SHE LEADS
With a
STRATEGIC NETWORK

22 visionary women leaders share their journey of building strategic networks with authenticity, a passion for learning and a commitment to creating impact

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Introduction

The Power of Conscious Connections



Bhavna Toor

CEO & Founder, Shenomics

What does it truly mean to build a strategic network? It's not a room full of handshakes. It's not the flurry of exchanged cards or the number of followers you've amassed. Conscious networking is something deeper. It's about showing up with presence, leading with authenticity, and building connections rooted in shared values and trust.

This e-book brings you the stories of 22 remarkable women leaders who've done just that. Across industries and cultures, they've intentionally nurtured relationships that fuel not only their careers, but also their personal growth. These connections weren't accidental - they were built with purpose and clarity.

Each story is a window into the power of authenticity. These women have formed networks of mentors, allies, and peers by showing up as their whole selves, listening deeply, and leading with heart.

As you turn each page, may you feel the strength of their intention and the quiet courage it takes to build meaningful relationships. This book is both a source of inspiration and a guide to leading and connecting more consciously.

Thank you to each woman who contributed her voice. Your stories offer a powerful reminder that success can be built with empathy and purpose.

And a heartfelt thank you to Charu, the curator of this collection. Your thoughtful leadership made this book possible.

Let this not just be a book you read - but a spark you carry forward. Because every powerful network begins with a conscious choice.

With gratitude,

Bhavna

CHAPTER 01

Vasuta Agarwal



Chief Business Officer, InMobi

Vasuta grew up in a joint family in her early years with her parents being professors and the family having a business background. This diversity helped her learn the importance of relationships and navigating diverse perspectives early on. After completing her engineering degree at Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), Pilani and her Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Bangalore, her career has been influenced by her ability to build lasting networks. Currently, Vasuta is the Chief Business Officer at InMobi, overseeing critical areas such as revenue growth, product innovation, go-to-market strategies, and operations. Her industry influence is widely recognized, with features in IMPACT's 50 Most Influential Women since 2018, the Economic Times' 40 under Forty List for 2021, and Campaign Asia's 40 under 40 Class of 2021. She also serves as an independent director and board member for Kaya Ltd. Vasuta believes that strategic networks are essential not only for navigating present challenges but also for shaping the future, providing crucial insights and aiding decision-making.

Even though I'm an only child, I grew up in a joint family surrounded by aunts, uncles, and cousins. This extended family created a strong support system for my parents— both professors, my father in statistics and my mother in zoology. The vibrant and dynamic environment, filled with diverse personalities and perspectives, shaped my upbringing. On

my dad's side, we also have a business background, so I grew up influenced by both the academic and business worlds.

I received an abundance of love and support from everyone during my childhood. This sense of belonging and the strong network of family connections has significantly shaped the person, I am today. Early on, I understood the importance of relationships and how to navigate different people and perspectives. In sixth grade, I spent a year in Canada, where my father had moved to pursue higher studies. Leaving our traditional joint family for the first time opened up my worldview. When we returned, we transitioned to a nuclear family, and by then I had developed a stronger sense of self. My friendships deepened, both at school and in the neighbourhood, creating a close-knit group from seventh to twelfth grade. Reflecting on my life, I now see how important that breakaway was.

Growing up in a large family circle felt normal and comforting for the longest time, but that year abroad and the shift to a nuclear family pushed me to look outward.

I went on to pursue engineering at BITS, Pilani. At BITS there was a huge diversity of students from across the country. At that age I naturally created my networks with those who shared similar interests or background, spoke the same language, or had common life-experiences.

I also became involved in the Hindi theatre club, which allowed me to work closely with diverse groups, including seniors. The bonds formed during those times, built on working together informally and without any quid pro quo, remain strong even after 20 years. In fact, it's also where I met my husband.

After Pilani, I took my first job as a chip design engineer at Intel in Bangalore. I worked there for two years before deciding to pursue my MBA at IIM Bangalore. Networking during my MBA was different from my engineering days. Many of my peers had work experience, and most of us had clear goals and expectations from the MBA.

At first, I was nervous about whether I would form any strong connections or meaningful networks. But I did! The shared experience of being in such a high-pressure environment brought us together. The

relationships I built during my MBA have lasted 15 years. After completing my MBA, I joined McKinsey in India. McKinsey allowed me to broaden my network with a group of exceptionally talented individuals.

Through the McKinsey alumni network I have been able to connect with so many who have gone on to become entrepreneurs or hold senior leadership positions. It has also been incredible to witness their journeys. One of the best things about this network is how responsive and willing to help they are, even if they don't know you personally.

It was through my MBA network that I was referred to the founders at InMobi, and now I've been here for 12 years. When I sought the next step in my career, my network opened the door to this incredible opportunity.

> **A strategic network not only guides you through your current chapter but also supports your future, providing valuable information and aiding decision-making.**

Despite being a natural introvert, I learned to overcome my discomfort with networking. One of the biggest turning points for me, in terms of networking, came in 2016. At that time, I transitioned to a market-facing role at InMobi as the India market GM. This new role required me to step into the market, represent the company, and be the face for our customers. I needed to do business development, media interactions and speak at events. I was working alongside the sales team, who had expectations that I would come in with strong connections. But that wasn't the case, and it really pushed me out of my comfort zone. The first year and a half was incredibly challenging. Slowly, I began to figure out how to build those connections in a way that suited me. I spent a lot of time attending client meetings with the sales team, building connections top down with key clients and leveraging my strengths of knowing the product and organisational dynamics well.

It was all about breaking through that mental barrier I had built, telling myself, "I can do this." I'm grateful that I was able to do so, because it completely changed the trajectory of my career. Gaining confidence in my industry network enabled me to step into a larger role covering the

entire Asia Pacific region at InMobi. It is also through my networks beyond work, that I have gotten the opportunity to serve as a Director on the board of other companies.

During my MBA, I remember everyone talking about how important networking was, and I couldn't entirely relate to it back then. Over time, as I watched my career and learning evolve through the people I knew, the significance of building and nurturing connections became increasingly clear to me.

Another effective way to strategically build your network is to join forums and groups of your interest or expertise. For example, I was part of the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), and also the Mobile Marketing Association board for 2- 3 years. While I couldn't always be actively involved in everything, just making time to be a part of these forums allowed me to stay informed and connected. If you're not there, you won't even know what's going on. Being part of external forums helps me look beyond my current role and stay updated on industry trends.

For me, it's always been about having a learning mindset and staying open to new opportunities to challenge yourself.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Build and nurture

Building a network is about making a conscious effort to make connections and nurturing them by being interested in other's lives. One must also be responsive when the need arises. When you do, it transforms from just a group of acquaintances into something much more meaningful and impactful.

2. Leverage your network without hesitation

Reach out for career advice, personal guidance, or whatever you need, confidently and without doubt. Push past any uncertainty about whether they'll respond or have time. If you don't, you'll miss out on fully utilising the value of the network you've worked hard to build.

3. Build networks to boost your visibility

Make networking a priority to ensure people know who you are and what you offer. This visibility opens doors to new opportunities to learn and grow and recognition within your organisation and industry.

CHAPTER 02

Mukta Arya



Managing Director, Chief Human Resources Officer (APAC), Societe Generale

Mukta began her career with Essar Group in Mumbai and has worked as a Human Resources (HR) professional with Tata TD Waterhouse Securities, Tata TDW Asset Management, and Ogilvy & Mather. She later joined Société Générale, where she has been for over 18 years in India, Singapore and Hong Kong She is an Associate Certified Coach (ACC) accredited by the International Coaching Federation and a published author of four books, including Wanton Thoughts, 3:15 PM - Musings in Hong Kong, Whimsica l Times, and Criss Cross - A Medley of Thoughts and has been a contributor of a chapter to My Voice-Volume 7. Mukta has received several accolades for her organisation such as Best Employer in Hong Kong 2024, HR Distinction Awards 2024, Most Caring Organisation 2024 and others over the years. Throughout her career, she has intentionally built networks for personal and professional growth, believing that a meaningful, mutually rewarding networks requires genuine engagement with no hidden agendas.

I grew up in a traditional Indian household where education and professional success were highly valued. My mother is a general physician (retired), and my father worked as an engineer with a career in Indian government organisations. As a child, I wanted to follow my mother's footsteps and become a doctor. This ambition fit me well at the time, as I behaved like a complete introvert and a dedicated bookworm. My sister, one and a half years older, was the outgoing and adventurous

one. I spent my childhood either following her or playing pretend games of being a doctor. Life, however, has a way of reshaping dreams. After several attempts, I was unable to gain admission to medical school and eventually pursued a degree in life sciences and even joined a masters programme in Biotechnology at Mumbai University.

