

‘NETWORKS FOR ACTION’: Tools for Change conference, Caux 2007

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In thinking about building our networks for action, I want to tell you some stories from my personal experience, and then draw conclusions from these stories. In doing so, I stress that I am no paragon of virtue in building networks and others here may have similar experiences to mine.

In the early 1990s I travelled to the steel city of Jamshedpur in eastern India to write a report for IofC’s then international magazine *For A Change* about the Tata engineering company. It has a huge factory manufacturing most of the trucks and buses on India’s roads. At the time it was running a ‘human relations at work’ training programme for its 22,000 employees. This was inspired by the values and spirit of Initiatives of Change. A number of employees and managers had been to the Asian centre of IofC in Panchgani, Maharashtra.

It helps when you travel anywhere to have a purpose, an objective which helps to open doors, and of course journalism is particularly adept at opening doors, despite its negative connotations in some circles. If people think they are going to appear in the media they are often happy to talk. Not always of course and, as a journalist, I find it is absolutely necessary to build a relationship of trust with one’s subject.

The article duly appeared in *For A Change* magazine. Then a relative of mine said, ‘I think you should sell this story to a newspaper.’ Apart from anything else it would earn you some extra income.

The only journalist I knew then was the Labour editor of the *Financial Times*, whom I had met at the annual Trades Union Congress in Britain. So I phoned him to ask his advice. The person you need to talk to, he said, is the editor of the Management pages. So I phoned this man and he said, ‘I’ve been thinking of running a piece from India and if you’ve been there, please send me 1,200 words on an Indian approach to total quality management.’

I had the thought not just to mail the article to him, as I would normally have done, but to take it to him in person at the FT’s headquarters. He read the article in front of me and said, Yes, I think we can use this. Then he said, ‘I didn’t realise it’s Moral Re-Armament (as Initiatives of Change was then known).’ He told me that he was the editor of his church’s parish magazine and could he come and interview me about MRA for an article in his magazine? It turned out that he was a neighbour of mine in south-west London. So he came to my home to interview me about MRA. He wrote that he had thought it was an extremist organisation but talking with me had given him an entirely different picture.

Three years later the Caux Round Table group of senior business executives launched its publication *Principles for Business*, here in Caux. I told the FT journalist in advance about this, and sent him a preview copy, saying that it was embargoed till the day of its launch. That weekend, his article appeared and when Maarten de Pous, the Executive Director of the Caux Round Table, went into his office on the Monday morning, there were faxes all over the floor from companies all over the world ordering copies of the Principles. (This was before the era of emails.) The journalist

had done the Caux Round Table a singular service in putting it on the business world's map. He, in effect, became part of the CRT's network for action at that time.

Two years later he asked me if I would write an article from Caux about how the CRT's business principles were being put into practice, and this article appeared in the *FT* under the headline, 'The ethical way to profitability'. He now edits a leading business publication, and has remained a good friend ever since.

I wonder how much I might have missed if I had not followed the hunch to visit him in his office.

On another occasion, a friend and I went to a business Accountability conference at the Royal Commonwealth Society in London. It was packed and we were among the last to arrive. I had not pre-registered, but was given a conference programme anyway. Just after it started a tall man walked in and I overheard him asking the steward for a copy of the programme as he had to take it back to Parliament. 'Sorry, sir,' said the steward, 'We've run out of them.' I had the insistent thought to give him mine, especially as I had not pre-registered for the conference. He was grateful and at the end of the day we found ourselves putting our coats on together at the cloakroom. So I walked with him up the road to catch the bus. He told me that he was a Member of Parliament and asked what did I do? I could have said that I was a journalist. But I decided to show my cards. So I told him that I work with an international NGO working for reconciliation, called Moral Re-Armament. 'Good heavens,' he replied. 'I had no idea MRA was still going strong. I am all for it. We do need to rearm ourselves with morals.'

This was not the kind of reaction one expected from a British MP. He told me, much later, that he had first met MRA when he was a student at Cambridge in the 1950s when MRA's founder, Frank Buchman, had invited him twice to come to Caux. But as he came from such a poor background he couldn't afford to go. He had since become a successful businessman, founding the Top Shop fashion retail chain, and was one of the few MPs with real business experience.

He has since spoken here in Caux and has been part of the IofC network, meeting with Somali groups and others at the IofC centre in London. He remains a firm friend and part of our networks for action.

On another occasion, I went to the Worldaware awards in London, given for social entrepreneurship in developing countries. A smartly dressed woman in the press seats turned to me and said, "Isn't it all wonderful?"

