Enter the "Success Zone"

With some coaching, most can master an optimal networking mindset

By Brennan Gamwell
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Networking may seem easy, even natural. Especially for seasoned business professionals whose livelihoods rely on cultivating and maintaining vast networks of professional contacts.

But as many of us know all too well, it's just not that easy. Likewise, many of us have probably experienced pre-networking event jitters.

Scott Sullivan

(Photo by Photo by Drongo Photo)

Perhaps you suffer from sweaty palms or spend hours grappling with an elevator pitch that is coherent, professional and warm. Perhaps you're more comfortable sticking with your friends instead of working the room, shaking hands and handing out business cards.

Let's face it: Many of us have good reasons for not networking well.

"Nothing is more stress-inducing for many folks than to ask them to talk about what they do and how someone can help them find clients without sounding either entirely cocky or sadly insecure," says Scott Sullivan, facilitator for the Capital Area Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (aka The Chamber) Smart Networking 2.0 series. Sullivan works as a certified professional coach and director of coaching and curriculum at Velocity, a D.C.-based coaching and professional-development firm. Sullivan also serves as the D.C. director of Business Networking International (BNI), one of the largest networking organizations in the world.

So, Sullivan knows a thing or two about how to put yourself out there. He knows we can all overcome our pre-networking jitters to enter the "success zone" and reach out to others more effectively.

"Socializing is, to a certain degree, natural, but networking is both art and science. And it's very scary to most people I've worked with," Sullivan says. Each of Smart Networking 2.0's sessions (the third is coming up Sept. 24) has been an exploration into the sources of the attitudes we exhibit at work and at home. "I ask the question, 'What can we do to maintain the ones working for us and change the ones that do not?'"

Smart Networking 2.0's third and final session will explore three scenarios that cause us the most stress in both our personal and professional lives. Sullivan emphasizes that dealing with stress is one of the primary factors leading to successful networking.

"People should think about what is at the root of the stress of relationship-building so they can show up in a way that maximizes their chances for success," he advises.

Cris Caruso, a financial adviser and Chamber member, has already attended The Chamber's two previous Smart Networking 2.0 events and looks forward to next week's finale.

"Smart Networking gives you a different way to approach networking at an event," Caruso says. "So often, we go to networking events, and it's sort of a catch-22. People tend to congregate with their friends, but networking shouldn't be a group of people standing around talking with people they already know."

Smart Networking also helped Caruso – already a seasoned networker – perfect her style.

"Scott helped me set the expectation that you don't have to walk into a networking event ready to conquer the world," she says. "I've really applied that take-home message that it's better to make one or two great, deep connections rather than engage in a networking marathon."

Caruso encourages anyone interested in honing their professional development skills – or simply those looking for meaningful business connections in the D.C. area – to give The Chamber a call.

"I've made great contacts, both professional and personal," says Caruso. "Plus, their recent educational programs on time management, DOMA and networking have been wonderful."

The Chamber's third and final Social Networking 2.0 event is Tuesday, Sept. 24, at the Renaissance Washington, DC Dupont Circle Hotel, 1143 New Hampshire Ave. NW, at 6:30 p.m. Registration is free for Chamber members, $25 for non-members. For more information or to register, visit caglcc.org.

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