This detour was a turning point in my journey. College was a revelation. The open environment, cultural festivals and extracurricular activities, these became my initiation into a world of possibilities beyond textbooks and exams. For the first time, I found joy in the company of others.

I discovered a more extroverted side of myself. I also came to appreciate the diversity of thoughts and experiences, realising how varied beliefs and values could be, even in a city like Mumbai. My mind opened to the fact that there was a world beyond my protected life, which I was excited to explore.

The shift in my personality led me to drop my masters in Biotechnology after one year to pursue a Master of Business Administration (MBA), which was called Master in Management Studies at Chetana College, Mumbai, where I found myself interested in HR. I was captivated by organisational psychology to the broader principles of HR. I eventually specialised in the field and, in 1997, landed my first HR job with Essar. The unpredictable nature and boundless opportunities for learning in HR have fuelled my journey, leading to diverse roles at organisations like the Tatas, Ogilvy & Mather, and Société Générale.

In college, networking was a simple pleasure of getting to know people with diverse backgrounds. However, as I entered the workforce, I realised that making human connections was not only a personal preference but a professional necessity. My first conscious experience of networking happened in 1997 when I joined an HR network. In those days, we met at sessions and conferences, where we exchanged ideas and shared learnings. The internet was still in its infancy, but I instinctively knew that staying connected with these people would enrich my life. I began creating a daily newsletter, collating HR news from various newspapers and sent it out to a curated email list to stay in touch with my HR connections.

Over time, I learned that networking requires effort, patience, and a genuine interest in others. One of my earliest mentors, Shyam Mohan, whom I reported to in Essar, taught me the value of maintaining relationships. He was remarkable at staying in touch with people, including former employees. Even after leaving Essar, he would send me New Year messages or notes on LinkedIn. It wasn't transactional, which made it special. I adopted this approach, staying connected with colleagues, mentors, and peers without hidden agendas.

> **Strategic networking begins with a sincere interest in others. This authenticity fosters the exchange of ideas, sharing of knowledge, and readiness to lend a hand when necessary.**

Building a truly meaningful and mutually rewarding network requires a genuine engagement with others, with no hidden agendas.

I view networking as layers. At the centre are close friends that I'm in regular contact with.

Then, there are business associates across Singapore, Hong Kong, India and in many other countries whom I connect with online and meet in person when possible. I also keep in touch with some of my past managers, who have become my mentors and offer guidance when needed. Networking requires effort and your personal time. It is best to be mindful and take a balanced approach to networking, to keep up the energy and enthusiasm.

When I first started, networking was intimidating. Sending emails and introducing myself at conferences felt daunting, but I persevered. I learned to be okay with rejection. If, someone didn't respond, I'd move on to the next person. I also conquered my fear of public speaking by enrolling in a six-week course, personally, knowing it would improve my communication skills. Over time, I shed my fear and shyness.

My time at Ogilvy taught me the importance of personal branding. To grow, you need to invest in yourself. Since then, I've made it a point to enrol in at least one professional development program each year. I completed my ACC certification and am now pursuing my Professional Certified Coach (PCC) qualification. I like to take charge of my growth

because I know myself best and what will make me happy When I moved from Essar to Tata's, it was due to my role model Amar Sinhji, who has been my guide, sponsor and mentor since my stint in HR. He was the one who asked if I would like to move to the joint venture of Tata group with TD Waterhouse. Opportunities like these don't come from cold applications, they come from a strong and trusted network.

Networking is not just about finding the next job; it's about aligning with people whose values resonate with yours. And mine resonated with Amar's in terms of ethics and professionalism and being fair, whatever be the circumstances. This is the true power of networking and connections, which can shape your career and other areas of life.

Networking has also given me mentors who shaped my understanding of ethics, leadership, and integrity. These lessons have stayed with me throughout my career. Today, I'm active on LinkedIn, attend industry events, and speak at conferences. These platforms have not only strengthened my personal brand but also led to recognition. For women, especially, visibility is crucial. Many hesitate to step into the spotlight, doubting their worth or worrying about perceptions from peers and seniors at work. A strong network is essential for gaining visibility, which unlocks opportunities that might otherwise stay out of reach.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Be bold

Stop worrying about what others think and take action. Be fearless in making connections and sharing your skills. People need to know what you bring to the table—if they aren't aware of your capabilities, they can't leverage them. Speak confidently about your achievements because if you don't, no one else will.

2. Be consistent

Set aside time to build your network, even when life gets busy. Consistently engage on platforms like LinkedIn, through emails, calls, and in-person when possible as it could lead to valuable opportunities.

3. Be genuine

Strategic networking, when done right, isn't transactional. Don't just connect when you need something, nurture relationships consistently and sincerely. Genuine connections create networks that are lasting, supportive, and mutually rewarding for your career and beyond.

CHAPTER 03

Neha Bagaria

Founder & CEO, HerKey



Neha Bagaria is an inspiring entrepreneur redefining online networking and expanding opportunities for women in today's world. She took a 3.6 year career break to raise her children. This experience revealed the challenges women face when re-entering the workforce, inspiring her to launch JobsForHer on International Women's Day, 2015. Initially focused on helping women restart their careers after a break, JobsForHer evolved in 2019 into HerKey - a platform that is focused on networking and skilling opportunities for women at all stages of their professional journey. Neha believes that strategic networking involves building relationships across personal, social, and professional contexts. According to her women are natural networkers, inherently skilled at forming genuine connections. Neha has graduated from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, with an honours and triple majors in Finance, Marketing and Management Information Systems (MIS).

Growing up in a close-knit Marwari joint family in Mumbai, my first and most profound network was my family. My father had five siblings, and my mother had four, and they shared an extraordinary bond that naturally extended to us cousins. Every birthday, festival, or milestone became an opportunity to celebrate together, teaching me the art of relationship-building and the value of appreciating differences in others.

Coming from a business community, my father thrived on meeting people and attending social gatherings. Often, I was brought along, tagging behind. At the time, I thought little of it, but looking back I realise how much I learned about networking.

I learnt how to engage with people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, constantly drawing inspiration from their stories. After my 10th grade I went to Jai Hind college in Mumbai to do my junior college. This was a very difficult thing to do as my three best friends did not accompany me. Despite the change, I built deep and meaningful friendships during this time, many of which remain strong even today. Then came the big leap, moving to the U.S. to attend Wharton School for my undergraduate degree in finance and marketing.

At Wharton, I encountered a melting pot of cultures. My peers came from places like Colombia, Greece, Hong Kong, and Papua New Guinea, each bringing unique perspectives shaped by their upbringing. Those four years turned out to be the most transformative of my life. I recall one particular conversation where my friends and I were discussing our future plans after graduation. I casually said that I would work if my future mother-in-law allowed me to. Their reaction was one of absolute shock.

Although my parents had never explicitly said such things to me, I had grown up observing that many women in my community were not allowed to work after marriage. I had internalised this as the norm. Their reaction made me question why it was that way. My time with my peer network then, combined with an American education, encouraged me to challenge the assumptions I had taken for granted and inspired me to always ask, "Why?"

After graduation, I discovered my passion for social entrepreneurship. At 21, I founded Paragon, a company focused on introducing the Advanced Placement (AP) program in India, enabling Indian students to transfer credits seamlessly to American universities.

I got married in my early 20s and moved to Bangalore. I joined my husband’s family business, which specialises in pharmaceutical manufacturing, and worked there for five years. Then, as I like to say,

“a baby gave birth to a mother,” and I took a complete career break to take care of my child. While I was a full-time mother caring for my two kids, my network naturally evolved to include ‘mommy groups.’ These groups became my primary support system and comfort zone, as they truly understood and stood by me during that phase of life and continue to do so even now.

However, a few of my older friends urged me to step out of the motherhood bubble and re-enter the workforce. These were the people in my network who truly understood my potential and recognised how much I thrived on the stimulation and fulfilment that work brought me.

Close connects often notice what you’re blind to because you’re too consumed by your current situation. That’s exactly what my friends did for me. They reminded me of who I am and helped me see the bigger picture.

Their guidance helped me realise that being a good mother didn’t mean sacrificing my career. In fact, the best gift I could give my children was a happy and fulfilled parent. This realisation led me back to the family business, where I took on the marketing function.

This was the time I began questioning why women didn’t rejoin the workforce after a career break. The more I spoke to women, the more I understood the deeply rooted challenges they face when trying to restart their careers. It became evident that I wanted to do something to help women return to work. This led to the launch of JobsForHer in March 2015, focusing exclusively on women who had taken a career break and helping them re-enter the workforce.

The ‘why’ behind the initiative was clear to me from the start, but the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ were aspects I needed to figure out. My husband is a member of the Entrepreneurs' Organisation (EO) and the Young Presidents' Organisation (YPO). As a spouse member, I took the opportunity to connect with as many successful businesspeople as I could to seek their guidance. One of them advised me to envision where I wanted to take JobsForHer in five years and then work backwards to achieve those goals. To my delight, many of the goals from that five-year plan were accomplished within the very first year.

