Social Chemistry

Decoding the Patterns of Human Connection

According to conventional wisdom, the size of your network determines its quality. Marissa King, a researcher and professor of Organizational Behavior at Yale School of Management, makes a bold claim. The structure of your network matters more. The structure of your network "helps explain everything from your pay to the quality of your ideas" (p. 11). In *Social Chemistry*, King outlines three distinct ways to arrange your social connections. Each structure has advantages and drawbacks, and an array of psychological tendencies influence which style you prefer. Her book is rich in primary and secondary research, and she peppers her arguments with vivid examples and research studies.

Key Quote

"The beauty of networks, including your own social signature, is that their properties are greater than the sum of their parts" (p. 68). — *Marissa King*

Key Concepts

Making Connections. The way your network is structured "helps explain everything from your pay to the quality of your ideas" (p. 11). When it comes to the value of your social connections, quality and structure matter more than size.

The Nature of Networks. "While everyone has roughly the same capacity to form and maintain relationships, people tend to allocate their energy differently across the different layers of social relationships" (p. 39). Each person has their own "social signature" and tends to be an "expansionist" (has large numbers of broad but not necessarily deep connections), a "broker" (nurtures weak ties between many different - even disparate - spheres), or a "convener" (focuses on a select group of strong ties and works hard to nurture and connect them).

Conveners. These people are motivated by trust and they value closeness with a circle of loyal friends. They work to maintain these ties and to support and connect their close circle. "Conveners favor bandwidth with redundancy" (p. 99).

Brokers. People who are brokers value connections with diverse circles and eschew homogeneity between their various groups. "Brokers are the bridges between islands" (p. 105). "Brokers are hot for diversity" (p. 99).

Expansionists. People who are expansionists are popular and likable, with a very broad but often shallow social network. King calls them "super-connectors." They have far more connections than regular people have.

In the Mix. "Different moments and challenges require different networks. Just as your emotional, social, and work needs change over time, so can your network" (p. 164).

In the Moment. "Truly hearing, seeing, and listening to another leads to connection" (p. 190).

Human Design. "Who is on a team matters less than how the team members interact, structure their work, and view their contributions" (p. 220). A primary aspect of successful connections on a team is the idea of "psychological safety."

Work/Life. When we mix up work and friendship a bit, we gain benefits in both areas, but we need to be careful to make the most of having friends at work while avoiding potential negatives.

Everyone's Connected. "In combination, brokers, expansionists, and conveners make the world small." King explains that "they all contribute to creating a brilliant, vibrant human order" (p. 280).

THE ELEMENTS OF A NETWORK

King outlines common characteristics of all networks. The balance of these elements in your network determines your network style.

Most people maintain networks of 100 to 200 stable contacts, a number known as Dunbar's Number. Beyond our stable contacts, the average person knows about 600 people. (Expansionists are outliers. They know many more people on average.) Studies suggest social media doesn't increase our network size. It also does not help us feel emotionally connected. Instead, King argues social media helps us keep track of weak ties at the edges of our network (pp. 36-37). A network is a mix of strong and weak ties.

Strong ties are defined by intimacy and affection. They "provide emotional support, help guard against depression, and increase feelings of well-being" (p. 42). They reinforce behavior, both positive and negative. For example, it is hard to quit smoking if your best friends smoke (p. 43).

Weak ties do not play a key role in behavior change, but they are "likely to give us our next great idea or business opportunity" (p. 43). You are more likely to get a new job through a weak tie than a close friend (p. 10). Our weak ties are often a source of expertise. When looking for advice, we seek competence, not emotional connection (p. 43).

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Physical proximity shapes networks. "When people are considering how to develop a network, far too often the focus is on whom you know." But King says, "A much more productive perspective to take is to think about where you go" (p. 56). Optimize for spontaneous interactions. Work near the break room in the office. Cul-de-sacs are social gold in neighborhoods, and high-rises increase interactions in cities (p. 55).

We balance between meeting, maintaining, and terminating. We constantly make decisions about whether to meet new people, maintain existing ties, or terminate relationships. Conveners, brokers, and expansionists emphasize different actions (pp. 57-58).

