

## The six degrees of separation of networking

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We've all heard the story, about how each of us is removed by just six degrees of separation from every other person on the planet. Few of us have spent any time trying to figure that out. We tend, rather, to forget about it unless someone makes the startling discovery that a person they know has managed to meet a guy who's friends with a guy who knows George Clooney.

What we don't realize is that there are no six degrees of separation.

It's an urban myth, say Ivan Misner and Michelle Donovan. And they should know.

These are veterans of networking. Misner is founder of Business Network International, the world's largest networking organization, and has been called "the father of modern networking" by CNN; Donovan runs the Referral Institute, specializing in personal referral coaching. They believe many more people are capable of achieving those six degrees, if only they would work at it.

They cite the research done by Stanley Milgram in the 1960s and 1970s, whose original experiment of sending letters through a host of intermediaries to reach one specific person was the source of the six-degrees story. That's the part that has become the myth.

The other part of Milgram's experiment, however, showed that the majority of people in the experiment never got their letters to the designated recipient. In fact, the most successful rate was 29 per cent, less than one-third of participants.

What this means, Misner and Donovan write in their new book, *The 29% Solution*, is "that 71 per cent were not connected at all!"

This shows, they argue, that while the myth doesn't hold, there's no question that some people are obviously better connected than others. The goal, then, is to find ways to become part of that 29 per cent.

It's called networking, which is more than shaking hands and passing business cards. Networking is about attitude - keep it positive, be motivated, acquire good listening skills. And it's about organization - follow up when you say you will, be dedicated to 24/7 networking.

The list of ways to develop networking skills is endless. There are 52 strategies listed in the book. But it all comes down to basics, says Donovan, who holds her mother responsible for teaching her networking skills. She believes that we've all learned how to network from our mothers; our job now is to put those lessons into practice.



CREDIT: Don Emmert/AFP PHOTO

Ivan Misner and Michelle Donovan say that six degrees of separation is an urban myth. Their new book, *The 29% Solution*, suggests that "71 per cent (are) not connected at all!"

Here are five networking facts your learned from your mother:

### **1. Share your toys!**

Her mother always felt it was important to give to others, Donovan writes. What does sharing have to do with networking?

"It's a skill that helps to make us approachable," she said. "Some of our best resources include time, money, connections, information, knowledge and skills. People appreciate us when we're willing to give to the relationship."

### **2. Walk, don't run!**

"As a kid, I was always in a hurry to get to the next exciting thing around the corner," Donovan said. "My attention was short, and my mom was trying to teach me patience."

It's the same for networking, she said. Someone in a hurry will miss the value that can be built from taking time with relationships.

"Establishing a network that has depth far exceeds one that is shallow and frail."

### **3. You have to work for it!**

Her parents' hard work throughout their lives served as an example, Donovan said, for the world of networking.

"That why it's called net-WORK, not net-SIT or net-EAT."

It takes effort and energy, and dedication to the process, to build strong networks.

### **4. Say thank you!**

When she asked her mother why saying thank you was so important, Donovan was told, "Because it's the right thing to do."

This is one of the greatest life lessons, Donovan writes, because it shows your gratitude and appreciation for someone else, which, in turn, solidifies your relationship.

### **5. Clean up after yourself!**

This might have been her mother's way of delegating the household chores, Donovan said, but it actually was a lesson in follow-up: put away your toys after playing, clear the table and wash the dishes.

In networking, consistent follow-up is crucial, whether it's a promise to help someone or just a thank-you.

"The home-grown lesson in follow-up might have been one of the most networking lessons of all."

In the end, Donovan said, these life lessons from childhood are a solid basis for developing strong networking skills. And remember your mother saying, "Someday you'll thank me"?

Well, now's the time to say thanks.

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