When I started JobsForHer, I was very clear when approaching organisations that our objective was not only a social cause. We were tapping into a highly skilled talent pool of women who were qualified, experienced, loyal, and ready to rejoin the workforce almost immediately.

> **Strategic networking involves building relationships across personal, social, and professional contexts. Women are natural networkers, inherently skilled at forming genuine connections based on mutual interest and value.**

Whether it's with family, friends, their husband's family, children's school circles, or former colleagues, women have an innate ability to maintain these relationships.

Over time, we recognised the need to provide women with more opportunities to network effectively. Through HerKey, our focus shifted to ensuring that women actively leverage the networks available on the online platform with clear purpose and intent, creating meaningful opportunities for their growth.

When we first launched as JobsForHer, the initial 20 companies on the platform were drawn entirely from my personal network. Today, as we have evolved into HerKey, our platform proudly connects over 20,000 organisations with nearly 5 million community members.

Online networking has been a game-changer for women. After their workday, many women rush home to manage family, dinner, and other responsibilities. Networking events often feel out of reach. This is where online platforms have made all the difference. Once the house is quiet and responsibilities are done for the day, women can use online platforms to build their networks at their convenience.

Our community members can go on the HerKey platform everyday and join the various sessions that are organised on diverse topics. Infact, any member can create their own session of interest and expertise. We also have dedicated online networking opportunities.

It is important to remember that there is an overwhelming amount of information and activity online and in the physical world. It's crucial to

identify the one or two things that truly matter to you. You don’t need to be everywhere or try to be everything to everyone. Instead, strive to be something meaningful to a specific group of people.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Create different circles in your network

Be clear about who belongs to your inner close circle. At the same time, understand the importance of having connections in other circles with people you can learn from, have fun with, or seek personal or professional advice from. It is good to compartmentalise your network. This approach helps maintain a balance as we all have limited time and energy.

2. Find common topics or points for connection

Networking often starts with shared interests, and this is a great way to do it. For example, be part of specific WhatsApp groups tailored to your interests. Having a like-minded community in a particular area of interest is the foundation for building powerful and supportive networks.

3. Be genuine and confident to reach out

It is important to be genuine in your interactions. There is no need to pretend to be someone you’re not or to act differently in an attempt to impress others. Authenticity not only fosters trust but also gives you the confidence to reach out to others without fear or hesitation. It also helps you accept a "no" gracefully, without taking it as a personal rejection.

CHAPTER 04

Aabha Bakaya



Founder & CEO, Ladies Who Lead (LWL)

Aabha is a veteran journalist with 20+ years of experience and visionary as she launched Ladies Who Lead (LWL) in 2021. Through LWL, Aabha envisions a diverse and inclusive community of experienced and emerging women leaders working together to accelerate meaningful change and create an equitable future for women in the workforce. Aabha's journalism career includes distinguished roles as a Senior Financial News Editor and Lead Anchor with some of the most reputed media networks, such as the India Today Group, NDTV Profit, ET NOW, and Bloomberg TV India. She has earned accolades for her contributions, including the prestigious Business Today award for Best Business News Anchor. Aabha believes in the power of cultivating a diverse and intentional network that includes peers, advisors, sponsors, and industry insiders and outsiders. She emphasises the importance of mapping out one's goals and identifying the right people and steps to achieve them. LWL reflects this philosophy by providing a holistic experience where women can learn, connect, and collaborate in a safe and premium environment.

I have attended 13 different schools as my father worked in hospitality, and I grew up traveling all around the world. My basic makeup comes from this experience, as it helped me become comfortable with different cultures, adapt to new environments, and connect with people from diverse nationalities. From a very early age, I learned that every individual has a unique perspective.

I have always been naturally curious and often question what drives people. For instance, if a new artist suddenly becomes famous, I find myself wondering, “What made this work?” Was it timing, cultural shifts, advances in technology, or a change in people’s mindsets? This curiosity about people, trends, and connections shapes how I think and interact with the world.

When I was in seventh grade, I won a national competition in Australia for my story about a baby kangaroo. It was from that moment that I knew I wanted to pursue storytelling and journalism. I completed a media course at the University of New South Wales, Australia, and started working at a very young age.

When I began working in print with Business Today, I was drawn not just to corporate news but also to covering interesting stories and emerging trends.

This was the genesis of my journalism career, which spanned over 20+ years. I’ve had the privilege of working with some of the biggest names in the industry, including CNBC TV18, NDTV, ET Now, and Bloomberg. The media industry is both small and dynamic, with people often moving between organisations. I was part of the founding team at NDTV and later worked with ET Now under the Times Group, which gave me a deep understanding of the Indian media.

My time at Bloomberg provided invaluable international exposure. Along the way, I also explored content and formats focused on startups, lifestyle, and luxury.

The media industry at its core is about people, and the connections you build while sharing their stories with the world. As a journalist you have to keep building a network and putting yourself out there. You need to meet as many people as you can, conduct numerous interviews, and attend several events. The nature of my job required me to engage with a wide range of people, even on days when I wasn’t at my best. Live news and events kept me interacting with others constantly.

While building these connections, it was equally important to maintain them and required intentional effort. Back then, without social media or WhatsApp, staying in touch meant dropping a note when relevant,

ensuring they had my contact details, and making myself visible through timely interviews or being at events. It's also important to acknowledge that you can't please everyone. Personally, I've encountered very few difficult individuals, likely because I consciously avoid letting such people into my space if they don't align with my values.

> **Building a strategic network begins with mapping out where you want to be and carefully identifying the steps and people who can help you get there. Over time, it's important to cultivate a diverse network that includes peers, advisors, sponsors, and both industry insiders and outsiders.**

Sponsors are particularly critical as they advocate for you, provide career opportunities, and help connect you with others when needed.

Many opportunities in my career as a journalist have come through my network, starting with a former colleague who referred me to a role and a peer who later became a senior editor and brought me onto his team. Building such relationships doesn't happen overnight. It's a long-term journey that requires years of effort, with cycles of renewal and growth.

This is especially relevant today, as people have little patience for unsolicited or superficial requests. It's not about a lack of kindness or generosity, but often others have practical limitations. People will usually offer their time and support for genuine connections. It's a fine balance. I enjoy aligning on shared goals, ideas, and the exchange of knowledge with individuals in my network.

Professional networks and social circles are distinct, and it's important to avoid mixing the two. That said, professional networks don't have to be boring or purely transactional.

I enjoy catching up with colleagues and clients over casual coffees or informal lunches. It's in these moments that I see the human side of people, which fosters greater understanding and builds stronger relationships.

For example, imagine being in a board meeting where someone is being aggressive. Taking the time to understand their perspective and passion for an issue equips you to negotiate more effectively. Without that understanding, their aggression might trigger defensiveness, escalating

the situation. Knowledge, authenticity, and empathy are powerful tools in fostering relationships.

At some point, I realised I wanted to create and work with content that any aspiring individual would look for in their life. I wanted to blend inspiration, learning and insights that impact daily life, across a wide audience. Also, many of the women I met through my work, expressed a desire for a space where they could come together, collaborate, and engage with each other meaningfully. They wanted to meet other women to build connections, have intellectually stimulating conversations and on some level just unwind. With my background, organising an event like this was straightforward, so I curated a networking event that turned out to be highly successful.

In 2021, some friends and well-wishers encouraged me to use my capabilities and the goodwill I had built to create something more structured and impactful. This led to the creation of Ladies Who Lead (LWL).

LWL is a leadership platform that empowers working women to amplify their impact, share their success stories, and exchange guiding principles within a dynamic and interactive community. I'm aware that many organisations already work to support and encourage women. Despite the progress, we've only touched the tip of the iceberg.

LWL offers a holistic experience through events and initiatives where members can learn, connect, and collaborate in a safe, premium environment. This broadens their horizons and exposes our women to a range of possibilities. For example, a member might find a mentor outside their field who offers valuable insights based on shared life experiences.

We bring together individuals at various stages of growth, creating opportunities to learn not just from peers but also from younger members. Growth and learning can come from anyone in the community. LWL has dedicated community managers who help members connect with the right people, especially if they have specific resources or asks in mind.

We organise smaller, intimate events and also larger mixers, which truly showcase the power of networking. At these events members have even rediscovered a connect from different phases of their lives.

We are a members club for women professionals and open to all, including those who have a career or are aspiring to build one. Today LWL has over 1200+ community members across India from across 50 sectors, giving them access to high quality mentors and leaders from across industries.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Invest in yourself and get ready

Invest in yourself by developing strong communication skills, which is now easier than ever with many resources available online. Stay updated on etiquette and current affairs, and work on learning how to engage in meaningful conversations. Approach networking with a proactive mindset by preparing and presenting your best self, as networking begins with you.

