

THE SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY CONNECTED PEOPLE

In times of physical distancing, connectedness has been affected, but in many cases, communities have flourished. In this article, **Cormac Russell** reflects on what we might learn at work from 'connectors' in communities.

Do you know someone on your street, neighbourhood, or village who is much beloved by their neighbours? I do! In fact, I know lots. As a child it was my grandmother on my mother's side. From a very young age her effortless elegance in connecting with people fascinated me. She taught me the value of community building, of storytelling, of using what you have as a community to secure what's needed and of standing shoulder to shoulder with regular folks. She had no credentials, no fancy words to hide behind, and she was far from perfect. But she made a practice – a habit, you might say – out of connecting. It was her most important lesson to me.

Now, my own work is in community development, mostly outside of aviation organisations, but some of what I have learned applies to communities within organisations, such as communities of air traffic controllers, engineers, pilots, and other professionals. In every community, there are 'connectors'. It is likely that you know some in your organisation. They may be connectors within your 'professional community', or your 'airport community', or within the 'aviation community'.

What I have learned from working with communities from Rawanda to Roscommon in Ireland, and from my grandmother to savvy relationship builders in organisations around the world, is that you can't be effective until you learn to be affective. Being affective is about understanding that you can't fix the technical stuff until you attend to human relationships.

This is the realm of connectorship. Studying connectors, as I have done over 25 years in 36 countries, has revealed several characteristic habits. As you read on, I invite you to think about the people in your 'community' who fit the description, and perhaps about how you might expand your own connecting ability. By the way, a health warning for folks who like to move fast: this may not appeal to you. It may feel soft or a bit too touchy-feely. I make no apology for this. These folks move slow and support others to make things. I believe they have something of great value to teach us. See what you think:

1. They name what they and what others do

Highly connected people name what they do and what others do. They are therefore predicable and help others become predictable too. They have probably been communicating on the basis of the belief that it's good to name your initiatives and those of others since they were children.

There is no manipulation here, just gentle magnetism that comes from an ability to name what you care about and want to act on, without feeling the need to convert everyone to agree with or follow you. They don't just name what they do, or want to do. They name what others are doing. This disarmingly simple act is done without judgment and often in an effort to connect with someone else. *"Anna, did you know that Peter from engineering loves cooking. Don't you organise the annual BBQ?"* Then they smile, and a twinkle appears in the corner of their eye. Simple, but

like magic, topped off with: *"I think you'd make good friends."*

A neighbourhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma, has long been known as "Brady Heights". Several years ago, details about Mr. Brady's history came to light, prompting a need for a new name. As a first step, some have collected stories and dug into the neighbourhood history, bringing diverse neighbourhood voices and transparency to the renaming process.

"Highly connected people name what they do and what others do"

2. They wait patiently

They wait. Imagine the joy of encountering someone who knows the value of creating the time and space where you can figure stuff out, wrestle with dilemmas, and come face to face with what you really care about and feel energised to act on. No sales pitch, no nudging, recruiting, coaching, or inspiring, just...waiting. In every neighbourhood, people with such a habit exist. I think it's a habit worth seeking out; it may well be the best-kept secret of all. In communities, such as yours, anything worth doing takes time and patience.





“Connectors take somebody from seeing only deficits and problems to seeing strengths and possibilities”

In Rwanda, three connectors have worked with parents from 49 schools to connect with over 400 villages in the Gasebo district to connect the assets of local communities and schools to address child poverty, sanitation issues and drought.

3. They hear others into expression and action

‘Hearing people into expression and action’ is a third habit of highly connected people. They are much beloved for this wonderful gift for creating just the right ambiance to better express ourselves and connect with others, leading to productive action. It is as if their listening activates us. Their listening is laced with curiosity, and their primary interest is not your opinions on what everyone else ought to do. Their primary interest is what motivates you. They have an innate understanding of the three things that motivate people to take action:

- what they care about and therefore want to move towards
- what they are concerned about and therefore want to move away from, and
- the opportunity to contribute a gift, skill or talent.

Yet when they listen for these things, they do so not in an effort to get us to act as they see fit, but simply to enable us to better express ourselves and connect with others. Do you know anyone like that?

In the neighbourhood of Hodgehill in Birmingham, England, seven street connectors have spent the last seven years knocking on their neighbours’ door, asking questions like “what would you love to do here if three or four of your neighbours were willing to help you?” The interesting thing is that people have answers, they have ideas. It is as if they have been waiting to be asked.

4. They follow our initiatives

One way of thinking tries to subdivide us into two camps: those who lead and those who follow. But there are so many other ways of being in the world, including being a ‘connector’ – someone who connects the gifts, wants and offers of others. Connectors step back and light up a space into which we can step and make a valuable contribution to the wider community. They help people to catch themselves doing the very thing they think they ‘can’t’ or ‘don’t’ do.

