dormant ties is a more powerful way to get access to new information, new ideas, and opportunities than from total strangers because they are already your friends. You don't have to go through a phase of building rapport, you only have to work on reconnecting.

Joe: Your arguments for maintaining weak and dormant ties seem counter to a lot of the books and articles that argue for us to keep building and expanding our networks. Why is your approach different?

 David: Most of the networking books and article are great, but they are advice, and *advice is autobiographical*. Advice is one person's description of how they did it, and that can be helpful if you are in a similar situation. If you are not, then it might not be that helpful. In the book, I synthesize about five decades of network science research and see what insights for the individual come out of that.

The first is a big mental model shift, which you alluded to. *I don't think you can grow or improve your network; you don't even have a network. You exist inside a network, but you don't own it*. The best mentality is to start understanding that and then ask:

"Where am I inside my network? Who am I connected to? Who are they connected to? Where am I and where do I need to be? And how do I navigate to get where I need to be?"

I think that is a much broader perspective that is usually far more impactful than working on growing your network by increasing your contacts on LinkedIn or inviting more people to a party. That's not as helpful as understanding the network that is all around you.

Joe: When I think networks, I also think about tribes. We have tribes in the military (Ranger tribe, Navy tribe, branch tribe, etc.) and in the book you call them clusters. Is it important to reach out beyond our tribes and connect with others?

The interesting thing about silos, or cluster, or tribes—whatever you want to call them, is that they are a kind of double-edged sword. On the one hand, information flows quicker when it comes from cluster to cluster instead of purely egalitarian. And you have a chance to improve your skills, grow and develop when you learn from people in your cluster. At the same time, it can also turn into a place where information doesn't flow out of the cluster. Nobody is talking, the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing.

Everybody doesn't need to be connected to everyone else, but in organizations where there is a natural tendency to move into tribes, it becomes important for certain people to step up and be the connector between tribes.

This is what I like about General McChrystal's team of teams approach. It wasn't, *I want everyone to know everyone*. It was, *I want everyone on the Ranger team to know this one SEAL who is embedded in your team. Because if you know this one SEAL and you trust him, he's going to be your connection to other SEALS, and you are going to develop a greater*

level of trust for that tribe. Usually one or two people are enough to increase the information flow. It doesn't have to be everyone, but if you look around and is there is no one—then it needs to be you.

For individuals, a person who connects to other communities unlocks value for their organization and themselves. This point is illustrated in one of my favorite quotes from Ronald Burt of University of Chicago, "The people who span the gap between two communities are the greatest risk for having great ideas." This is because they have two different perspectives in their mind. Most of the research supports the idea that the whole cluster gets better. You being the connector between the two communities is dramatically the more positive place to be than only knowing the connector and not being one yourself.

Joe: Do beer calls or social functions help the organizations?

David: In the book, we talk about the concept of multiplexity. You build a deeper relationship with someone when you have multiple contexts for connection. So if you know someone only in the work context, that's one thing. But if you know someone in a work context, and your kids go to the same school, and your spouses are friends, you build a deeper relationship. These types of social events are usually an opportunity for that to happen. If you end up alone with the same three buddies, then you're doing it wrong. But, these events provide opportunities to know more about each other by seeing what their outside life looks like, like who is in the family and what are they up to when they aren't in their day-to-day position. These events can increase the number of contexts of connections that people have and help build deeper relationships.

There is also a wealth of information that has spilled over into this area as well. Going back to your prior question about bridging the gap between clusters, McChrystal used a work-only context to build a team of teams, but if you are building multiplexity inside these different tribes, you're going to help increase trust. You can't have a party every single

Friday, but there is a need to create environments where people can see each other in other aspects of their lives so that they can get to know each other in those aspects.

Joe: Do you have any additional resources for leaders who want to dive deeper into these topics when they read your book?

David: I have a free .PDF workbook readers can download from my website. It will help them think about their networks, and provides them with tips and exercises they can do to improve their networks.

Want to learn more? Listen to this podcast where David discusses *Friend of a Friend*. And don't forget to check out David's book here. I promise it will make you think differently about networks.

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