2. Create your strategic network list

Build a qualitative list of people in your network, including sponsors, mentors, peers, and advisors, as each of these play a different role. Your network can go as far back as your school and college, if you have good relationships from that time. Define what you're looking for, such as mentors from your industry or a life mentor for broader guidance. Use this list to determine who you can approach from your existing network and where you need to build new connections to meet your goals.

3. Put yourself out there

By actively engaging with others and building connections, you will naturally discover individuals through this process who align with your goals and values. This not only creates opportunities for your own growth but also allows you to support others when needed. In this context, maintaining an online presence enhances your visibility and helps you connect with more people. However, consider your online efforts as a complement to real-world interactions in fostering meaningful connections.

CHAPTER 05



Shukla Bose

Founder, CEO, Parikrma Humanity Foundation

Shukla's network is a natural extension of her work, built on the value she provides and the people who resonate with her mission. At the peak of her career as Managing Director at RCI (Resort Condominiums International), she made a bold decision in 2003 to leave the corporate world and found Parikrma Humanity Foundation, a non-profit organisation dedicated to providing free, high-quality education to children from underprivileged backgrounds. For Shukla, building a network for Parikrma has always been about creating a strong community. The foundation thrives thanks to its dedicated teachers, students, slum dwellers, sponsors, and volunteers. The core strategy has been to foster trust and a sense of belonging, ensuring that everyone involved feels like an integral part of Parikrma's journey. Shukla has also played a key role in shaping and influencing education policies at both the state and national levels, serving on the Karnataka Knowledge Commission, Karnataka State Confederation of Indian Industries (CII), the CII Education Committee.

My first lessons in honesty and integrity trace back to when I was a little girl. My father, despite having access to seven government vehicles through his job, made me walk six kilometers each way to school through the hilly areas of Darjeeling. He couldn't afford the high-end schools I attended, which were meant for the wealthy, but I was a good student and earned scholarships that covered my fees.

Around the age of 15, I made the bold decision to move to Kolkata, the so-called "sinful city," and joined the prestigious Loreto College. To balance my life, I began volunteering with Mother Teresa's organisation, a commitment I held for seven years. This experience was deeply grounding.

As a college student, I'm grateful for the time I spent working closely with Mother Teresa, volunteering twice a week. She wasn't a Nobel Prize winner or an international celebrity back then, but her charisma and selflessness were unmatched. After completing my master's degree, I got married, continued to work, and joined the leisure industry with the Oberoi Group of Hotels.

I advanced from regional roles to international positions, eventually becoming Managing Director for RCI (Resort Condominiums International) from 1990 to 2001, overseeing business across India, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, China, and the Pacific Rim. At that time, there weren't many women CEOs, which brought its own excitement and highs.

Over the years, I've built many connections across industries and forums, each based on strong, trusting relationships. I've always prioritised creating genuine connections, grounded in trust and mutual support. I know these are the people who will stand by me, just as I trust them wholeheartedly. These are the kinds of connections that don't require constant contact; yet whenever we reconnect, there's an immediate sense of comfort and trust.

> **If we consider my approach to building a network, I believe the answer lies in how my connections have naturally evolved from the work I do, the value I offer, and the people who resonate with it. At its core, my network is a circle of those who truly believe in me.**

I've had the honour of serving on prestigious boards and panels, including NCERT's National Focus Group: School Governance & Leadership, a high-level advisory body to the Prime Minister dedicated to transforming India into a knowledge-driven society. This role, along

with the relationships I developed through it, enabled me to contribute to meaningful policy changes, particularly in national education.

In 2003, I was at the peak of my career. At RCI, which had 83 international offices, India was one of the most promising locations, known for delivering exceptional results. People saw me as an effective and competent leader, and I was respected in both the organisation and the industry. That sense of respect was most valuable to me. It was then that I decided enough was enough, and I wanted to use my experience to empower others. My experience of working with Mother Teresa in the slums paid off, and I started Parikrma Humanity Foundation with the mission to unleash the potential of underserved children, enabling them to live their lives on equal terms and become valuable contributing members of society. Today, there are 1,800 children (across 4 K-10 schools and 1 Junior College) coming from 99 slums and four orphanages in Bangalore. These children don't just receive free education, but also high-quality CBSE English-medium learning modules, along with three meals a day and health check-ups.

For Parikrma, building a network has always been about fostering a true community. We have committed teachers, children, slum-dwellers, sponsors, and volunteers and everything that makes the organisation thrive. Our core strategy has been to network in a way that fosters trust, where people are invested in our mission and feel they're part of our journey.

One of the most important aspects of Parikrma is our connection with the slum dwellers. Whenever they face an issue or a problem, they know that Parikrma is where they can turn for support. They trust us to offer advice with no hidden agenda and only with their best interests at heart. Seventy percent of my teachers have been with Parikrma for more than 12 to 15 years. I started Parikrma in 2003 with 11 staff members, and 10 of those are still with me. I'm incredibly proud of this.

If you were to ask me what my success is, I'd say that it's exactly this. It means I've been able to give people a sense of well-being and purpose. Initially, it was loyalty to me, of course. They looked up to me as a leader, recognising that if I set my mind to something, I would make it happen. Remember, they joined when there was no Parikrma

Foundation—only an idea. These teachers believed in me, and more importantly, they believed in the idea itself. The goal has always been to create a community of believers who think that change is possible, that transformation can happen, and that we have the power to make it a reality.

Today, this community continues to grow, which is crucial for Parikrma's continuity. I'm proud to say that 33 students who graduated from Parikrma have returned as teachers after pursuing careers as lawyers, dentists, and other professions. In our community, they find the freedom and safety to grow and make a real impact. Parikrma represents a network of goodwill, fostered by everyone in the community. For instance, during the COVID-19 crisis, when many of our children and their families, who rely on daily wage work, were left without food, our sponsors stepped forward with extra funds. Our teachers and volunteers came together, packing and distributing food boxes while adhering to social distancing protocols. This was truly a time when the community supported and stood by each other. Right from the start, I built a system at Parikrma rooted in transparency, relying on facts and authentic data. For example, in the early days, I would ask people for Rs 18,500 to sponsor a child at Parikrma, covering their books, materials, three meals, and uniforms. However, because some items like uniforms and breakfast were separately sponsored, we didn't end up spending the full Rs 18,500 per child.

So, I either returned the excess funds or wrote to the sponsors, saying, "I'm happy to inform you that we didn't need the full amount. Would you like me to return the extra funds, or may I keep it in our corpus for the next year?" People were amazed, as they had never received such a message from any organisation before. But to me, this approach was essential, as transparency and trust are the cornerstones of everything we do at Parikrma.

I have built long-lasting connections over the years through these small but meaningful gestures. Some of my corporate sponsors have supported us for 19 years now, and I'm immensely grateful for those longstanding partnerships. Of course, there are moments of uncertainty when there is

a change in leadership or a shift in company priorities, but these relationships have stood the test of time.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Network with purpose and clarity

It's crucial to know exactly who you are and why you're doing this while building your network. Focus on defining goals that align with your values and vision, and then build connections that will support you in achieving your objective.

2. Keep it simple

One of the greatest lessons I learned from Mother Teresa was the power of simplicity. You don't need to be clever or impressive, you just need to keep yourself and things genuine and straightforward.

3. Be compassionate

While building relationships and a community for a purpose, one has to be compassionate along with being passionate. Passion alone will not take you far. But when you are caring you can take people along with you which is what is required.

CHAPTER 06

Shaili Chopra



Founder, SheThePeople & Gytree

Shaili Chopra is a revolutionary leader dedicated to amplifying women's voices and fostering authentic connections. Growing up in a military household, she attended 17 schools in 12 years, gaining resilience, adaptability, and a deep understanding of change at a very young age. In 2015, she founded SheThePeople to challenge the media's limited portrayal of women. Today, it's a thriving digital platform with a reach of 400 million, built on the foundation of creating a supportive sisterhood. She is now spearheading a new initiative focused on women's health called Gytree. It is India's first nutrition supplements and programs platform helping Indian women take charge of their daily health and beat chronic lifestyle diseases from obesity, diabetes, muscle loss, irregular periods and more. An award-winning journalist turned entrepreneur, Shaili is an Aspen Fellow and a recipient of India's prestigious Ram Nath Goenka Award for Journalism. She is also the author of five books, cementing her impact across media, business, and advocacy.

Growing up in a military household, change was our only constant. I attended 17 schools over 12 years. Every move taught me resilience, adaptability, and the confidence to step into unfamiliar spaces, meet new people, and embrace fresh experiences. The earliest networks I built were within my family, followed by our neighbours and friends.