In the South Central Neighbourhood in Singapore, the Family Centre staff reversed an age old question that they would ask residents, “what do you need from us”, to “what are you already doing that makes things better and what else would you like to do?” Out of this new question emerged the insights that people are doing a lot of stuff below the radar to support their families and communities, and it’s mostly either invisible or not valued. An initiative called “I Wish You Enough” emerged. This initiative is a community-led way of ensuring families living in poverty have enough to live well. Practical cooperative efforts include seven families pooling their monthly food budgets and then buying groceries in bulk at a wholesalers.

5. They focus on assets

When a neighbour says they are worried that their 13-year-old daughter is going down the “*wrong road, falling in with the wrong crowd*”, a highly connected neighbour listens to that, and then does something counterintuitive. At just the right moment, having waited and heard the person, they don’t join in the moaning, but instead follow what the person has said that they care about. And with that they ask questions, at the speed of trust, not in quick fire, that only a highly connected person can ask: “*So Mary, you know how you said you’re worried that Jane is going to go down the wrong track, and because it’s coming close to the summer holidays you’re even more concerned? Is that something you’d like to move forward?*” “*What could you bring to the solution?*” “*Do you know others who could join you?*” “*How can I be useful?*” Then they wait, and wait some more, as Mary looks inside of herself to find what gifts, skills, knowledge and passions she has within her grasp to act on what she cares about.

Connectors take somebody from seeing only deficits and problems to seeing strengths and possibilities. I’m sure you can think of many other examples at work, where a problem could be – or has been – turned into possibility, realised by you and your colleagues. This is the ‘BY’ mode of change outlined in my article in *HindSight* 28 – change done BY people, not FOR them.

6. They connect people’s gifts, skills and passions

As well as helping people tap into their own potential, they understand the power of connecting people together by gifts, skills and passions. Highly connected people are connected because they connect people to each other. But that’s not their primary motivation. They are not networking out of self-interest. They connect people because that is what they love to do.



Using the example above, as well as helping Mary shift from a deficit- to a strength-based perspective, they go further and transform the conversation into an asset-based learning conversation. They help Mary to use her connections as well as her personal skills, *"I wonder who else might help?"*

"Sally, four doors up has talked about this, she's always saying that there's nothing for girls to do, and all the activities are geared for boys. And Mike is raising two daughters on his own, I bet he'd have something to say, do you know anyone else?". Mary: *"Come to think of it..."*

Instinctively they know that there are three kinds of assets:

1. **Primary assets** that are local and within community control that just need to be identified, connected and mobilised (e.g., air traffic controllers can get together informally without managerial approval in an organisation).
2. **Secondary assets** that are local but not within community control, and therefore require more complex negotiation (e.g., pilots can organise safety workshops, but need managerial approval in an organisation).
3. **Potential assets** that existing outside of the community and outside community control (e.g., controllers can organise safety workshops with pilots and ground staff, and tour an airfield to understand ground safety issues, and need managerial approval from various organisations).

Highly connected people have a habit of guiding people through a thinking process that helps them explore how primary assets can be used first, then they are mobilised to start thinking about tapping into secondary assets and so on.

In a neighbourhood in the Netherlands, Joop lives with his mother. Some know him as a person with mental health issues. He has a fear of open space and social interactions. So he rarely goes outside. When we first met his mother and him, they were both disconnected. The conversation turned from Joop's deficits to his capacities and interests. He is a keen stamp collector and loves plants. Today he is the guy that looks after neighbours' plant when they go on vacation.

7. They grow their power by giving it away

Highly connected people work through connections, not hierarchies. It is important to make a distinction here between a networker and connector. A networker is much more likely to use language such as: *"my network"*, *"I use my network to..."*, and *"it's not what you have, it's who you know that counts"*. A networker has clear self-interest in engaging and investing in their networks, and will happily reciprocate but expect something in return.

Connectors are more likely to use 'our' and 'we' language: *"we just get together on our street, at the drop of a hat"* or *"our book group"*. They also tend to describe what others do for others, rather than what others do for them. Connectors don't tend to think of themselves as 'networked'. They think of themselves as connected deeply with, and in, the lives of others in their community.

In simple terms, I would say networkers invest in multiple interpersonal relationships; some are deep, but the wider the network the more surface level many of the relationships are. Connectors by comparison may not know as many people, since they are driven by depth in their relationship and by the desire to connect the people they know to each other.

Connectors tend to feel powerful when people who were disconnected become connected, especially as those connections deepen and the associations spread. They feel joy at the idea that a culture of community is taking hold.

So did you think of people in your professional or work 'community' who fit the description above, perhaps in the control room or for professional association? Perhaps it's you. Either way, we can all expand our own connecting ability. **S**



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