I saw on her name badge that she had the same unusual surname as a friend of mine, who had been the UK head of the anti-corruption body Transparency International. She said that she was his sister-in-law and I realised that she must be the wife of the Chairman of one of the world's biggest oil corporations. I knew he was the brother of my friend, and also a man of ethical principles. We were about to launch in Britain the IofC programme called Caux Initiatives for Business. So I asked her if her husband could come to speak at our launch occasion, being hosted by the MP whom I've just mentioned. There and then, she got out her big family diary from her handbag and said, 'Yes, he's free that evening. I'll tell him!' So he became our main guest speaker and he and his wife have remained friends ever since.

[Another friend is an author on Islam at the University of Bradford in Yorkshire. Bradford has the highest percentage of Muslims of any British city. My friend is the advisor to the Anglican bishop on relations with the Muslim community. I met him when I went to interview him for an article in *For A Change* magazine, later published in one of our national newspapers. He subsequently took part in an international gathering on relations with the Islamic world, organised by IofC in Morocco. This man is always keen to welcome our guests to the university's Department of Peace Studies, the largest Quaker foundation of its kind in the world.]

Another friend I keep in touch with is the Washington Bureau Chief for a leading international newspaper. I simply emailed him—a very easy thing to do—to compliment him on the book he had written, which I had read and commended to others. We met in Washington and now keep in touch by email.

Sometimes we build on the friendships of others. As it says in the scriptures: 'One sows and another reaps.' One of my editorial colleagues on *For A Change* was at university with a man who became the obituaries editor of a national newspaper. He gained an appreciation of IofC whilst at university. So he has been glad to publish obituaries we have written of the great pioneers of MRA/Initiatives of Change, recognising that their lives are worthy of public recognition.

So what do I draw from these stories? I personally am not a natural team player. It is often easier to work alone, especially for a journalist, though far less productive in the long run. But I am interested in the sequence of events, when one thing leads to another. So the first lesson I draw is to emphasise an obvious point: it is a mistake to think that one's network for action consists solely of the people you already know. A team never grows in that way. Frank Buchman used to say, 'I have been wonderfully led to the people who are already prepared.' He meant that God's hand was *already* on them to play some role in fulfilling a great purpose in the world. All we have to do is go to the places and events to meet them.

And that is the second important lesson. Don't wait for people to come to you. We have to put ourselves in harm's way, as it were. Peter Howard, who succeeded Buchman as MRA's global leader, used to talk about the difference between 'enclavers' and 'freebooters'. Enclavers were those who provided a *vital* service in nurturing the fellowship. The freebooters were out there in the world, slaying dragons like St George, and getting engaged with the world. And that is also *vital* if one's network for action is going to expand. So go to the events where you are likely to meet and get to know people on *their* ground: party political or trade union conferences, business or journalism conferences, World Social Forums or whatever. Think out the best way to express your reason for wanting to talk with someone and how to introduce yourself. It may simply be to congratulate them or thank them for something they've said. It helps if they can understand where you are coming from and what handle you have to your name. Think out how you describe yourself, your position or title and its significance.

It means taking courage, taking risks—and especially being attentive to the whispers of inspiration at such public events. I would have missed making the friendship with the MP if I had not obeyed the simple thought to give him my programme.

Psychologists say that the definition of *motivation* is ‘all those pushes and prods, physiological, sociological and psychological, that defeat our laziness and move us, either eagerly or reluctantly, into action’. Another of those pushes and prods is the spiritual, the whispers of holy guidance that come to us in our times of reflection and prayer for individuals, however inadequate we may feel.

Thirdly, remain faithful to the people you have first met. Put them in your address book. Add them to your database, with their permission of course. Include them in your email loops. Pray for them, if you are so inclined. And don’t be afraid to treat them as equals. Realise that we also have a moral authority, and a wealth of experience, that is indeed attractive and intriguing to them. I often find that I have to grit my teeth in picking up the phone to someone, perhaps afraid that I might make a mistake, or be rebuffed. But I think it is far better to take the risk than never to know what one might have missed. There are sins of commission. But there are also sins of omission, of actions that I might have taken but have been unnecessarily afraid to do so. Some people, of course, do require one’s patient reserve and it is equally a mistake to pester people.

Then, as you build the friendship, don’t be afraid to ask the personal questions or make challenging statements. Far from driving people away, in the end this is what holds people together in the network. They will begin to see you as a confidante, a friend. Someone they can trust and share their concerns with. And it is the greatest compliment when somebody says to you, ‘You know I do value your friendship.’

Finally share your friendships with others in the network. Introduce them to your friends in the global network of IofC. And have imagination about who they should meet. I took several friends to meet the MP in Parliament whom I thought he would be interested to meet. And the business leader I mentioned enjoyed bringing his family to a Jamaican restaurant in south London to meet with a group of us.

In the end our networks for action are really networks of friendship.