We were two sisters in a home where "no" wasn't a word we readily accepted. Boundaries were something we learned to set for ourselves early in life. Living among neighbours from across India brought another layer of richness to my upbringing. Each family shared or represented a slice of their culture, which shaped my perspective. The Gujarati families, for instance, showed me the strength of their familial bonds and the empowerment they offered their daughters, a freedom that felt effortless yet deeply impactful. These experiences helped me build the courage to create my own identity.

Military life also taught me to stand firm. It wasn't just about discipline; it was about learning to face bullies, navigate power dynamics, and push back against those who claimed more space than they deserved.

When it was time to choose a college, I resisted the expected path. Convent schools and women's colleges are celebrated for their strong sisterhoods, but I wanted something different. I sought a co-ed environment that would broaden my horizons and expose me to diverse perspectives I wouldn't encounter in a single-gender space. That decision led me to Sri Venkateswara College at Delhi University, a place filled with academically brilliant and well-rounded individuals. It wasn't just the classroom environment that helped me grow; it was everything that came with it.

By the age of 19, I was juggling studies and work. I took on a variety of jobs from building websites, writing code, and helping a company establish their back-office operations in India. When I look back at a generation of people who have truly made it big, one thing stands out is that they weren't confined by a single path. They embraced all kinds of work, throwing themselves into whatever opportunity came their way. One of my most unconventional jobs I have done was selling a body spray outside a busy store. Over ten hectic days, I learned about consumer behaviour, human interaction, and the subtle art of persuasion. What seemed like a simple job turned into an unexpected masterclass for me.

To me, networking works in much the same way. It's not a straight path but an intricate web, like an octopus, its tentacles reaching in every direction. Each connection is a touchpoint that opens doors to new

opportunities. And over time, these touchpoints form the foundation of a network.

Take the woman who gave me my first job in college. She believed in me when I didn't fully believe in myself. Years later, she became an investor in my company. That's the thing about networks, they have a way of coming full circle, often in ways you don't expect.

I've been fortunate to have mentors who saw potential in me before I saw it in myself. My first job at CNBC is a perfect example. The editor who hired me told me, "I know what you're capable of, and I need you on air." At the time, I didn't have half the confidence he had in me. Then there was my dean from the National College of Journalism in Chennai. He pushed me to move to New Delhi, convinced that I needed to build my career at the headquarters of media organisations. That one decision profoundly shaped my trajectory.

When seeking mentorship or a sponsor, there are three things to keep in mind. First, show your mentor that you're serious and authentic. Second, explain why you think they are the right person to guide you. Third, be clear about how you'll apply what you learn. These principles apply whether you're seeking guidance from senior leaders, peers, or external mentors. Respect and effort always determine what you gain.

> **I would consider strategic networking to be more about building authentic connections. It's a long, deliberate process that demands both self-awareness and adaptability. You have to bring your best self forward while carefully navigating the nature of the people you engage with.**

Networking isn't about following a rigid formula. It's about finding your own way. I'm part of alumni networks at Stanford, Vital Voices, and the Aspen Institute, but I don't spend my days emailing hundreds of people about who I am. Instead, I engage deeply when it matters, focusing on conversations relevant to my work, my country, or larger ideas. Authenticity stands out in today's world, saturated with social media noise and surface-level connections.

Not every network will resonate, and that's okay. I've learned to prioritise the ones that truly matter and those are spaces where I can

learn, grow, and contribute. Humans gravitate toward connections that inspire them or make them feel supported. I'm no different. If I believe a meeting holds value, I'll make the effort to show up, even if it takes hours in traffic.

Online networks have their place, but their depth depends on the value of the people within them. I have one close-knit online group where the trust we share allows for raw and challenging conversations. But even with them, I know these connections wouldn't last without meeting in person a few times a year. There's something irreplaceable about sharing physical space, energy, and humanity. Online networks are surely convenient, but for me the in-person interactions will always matter more than screens.

In 2015, I founded SheThePeople, driven by a simple question: Why does the media focus on women only in stories about violence or assault? I wanted to change that narrative. In the early years, we were a small team, just finding our footing. Today, we've grown into a community of 10 million, with 100 million monthly viewers. Real impact comes from sharing everyday struggles, not just celebrating the achievements of a few icons. When women talk openly about their challenges be it post-pregnancy weight, shattered confidence, or health issues they create a ripple effect. Someone else hears them and thinks, I'm not alone. The essence of SheThePeople lies in creating a sisterhood that gives every woman a network where inspiration and connection thrive.

What also stands out to me in our SheThePeople community are the male allies in our network, people who understand the need for change and choose to support it. They may not always roll up their sleeves, but their backing fuels the fight for gender equity.

I have also come to realise how much networking can push for change in underserved spaces. For me, every conversation about women's health is, in essence, a networking conversation. Networking isn't just about profit margins or finding your next big connection. It's about building relationships that inspire action, like how prioritising wellness can make someone a powerhouse. When women talk about shared struggles they create a sisterhood. And that to me is simply another term for authentic networking.

The essence of networking lies in shared experiences. It's not about strategy; it's about humanity, learning, connecting, and growing in ways that leave a lasting impact.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Be authentic in your intent

Networking thrives on authenticity and being genuine about the intent to contribute to others, as much as it is about receiving support.

2. Be prepared

Challenges are inevitable, even in networking. Preparation helps you minimise these obstacles and make the most of every opportunity. The reality is that your substance and preparation will always carry more weight than your style.

3. Be Positive

Building a network takes time and effort. If things don't go as planned, don't give up. Show up consistently, and over time, your network will grow in meaningful ways.

CHAPTER 07

Priti Rathi Gupta



Founder, Lxme

Priti is the founder of LXME, India's first financial platform for women, empowering them to build financial acumen and invest seamlessly. She also founded Ishka Films, a media production company focused on creating intelligent and thought-provoking urban cinema. Priti's journey has been shaped by her belief in the power of meaningful connections. Inspired by her father's love for people, she sees networking as more than a professional task and more of a personal investment in your own growth. Her greatest lesson has been understanding that the essence of networking lies in giving, helping others, and fostering relationships that matter. As Managing Director of Anand Rathi, one of India's leading financial services firms, Priti brings over 27 years of expertise in capital markets, commodities, and currency sectors.

Networking is a life skill, and one that women must embrace. At its core, life is about building connections. The relationships we create shape so much of who we are and what we achieve.

The mistake many of us make is compartmentalising networking, seeing it solely as a work task to check off the list. But networking isn't just part of your job, it's deeply personal. It's an investment in yourself, your growth, and the life you want to build. This truth has become clearer to me over my life journey.

I was born in Jodhpur but grew up across five different cities because of my father's job. Every three or four years, we relocated. As a child, this meant stepping into new environments, making friends, learning new languages, and finding connections from scratch.

By the time we settled in Mumbai, I had unknowingly developed the ability to strike up conversations, find common ground, and build relationships wherever I went. Those early experiences laid the foundation for my understanding of networking.

My college years were far from conventional. Mornings were spent in class, and afternoons at my father's office, where he insisted I learn about personal finance and investment portfolios. Looking back, I'm incredibly grateful for that experience. Internships weren't common back then, and it was even rarer for girls to learn about investing.

Those early lessons in finance gave me skills that proved invaluable as I moved forward. At 19, I got married and stepped into a conservative family where family responsibilities came first.

My parents subtly reinforced these expectations, prioritising tradition over career aspirations. By 21, I was a mother. The push-and-pull between tradition and ambition became my reality.

I mustered the courage to get back to work when my husband set up his brokerage firm at the National Stock Exchange (NSE). Later, my father, who had taken membership with the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE), proposed that we join forces. Thirty years ago, my father, my husband, and I came together to build Anand Rathi Financial Services, a true family network working towards a shared vision.

By 2003, our stockbroking business had matured significantly. With a team of over a hundred MBAs and chartered accountants, I often felt the need to study further.

I enrolled in an executive program at S P Jain Institute, Mumbai. It was here that the true power of education and networking really dawned on me.

Growing up, I inherited a deep love for meeting people from my father. I've always gone out of my way to connect with others. I'm also driven by a genuine curiosity about people and an insatiable thirst for learning.

In 2017, I decided to return to studying once again and joined the Owner President Management Program at Harvard Business School (HBS). This became a life-changing opportunity to build connections and broaden my horizons.

Returning to studying in my forties was overwhelming. At Harvard, it felt even more so. I remember walking into the reception lunch, scanning the room. Most attendees were men, as expected. But what stood out was the diversity, nearly 35 nationalities represented, each with unique perspectives.

Initially, I felt intimidated. But that feeling didn't last long. The diversity of thought and experience in the room changed me. It gave me a global perspective and, more importantly, an extraordinary network. Even today, that network remains one of my strongest communities. Whether I need personal advice or professional guidance, it's where I turn to.

