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02/24/16

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Sculpt Your Social Network

Upon arriving in University City in the fall of 2015, I knew no one; my first priority was to find comfort and safety in social companionship. Within the first few days of orientation, meet-and-greet events run by my dual-degree program introduced me to several other students in similar positions. Quickly, these five individuals became my close peers and they have remained so through my first semester. Forming a core group of friends with other students in my academic program, the M&T program, was a conservative maneuver. It is easy to build ties with contacts who are similar to me in “experience, training, worldview, and so on,” known as the self-similarity principle, and who spend extensive time with me in class— the proximity principle (Uzzi). The dense, low-diversity network I formed was well-suited to my objectives. Denser networks are not only more likely to supply emotional resources to one another but are also more likely to detect when the resources are needed (Balkundi). However, as freshman orientation fades in rearview, I no longer need a dense network to “gratify my ego,” (Uzzi). Success, now, is to become an attractive job and interview applicant.

In seeking a dense, or highly clustered, network of similar peers, I undercut the diversity of my close contacts (Uzzi). All five alters in my immediate network are males and have not lived outside of the U.S. Each peer is my age, has the same level of formal education as I have, and is pursuing the same two majors as I am. The effective size, or the size after redundancies are discounted, of this network is also small; the five individuals I have formed my closest ties with are subsequently close with each other, making the network characteristically closed and dense. In fact, my network density is 100%. The network is also structured closer to a wheel than a full-tie, and because each alter has one closest tie, information loops through the network rather than being dispersed equally. To become a more attractive job applicant, I will endeavor to position myself centrally in my network, diversify my close ties, and broker information with distinct networks.

Securing a centralized role within my wheel network would provide numerous advantages. Reaching out to and developing a stronger tie with the members more distally located in my wheel network will help me position myself at the network’s center. If I build stronger ties with my peers than they have with each other, the network will more closely resemble a core-periphery rather than a wheel. To do this, I can engage in a one-on-one dinner or movie with these network members to build mutual confidence, shared experience, and emotional intensity, which Granovetter lists as the core of an interpersonal tie. Helping friends with homework or accompanying them during an errand run, examples of reciprocal service, would ensure a strong tie (Granovetter). Typical of a dense, decentralized network, my peers “tend to share only acceptable and attitude-reinforcing information,” which pressures me to conform to local norms (Balkundi). Occupying a central position will unfetter me from this conformity and enable me to consider diverse perspectives with more flexibility, a valuable skill for job interviews and management positions. As a central figure in my network, I will benefit from the strong trust shared with the other members and secure valuable information more quickly than I would as a non-central member. This information will notify me of extracurricular and occupational opportunities, entrepreneurial ventures, and challenges within classes. Interestingly, becoming closer with the distal members within my network, effectively positioning myself centrally, will improve others’ perception of me. Simply occupying the central position of a network, a position that need not entail formal leadership, will induce others to perceive me as a leader on account of my “easily recognizable strategic position,” (Mehra). This favorable renown will spread to recruiters and assist me in job applications.

I will look to connect with older students in the M&T community to diversify my network, which is distinctly homogenous, composed of five other males of the same age, majors, and background. Uzzi warns that pursuing casual interactions will not yield deep ties. Instead, joining an intramural basketball league with several upperclassmen will allow me to engage in a high-stake activity with these contacts, binding me to them in shared celebration, commiseration, and ultimately forged loyalty, what Uzzi describes as the shared activity principle (Uzzi). Homogenous, dense networks become “echo chambers”; the information I learn is stale and redundant and the knowledge I look to pass on does not disperse widely (Uzzi). If I secure three close contacts who do not know other my other close peers, my network density will drop from 100% to 37%. Although my dual-degree program is professed to provide a valuable network, I do not learn about interview experiences and extracurricular and internship opportunities because my network is strictly made up of freshmen. Gaining upperclassmen contacts within the dual-degree program will provide fresh information about courses, academic resources, and eventually contacts within companies. The added diversity from older students from various backgrounds will help me think more creatively and learn faster as well, a valuable tool to succeed in classes and in management positions in the workplace (Burt).

In addition to maneuvering within my own network, I can look to broker information with distinct networks. Despite being in-between the majors of bioengineering (BE) and computer science (CIS), I chose to engage in software extracurricular activities because I can pursue the clubs with close peers, all of whom are CIS majors. Therefore, my understanding of the software technology industry is identical to my peers’ understandings. We hear about the same internship opportunities and learn similar skills on account of having the same mentors within our clubs. I would benefit from pursuing BE extracurricular activities, interests which are not shared by members in my network. This would afford me unique training and perspectives. Furthermore, this would allow me to broker information between BE-oriented students and the software-focused peers in my network. Because these two departments are physically separate and have distinct curricula, I would have greater ability to recognize opportunities to collaborate on homework in general classes and even on entrepreneurial ventures (Kleinbaum). Backed by ties to these diverse disciplines, my ideas are likely to be more favorably evaluated and will be dismissed less frequently (Burt). Connected between two groups, I’ll be more “familiar with alternative ways of thinking and behaving” and thus more flexible during interviews and in challenges (Burt).

Restructuring my network and repositioning myself within it will logically influence my peers within the network, often in a beneficial way. Brokering information between my freshman peers and contacts in bioengineering as well as upperclassmen will also afford new resources to my close ties (Kleinbaum). Balkundi determined that the relationship between networking centrality and performance has a positive corrected correlation of .29, meaning that positioning myself in the center of my wheel network will provide opportunities and information to my close contacts as well (Balkundi). Of course, taking actions to restructure my network will have tradeoffs that are both unfavorable to myself and my peers as well. Forming new ties with other networks will weaken the strong bonds I share with my close friends, which will reduce the emotional resources and security available to me and my close peers. Studies have resolved a .22 average corrected correlation between social ties and performance; branching out from my close peers will minimize our ability to collaborate effectively. Despite the benefits of brokering between networks, specifically heightened creativity and opportunity-recognition, spreading myself too thin will reduce my ability to collaborate. The more networks I look to extend myself into, the weaker my ties will become. Kleinbaum warns that without enough deep relationships, it is impossible to bring together distinct networks to cooperate (Kleinbaum).

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