THREE NETWORK STRUCTURES: CONVENERS

Conveners create dense networks of strong ties. In a convening network, your friends are likely friends with each other (p. 7). Conveners focus on maintenance. "They don't spend a lot of time exploring multiple social worlds but tend to have deep roots in a few" (p. 68). For the convener, their network has "outsize trust and reputational benefits" (p. 7). The hallmark of their networks is trust – a psychological state marked by the intention to accept vulnerability and expect positive behavior from another (p. 75).

Advantages: Convening networks have a higher bandwidth for sharing sensitive or complicated knowledge. "Strong and cohesive ties increase people's willingness and motivation to share information." King explains that "in industries in which sharing complex information is critical, this can be an important advantage" (p. 82). Strong, dense ties provide "protection from potentially nefarious others" (p. 81). Conveners are more likely to spot socially threatening behavior.

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Conveners are more resilient. People tend to form convening networks after natural disasters (p. 83).

Conveners maintain strong ties. Strong ties guard against loneliness. Conveners are typically happier and more satisfied overall. They tend to feel more satisfied with the social aspects of their professional lives (p. 13).

Disadvantages: Convened groups are susceptible to homophily – the tendency to prefer relationships and groups based on similarity and familiarity (p. 88). If you do not look like the people in the convening network, homophily reduces your access to resources and social capital. "Even if they are in a richly diverse community, women and minorities in closed networks of similar others have a harder time finding jobs and are promoted at lower rates" (p. 90).

To counteract homophily in your networks, focus on building relationships based on shared activities, not shared characteristics. Introduce brokers into your network. Brokers are skilled at developing relationships with a variety of people (p. 91).

Not everyone benefits from networks with high bandwidth. "According to a study conducted by Martin Gargiulo and his colleagues at INSEAD, [higher bandwidth networks] are less beneficial for employees who are principally responsible for transmitting information" (p. 83).

THREE NETWORK STRUCTURES: BROKERS

Successful brokers cultivate a "diverse network of specialists with deep expertise" (p. 101). They straddle multiple social worlds. Without a broker's intervention, their friends are not friends with each other. Brokers "generate value by bringing together typically disconnected parties from different social worlds. Their networks have huge information benefits and are highly innovative since the majority of new ideas come from recombination" (p. 6). The strength of a broker's network comes from their weak ties, which they focus on maintaining (p. 68). Successful brokers are rare (p. 102).

Brokers are typically high self-monitors. High self-monitors adapt rapidly to changing audiences. They are highly attuned to situational cues and changing social norms. They tend to define themselves by their roles - mother, media analyst, host, CEO, friend. When high self-monitoring behavior goes wrong, people may see them as manipulative or contrived. In contrast, low self-monitors typically behave similarly in different contexts. They tend to view themselves in terms of one single, essentialist self (pp. 110-114).

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Advantages: Brokerage is essential for innovation. "Since brokers sit at the intersection of multiple social worlds, they are exposed to novel ideas and perspectives. This allows them to excel at importing, exporting, and recombining ideas" (p. 107). Recombination is the heart of creativity.

Brokers are adept at negotiating change between contentious groups. They are skilled at navigating competing concerns (p. 123). The ability to code-switch - or change behavior based on audience - is an advantage in many industries, particularly in politics. King cites Barack Obama as an example of a broker. He could smoothly and effortlessly navigate a political dinner, respond casually at Ben's Chili Bowl ("Nah, we straight"), and dance on the Ellen DeGeneres Show (pp. 117-118). Brokers tend to have a better work/life balance (p. 13).

Disadvantages: Most people have a cognitive bias for something King calls "triadic closure." People tend to form alliances of three people, where "a friend of a friend becomes a friend" (p. 103). People want to know familiar people. Brokers, however, bridge insular social groups (pp. 102-105). This takes work, effort, and intentionality. Successful brokers might fight triadic closure by constantly changing schedules or switching their social groups (p. 108). Misguided brokerage attempts hurt reputations (p. 116). For example, introducing specialists who already know each other is awkward at best. If you attempted to control the flow of information between them, it might be socially damaging. People with power are particularly susceptible. They must be conscious of spaces where their position blinds them to the social perceptions required to connect people.