The average age of individuals in the program was 40 to 45 years. Most were well-established in their careers and lives. This maturity added depth to our connections. Our conversations were layered with years of wisdom and life experience.

It wasn't just about accomplishments; it was about vulnerabilities. People in this network wear their imperfections with ease, making these connections even more meaningful. The idea for LXME, India's first financial platform for women, was born at Harvard Business School.

The platform, aimed at empowering women to build financial acumen and invest seamlessly, had been brewing in my mind. During the program, we were tasked with presenting a novel idea, supported by strategy. It was the perfect opportunity.

I shared the concept with my core working group, a team of eight or nine peers. Their reaction was immediate and enthusiastic. "This is brilliant," they said. "Let's make it our project."

The next pitch was to a class of 160 people of which 30 were women and the rest men. The reactions were strikingly different. The men, curious rather than sceptical, asked, “Why do we need a separate platform for women?” On the other hand, the women were electrified, asking if they could bring LXME to their countries.

This dialogue became the foundation of LXME’s strategy. The input from 160 brilliant minds refined every aspect of the platform, from its value proposition to its narrative and structure. That’s the kind of support of a network that transforms an idea into something extraordinary.

I am also a part of the Young President’s Organisation (YPO). Not long ago, a team member’s father suffered a serious injury while traveling in Portugal. My YPO contact stepped in, arranging hospital care and ensuring his safe return to India.

That experience reaffirmed something I’ve come to deeply believe about networking.

At first, I approached networking as a way to learn and gain insights. Over time, I realised the true essence of networking lies in giving. It’s about showing up and offering help. This shift in perspective has been my greatest lesson.

> **The strategy behind networking starts with identifying what I care about and finding people who share those interests. Whether it’s personal or professional, it’s about connecting on a wavelength that feels natural.**

But it’s not just about what I can gain. The real value of networking lies in asking, “What can I offer?”

My "aha" moment came when I realised the approach of giving builds trust, respect, and affinity. When I started building LXME at 48, many questioned my decision.

I had already established a large, successful group. “Why now?” they asked. “Why not keep it under the existing umbrella?” But stepping out on my own felt right.

The trust and goodwill I had cultivated over the years came back to support me in ways I couldn’t have anticipated.

From raising funds to finding partners, the support was overwhelming and a testament to the impact of giving first.

One of the biggest challenges women face in networking, and one I've experienced myself, is being taken seriously in male-dominated spaces. The difficulty lies in breaking through perceptions and earning genuine recognition.

Biases against women are everywhere. They're persistent, blatant, and hard to ignore. But as women, we must push forward and build networks that empower us.

It means putting ourselves out there, again and again. It also means calling out bias, not just for ourselves, but for other women too. That's how we begin to change the story.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Be open minded

Strategic networking begins with an open mind that is ready to meet people, listen, and learn without a predefined agenda. Focus on building genuine connections and discovering shared opportunities for growth.

2. Be the connection others need

At its core, networking is about helping others meet their needs. Whether they're searching for advice, guidance, or a connection, being the person who can provide that is the fastest way to break the ice. This mindset of giving is what makes networking impactful.

3. Be consistent

Networking, is not a one-time effort. It's about building steadily, in smaller, varied formats, and making it a regular part of your routine. I dedicate the first half of every Saturday planning and writing my content for what I want to post on LinkedIn for the coming week.

CHAPTER 08

Meenakshi Iyer



Managing Director, Wealth and Retail Banking Tech, Standard Chartered GBS, India

Meenakshi is a dynamic leader whose career has been profoundly shaped by the opportunities that emerged through her networks. As the Managing Director of Wealth and Retail Banking Tech at Standard Chartered GBS, India, she currently spearheads digital transformation for banking applications and customer journeys, overseeing product engineering, solutions, delivery, and global applications. At the outset of her career, Meenakshi did not aspire to work abroad; however, she landed an exciting assignment at Infosys that took her to New York, right on Wall Street. Meenakshi attributes her dedication to diversity and inclusion (D&I) to the women's networks she has engaged with and currently serves as the Chair of the D&I Council at Standard Chartered, GBS India. She firmly believes that, from a senior leadership perspective, nothing truly functions without a strong network.

Growing up, I observed the women around me leading very traditional and conservative lives, which deeply influenced my perception of their roles. I believed that women had to work incredibly hard, whether managing homes, working outside, or juggling both. From the crack of dawn until late at night, their lives seemed consumed by endless responsibilities. My mother, for instance, was a homemaker. As my brother and I grew older, her love for Carnatic classical music inspired her to start teaching it. I watched her tirelessly conduct back-to-back

classes while still managing all the household chores and responsibilities.

From the very beginning of my college journey, I knew I didn't want to follow the conventional path. I wanted to break the norms and pursue what men were doing. While most girls leaned towards computer science, I was drawn to architecture and mechanical engineering, fields more commonly chosen by men at the time. I aimed to be different, and rebel against the stereotypes and passive expectations my family and society had from me, simply because I was a girl.

When my father chose a college for me in a small town called Loni in Maharashtra, I decided to study chemical engineering.

I had no idea what the course entailed or what career path it would lead to, but for me, it was about entering a male-dominated field and proving that I could succeed in it. The coursework was tough, yet I managed to do reasonably well. However, after four years, I graduated without a job, so I returned to Mumbai and took up some computer programming courses. During this time, I came across a walk-in interview advertisement for Infosys in the newspaper. Out of thousands of applicants, I landed a job with them in Bangalore When I joined Infosys, the first three months of training were incredibly tough. It was highly competitive, with people from premier colleges from across the country.

If you weren't in the top quartile, securing a project was challenging. I felt out of place, and my confidence began to waver. Fortunately, I built a connection with one of the training facilitators at Infosys. After sharing my concerns, they helped me secure a client-side project with Goldman Sachs, which really turned things around for me.

I had never imagined or aspired to work abroad. However, within three months of joining the project, I was given the exciting opportunity to work on the client side in New York, right on Wall Street. The long hours we spent together helped me forge deep and meaningful relationships with some of my colleagues. I also realised how much I could learn from this network of professionals around me. I began to appreciate the unique strengths each person brought to the table, including those who were just a couple of years ahead of me. I took this

opportunity to ask questions and seek guidance, and as I reached out, others also started to rely on me for my insights and experience. These networks allowed me to be myself, and we supported each other as we navigated living and working in a foreign country.

After seven years in the U.S., my husband and I moved back to Bangalore. Just a few days after landing, I received a call from a department head at Infosys about a major project. They wanted me to lead a challenging transition from a vendor to a new client, requiring us to build everything from the ground up. The trust they placed in me reflected how much they valued my skills and experience. For this project, I also had to hire fresh graduates and build a team.

Over time, my team, both direct reports and others at different levels formed a strong bond as we worked together. Even today, I stay in touch with many of them, and they often tell me I was one of the best managers they ever had. These close connections not only made our work more enjoyable but also created a lasting network of mutual support and trust that continues till date.

In 2007, I received a call directly from Goldman Sachs offering me a senior role as they expanded their operations in India. This opportunity came through my professional network. It turned out to be a fantastic experience, as I was already familiar with the organisation from my time serving them as a client, and I loved their work culture. Being one of the early team members setting up operations meant we worked hard, but we also formed strong bonds. We celebrated our successes together, creating a close-knit peer group.

However, by 2013, I started to feel restless, and a bit burnt out. I had also just had my first child and was re-evaluating my career path. I decided to take a break for a few months to explore whether I wanted to start something on my own or pursue other career options. During this time off, I realised something very important about myself and that was that I thrive in environments where I'm part of a team. It became clear to me that I needed to get back into a job, so I started the typical resume-updating and job-hunting process. Once again, an opportunity came along through my ex-colleague. He told me told me about a job for

which he had been approached and was not applying. He felt that I would be a great fit.

Eventually I landed that job and joined ANZ Bank. I hadn't even reached out to anyone saying I was looking for a job, but that's the beauty of strong networks. People think about you when opportunities come up.

When I joined ANZ, I felt a strong urge to establish a Women in Technology group. At Goldman Sachs, I had personally experienced the impact such a network could have. The group was instrumental in promoting diversity and inclusion, creating a space where women could come together to share their stories, discuss career paths, and talk openly about their struggles and achievements.

The group also facilitated connections with senior leaders, which was incredibly inspiring. Listening to how they navigated challenges and built successful careers made success feel within reach and reminded me that I wasn't alone on this journey. I learned that empathy and a softer approach are powerful strengths; you don't always need to put up an aggressive front at work. Those lessons were invaluable, and I was determined to bring that same energy to ANZ, helping women expand their networks within the organisation. A network like that creates a sense of belonging and becomes a support system, not just for work but for personal matters too. I had a similar experience volunteering for the Grace Hopper Conference India for women in technology, where I made lifelong connections.

Being part of these women's networks made me deeply conscious and passionate about diversity and inclusion, something I might not have realised otherwise. It's also worth mentioning that I landed one of the most exciting roles of my career through my diversity network. At ANZ, there was a global competition for Women's Day, and I participated, winning a one-on-one session with a female global leader. I prepared thoroughly, planning what to ask and learn, and during our half-hour conversation, I made a strong impression.

A few weeks later, a global role opened up. The head of ANZ India called, urging me to apply because the hiring manager, who happened to be that same senior leader I had interacted with a few weeks back

thought I'd be a great fit. I sent in my resume, applied, and landed the role! It just goes to show that you never know what opportunities will come through your connections and you have to be ready to seize them.

> **We are constantly working within a network, whether it's with stakeholders or team members. As you move into senior leadership roles, effective stakeholder management at all levels is key to delivering results and doing a good job.**

From a senior leadership perspective, nothing really works without a strong network. I've realised that you need to spend at least 60-70% of your time cultivating and maintaining those relationships. They're the backbone of managing both success and setbacks.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Be selfless

Instead of approaching people with the mindset of "What can I get out of this?", aim to offer support, share knowledge, or collaborate without expecting something in return. This genuine approach creates lasting and meaningful connections.

2. Be supportive

Focus on helping others succeed by actively supporting your colleagues and team members. Look for opportunities to position them in a positive light and collaborate with them on important initiatives or projects. Make it a priority to acknowledge the contributions of both junior team members and peers.

3. Be respectful

Actively listen to ideas and insights from others, recognising that valuable perspectives can come from all levels of experience. Foster a collaborative atmosphere by respecting and empowering everyone to participate, ultimately creating a stronger, more cohesive work environment.

CHAPTER 09

Shreya Krishnan

Managing Director, AnitaB.org India



As a child, Shreya faced the challenge of being overlooked because of prejudices associated with colourism and her small frame. She pushed beyond these limitations and pursued her passion for acting and connecting with others by joining her school's acting club. This experience in her early years has laid the foundation for her approach to networking – which she sees as building a circle of meaningful connections. Shreya's networks have driven her career and personal growth in marketing, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and corporate social responsibility (CSR). She has won prestigious awards like Ms. Universal Empowerment 2024 and Mrs. India Universe 2017 and has pursued dance, theatre, blogging and sustainability. Now, as a leader at AnitaB.org India, she empowers women and nonbinary technologists by cultivating a like-minded community, which Shreya defines as strong networks to drive meaningful change.

In school, I was frequently teased for my dark skin, thin frame, and thick glasses. Driven by a passion for acting and a need to connect with people who might otherwise overlook me, I knew I had to step outside of my usual circle. In middle school, I took a bold step and joined the acting club. Initially cast in minor roles, I quickly demonstrated my talent and began landing lead parts. This pattern continued, and I got into elocution and emceeing. The stage became my happy and comfortable space. In fact, my mother would say, "give her a mic and she is fine."

Reflecting on my school and college years, I realise I was simply pursuing my passions and hobbies. Yet, these very connections opened doors for me to perform as an artist, participate in a beauty pageant, and lead a team at just 21.

> **I believe the real power lies not in networking, but in cultivating a circle of connections — people you can rely on for a myriad of reasons, creating a network that supports and enriches your life.**

I have always been a proponent of making human connections. I welcome the joy and generosity of spirit that comes from people and experiences into my life. That's my philosophy—perhaps even my strategy.

I don't think you can approach networking with the number of visiting cards you collect at an event. While those cards may end up forgotten in a drawer, a person who remembers you from a genuine conversation is far more likely to respond to your outreach or want to reconnect. Investing time in meaningful conversations and relationships is what truly matters.

I cherish it when someone reaches out and says, "Do you remember that deep conversation we had?"

During my first two years at St. Joseph's College in Bangalore, I joined almost every student committee. By my third year, I became the cultural secretary, demonstrating how immersing myself in my passions and connecting with like-minded individuals could lead to influential roles.

My network has enabled me to explore various experiences—from running my own marketing consultancy to working as a freelance journalist with the leading newspaper The Hindu, teaching dance at a corporate, and even acting in a film, thanks to an Instagram reel. Giving back and supporting others is a core part of who I am. For me, networking is about these meaningful exchanges and making a difference.

If you're not leveraging your connections to effect change, you're missing out. Networking is about showing up and seeing what change

you can make with access to all the connections you have offline and online.

I view networking as a community-building exercise where everyone unites for a shared purpose. This concept is central to my current role at AnitaB.org India, where our focus is to offer women and non-binary technologists opportunities to connect, enhance their professional skills and receive recognition. We are able to work on this mission through the networks we have built across the ecosystem with different partners. I prefer using “community” instead of “network” with respect to the work we are doing at AnitaB.org, because it embodies our common goal of fostering change, safety, pay parity, inclusivity, and belonging. This collective consciousness is the essence of a strategic network.

If you think networking isn’t for you or isn’t important, reconsider. Networking is about the positive impact you can make and amplifying that influence through your connections. It exposes you to diverse voices, opinions, and perspectives, which is invaluable.

As women, networking is very different for us. The traditional networking methods like socialising over drinks might not always work. You need to choose what works best for you.

Many introverts get intimidated and drained in large get-togethers or spaces. I, on the other hand, love social events and large crowds. It completely energises me. If you are an introvert, then maybe one-on-one and intimate settings are better for you. There are times when I lose my extroverted energy and just want to keep to myself. And it is ok!

Expanding your circle, as rewarding as it is, inevitably comes with more judgment. I learned this early on. In school, I was often labelled as overconfident, and as I grew older, I was seen differently because I didn’t fit into the conventional mould of a dancer, actor, or leader. But I’ve never been one to let others' opinions weigh me down. Once, when I felt out of place among peers who were almost 15+ years older than me, my manager wisely told me, "If people judge you by your age, that’s their issue, not yours."

That advice became a guiding principle for me. When you put yourself out there, authenticity is crucial. Whether in the real world or online, I

remain true to myself. There are times when I have had to assert my authenticity, because the world teaches you to have a game-face on or a corporate avatar.

I consistently channel my energy into opportunities that align with my true self, making the most of each one. This approach has been instrumental in making my networks valuable. It has expanded my world, opening doors to career opportunities, personal growth, learning, and community impact.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Embrace your true self

Approach networking calmly and naturally, focusing on your strengths and core identity. By accepting who you are and making allowances, you create space for growth. Begin your networking journey with self-reflection and inner work, laying the foundation for meaningful connections.

2. Know your audience

Understand who you want in your network. Build a circle that aligns with your interests, purpose, and values. Recognise the potential, diversity, and opportunities within your network to maximise its impact.

3. Network with intention

Approach your network with clear goals and purpose. With a defined intent, your outreach becomes purposeful and valuable. Even if your aim is just to have fun, setting that intention ensures you connect with the right people and approach it effectively.

CHAPTER 10



Charu Sheel Kunwar

Managing Director and Group Head-Human Resources, Lighthouse Canton

Charu is a seasoned Human Resources and Talent Development leader with over 25 years of experience in financial services and business processes. Her career exemplifies the power of strategic networking, which has been instrumental in her career progression and her ability to uncover new opportunities. Driven by a strong sense of initiative and purpose, Charu has consistently stepped forward to contribute and make a difference, willingly taking the lead whenever opportunities arise. For Charu, a strategic network in a professional context is a circle of individuals with whom one builds meaningful relationships, including mentors, sponsors, and colleagues. She firmly believes that a strong network is not just about hierarchy; it is about fostering trust and enabling mutual growth.

For as long as I can remember, I have always been someone with a strong sense of initiative and drive. It's simply who I am! Much of these traits and the value of relationships stems from my parents. While growing up, they constantly emphasised on the importance of understanding people, nurturing relationships, and creating networks built on trust and mutual growth. This foundation instilled in me the confidence and empathy to connect with others. Even as a child, it felt natural for me to take the first step and approach others to make friends. This trait has remained with me throughout my life; whenever I believe I can contribute or make a difference, I willingly volunteer myself. Additionally, the sense of

initiative and building connections only deepened thanks to my husband. He has always encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone and engage with diverse individuals and opportunities. The unwavering support and perspective of my family has strengthened my confidence and ability to forge lasting, impactful connections.

As a people-oriented individual, I was actively involved in the extra-curricular activities in school and through college. The connections I made during that time hold immense value for me, and to this day, I remain in touch with many of my teachers and friends.

I attended Lady Shri Ram College (LSR) in New Delhi. Renowned for attracting the brightest students from across the country, LSR initially felt overwhelming in the first few months. However, I was fortunate to form a close circle of friends who continue to be a part of my network even today.

The culture at LSR profoundly impacted me, shaping me into a progressive, and independent individual. It was the collective spirit of the institution, where both teachers and students led by example, that left a lasting impression. The environment taught me that there are no boundaries to what I can achieve, both as an individual and as a woman.