Convening networks may bond over sharing negative sentiments about people at the edge of their network. Those people are brokers. "Brokers who stand between two groups of conveners, a position known among network researchers as the ties that torture," are more likely to be perceived as uncaring or labeled as jerks (p. 128).

THREE NETWORK STRUCTURES: EXPANSIONISTS

Expansionists are popular. They have "extraordinarily large networks, are well-known, and have an uncanny ability to work a room" (p. 6). Their "power comes from knowing many times more people than the average person" (p. 135). They favor "weak ties, have vast interaction spaces, and expend most of their social effort meeting new people. They also have an easier time ending relationships, because their investments don't have a lot of reciprocal obligations" (p. 67). Expansionists are highly skilled at reading body language and recognizing signs of status (p. 146-148).

Advantages: Their vast networks grant them access to resources and status. Their position allows them to leverage the halo effect – being seen with people with status imbues you with status (p. 145). For example, Shep Gordon was the publicity genius behind Alice Cooper and Groucho Marx, among others. He cultivated a vast and lofty network of friends (pp.132-135). He "frequently relied on using the fame of friends to make new clients famous" (p. 139).

Popular employees tend to have a more pleasant time at work. Coworkers offer more welcoming behavior. Team members are less likely to belittle or ignore a popular employee (p. 137).

Disadvantages: Expansionists are vulnerable to role strain - they cannot meet the demands of their many roles. Role strain leads to depression and burnout (p. 157). Expansionists benefit from setting boundaries. For example, a five-minute favor is often as effective for a relationship as a five-hour favor (p. 154).

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Expansionists often struggle to maintain ties. It is hard to keep track of hundreds of people. "Effective expansionists have a system" (p. 155). They might use customer relationship management tools to store contact info. Others keep call logs or create tasks lists. Reminders to reach out and detailed notes about previous meetings may help (p. 155). David Rockefeller kept an extensive Rolodex with personal details about his contacts (pp. 33-35). Studies suggest popularity can leave you lonely. Generosity, service to others, and gratitude can guard against loneliness (pp. 157-160).

THERE'S NO PERFECT NETWORK

"The most appropriate network is the one that matches your personal goals, career stage, and needs" (p. 164). Lean into the style that maximizes the benefits to your role. Consider blending styles. Most people do. "One out of three people don't have a clearly defined style. An additional 20 to 25 percent have a mixed style," or a blend of multiple styles (p. 164).

In your early career, knowing many people leads to more opportunities. Brokerage is most common mid-career, when professionals have the resources to implement bold ideas (p. 170). In contrast, executives will find their peers have better resources. They often need fewer ties to access the same quality of resources. Leaders typically need to network down - or create connections between the people below them - to reduce the demands their weak ties place on them (p. 171).

We build connections moment by moment. Effective eye contact, open-minded listening, asking follow-up questions, and appropriate touch are important for building trusted connections (pp. 187-215).
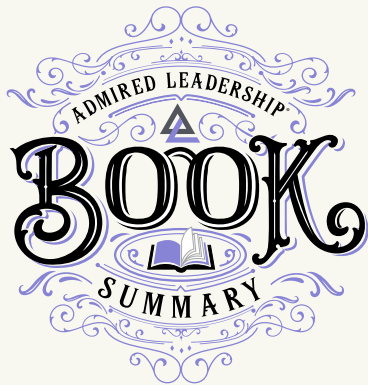
TEAM BUILDING

Looking to build the perfect team? Who is on the team matters less than how they interact. King explores the findings of Google's research project, Project Aristotle. Google's findings suggest psychological safety is the most important dynamic for effective teams. "Psychological safety is a climate in which people feel safe to speak up and take interpersonal risks. It isn't about friendship or liking one another, it is freedom from interpersonal fear. It is a shared feeling that exists in the group, not something an individual has" (pp. 220-221).

Psychological safety is highest in new teams and very mature teams. Capitalize on the window of opportunity when a team first forms. Use that time to establish participatory norms. Support the conveners, who contribute to psychological safety as the team matures (p. 227).

If you would like to analyze your network, King directs readers to www.assessyournetwork.com.

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