Later, during my MBA at the Birla Institute of Management Technology, I embraced the guiding value of simplicity in everything I do. Each institution and organisation I've been a part of has had its own unique culture, significantly influencing the people I interacted with and the networks I built through these experiences.

My career growth and journey highlight the incredible power of a strong network. My first job at NIIT came through a referral from a school friend who was already working there and encouraged me to apply. I later, joined GE/Genpact through my professional network and spent 14 enriching years there.

I owe a huge part of my professional success to GE/Genpact. I was fortunate to have an amazing boss who acted as my sponsor and was genuinely invested in my career growth. In 2002, she suggested I try working from home for a while, to balance my life at work and home. Remote work was not common then, but I gave it a try. I worked from

home for two months before transitioning back to the office three days a week. This thoughtful approach helped me ease back into my professional life at a time when I could have drifted away from my career.

When I moved to Singapore with my family, a former colleague connected me with her contact, which is how I got my first stint in a foreign country. This network built from there led me to Lighthouse Canton in 2018, which marked the beginning of an exciting journey with the organisation. Since then, I have worked on multiple facets of Human Resources (HR) as we built operations from the ground up, including establishing a performance management system, selecting the right HR technology platform, building the entire HR team and implementing systems across the organisation.

> **A strategic network in the professional context is a circle of individuals with whom you have meaningful relationships, including mentors, sponsors and colleagues. A strong network isn't just about hierarchy; it's about creating trust and mutual growth.**

I truly value my peer network as they are the ones that listen, understand, and I can share a light-hearted conversation during challenging times. My network also extends to individuals within my industry and the HR fraternity, with whom I can reach out for guidance or mentoring.

I often tap into my network for work-related matters, especially when I feel uncertain or need additional input from those with relevant experience. Whether I'm validating decisions, seeking feedback, or even hiring the right talent, my network has been a reliable sounding board and source of support.

I am a part of several online networks that are incredibly useful, especially from a knowledge-sharing perspective.

For instance, I've used my professional virtual networks to get clarifications about policies I was trying to implement and find recommendations for potential partners. Posting a query or update in these virtual spaces often yields quick responses and valuable input from a diverse group of professionals.

Many women struggle to effectively communicate their accomplishments in the workplace. In such situations, having a strong sponsor is important, who believes in your capabilities and can speak on your behalf when needed. This support can be instrumental in navigating the workplace and ensuring your contributions are recognised. It's advice I consistently share with young women professionals, to help them build confidence and leverage their networks effectively.

When it comes to networking with individuals from other regions, we do need to contextualise ourselves according to their cultural nuances. Having spent most of my career in India, I can say that we tend to be quite personal with people, talking about families or other aspects of life outside work.

While people from different cultures may not always feel comfortable with such personal discussions. Even though they might be friendly in the office, it's not always appropriate to dive into personal topics too soon.

Another example could be in India, if you want to meet for dinner, you can just decide on the spot and figure out the details later. In Singapore, however, such gatherings require more planning, including reservations and sharing details in advance. These differences highlight the need to adapt your approach based on cultural context.

One of the most important values in networking is authenticity. You shouldn't connect with people or build relationships just for appearances or out of obligation. While social media is a powerful tool for making connections, increasing visibility, and maintaining relationships, we still exist within a hybrid environment of physical and online worlds. If you post something insincere online, it can often be detected, especially by those who know you personally. Remember, your online presence is an extension of your real self.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Always have the courage to reach out

The key is not to hesitate when reaching out. If you believe a connection with someone could benefit you, go ahead and make the effort. The

worst that can happen is that the person may not respond. But that's okay. At least you won't carry the guilt or regret of not trying.

2. Maintain the relationships you build

Don't treat your relationships as a one-time connection. Whether it's a boss from 10 or 15 years ago who mentored and invested in you, or a colleague who supported you, it's important to nurture these bonds over time. There are simple ways to do this. For instance, if you come across any update about somebody in your network, reach out with a message. You can also share relevant updates about your life or let them know about significant milestones. Small, thoughtful gestures like these go a long way in keeping the connection alive.

3. Make networking a two-way street

Networking isn't just about what you can gain, it's also about what you can give. To build a truly strategic network, think about how you can add value to the people in your circle, no matter what their level is. Even if someone is a senior leader or your boss, there are always ways to contribute. For instance, you might write them a thoughtful recommendation, share an article they would find useful, or simply offer your support when needed. Sometimes, giving back can be as simple as showing up for that person without any judgment.

CHAPTER 11

Kuppulakshmi



Global Head, Zoho for Startups at Zoho Corporation

With 15 years at Zoho and counting, Kuppulakshmi Krishnamoorthy (Kuppu) secured this remarkable opportunity through her professional network. It was thanks to a colleague she met in 2010 who has since become a close friend and well-wisher. For Kuppu, this experience embodies the essence of a strategic network, a deeply rooted community that supports each other unconditionally, and looks ahead to benefit future generations. Today, Kuppu heads the Zoho for Startups programme globally, bringing nearly 25 years of professional experience to the table. During her time at Zoho, she has played a pivotal role in the company's growth story, specialising in bridging the gap between businesses and technology. Her work focuses on forging strategic alliances between Zoho and various startup entities, including state governments, incubators, accelerators, and other global stakeholders. Kuppu is a TEDx speaker and also delivers keynotes on global platforms, sharing her insights on future skills, emotional intelligence, and the human elements of technology. She firmly believes that there should be no FOMO, the "fear of missing out," when creating a network. True connections require depth rather than the rush of trying to keep up.

My story begins as that of a typical small-town girl from Tamil Nadu in the 1980s. We were a close-knit family, and just like in the movies, my father faced a massive business and personal loss that turned our world upside down when I was about six years old. With very little money, he

had to start from scratch on his own. I witnessed my dad's wisdom, survival skills, and networking come to the forefront as he launched his business, sourcing some of the best sarees from Surat in Gujarat.

However, we faced another significant setback when my father's business came to an abrupt end due to the riots in Gujarat. We had to sell all our furniture, and once again, life changed for the worse. I moved from a convent school to a government-aided school that had only one English-medium class and majority of learning in Tamil. Despite these challenges, my parents instilled a sense of dignity and contentment in my sister and me from a young age, ensuring that these difficult times didn't weigh heavily on us. Those years, though simple and tough, remain some of the happiest of my life.

As a next step, my father started learning Hindi from my mother, who held a degree in the language. He reached out to his existing network, including former clients from his saree business, and initially offered free lessons as a way to experiment with teaching. My mother supported him by teaching Hindi to children whose parents wanted them to learn it as a second language.

Through these small steps, my parents built a new life and established a school in Salem, Tamil Nadu, dedicated to teaching Hindi at all levels. There was a thriving business community of Gujaratis, Jains, Marwadis, and others in Salem who recognised the importance of knowing Hindi as a second language. This is a perfect example of my dad's natural talent for building connections and nurturing a network focused on organic, meaningful relationships and genuine give-and-take. During our toughest financial times, my parents' network was there for us, sharing hand-me-down clothes and books. When both my parents passed away, half of Salem seemed to be in our home, cooking, cleaning, and doing everything we needed without us having to ask for help.

That, to me, is the essence of a true network — a deeply rooted community that shows up without question, lifting each other and thinking ahead to support future generations.

> **Understanding what it means to have this kind of "strategic network" takes a certain level of emotional intelligence. It's**

less about strategy and more about the sense of connection and community that each of us holds dear in our own way.

In 2002, I moved to Chennai, a bustling cosmopolitan city, to pursue my post-graduation in industrial microbiology. Those were still the early days of the internet, and building relationships face-to-face was the norm. Starting from scratch, I managed to form a circle of connections I could approach with any question, no matter how small or "silly" it might have seemed. After finishing my master's, I felt completely lost. Unlike today, where we have online resources at our fingertips, I had no extended network to lean on for industry connections or mentors to offer career guidance. I was staring at a vast landscape of opportunities with no clear path, feeling an intense pressure to have my future all mapped out. Imposter syndrome crept in, along with waves of self-doubt and anxiety.

The internet has truly been a game changer. Now, we can access vast networks and global opportunities for just about anything we need. If I were starting out as a microbiologist today, I could build a following on Instagram, create visibility, and share knowledge in ways I never imagined possible back then.

Initially in Chennai I worked night shifts at a call centre, as India was a popular outsourcing destination. The training and lucrative salaries made this sector extremely appealing. Once I landed a job, I underwent training focused on neutralising accents to communicate seamlessly with people from around the globe. It was at this job that I discovered I thrive in environments filled with positive people who possess strong work ethics and a generous spirit. My dreams have never centred around flashy cars or grand ambitions; they focused on being a good human being, as instilled in me by my parents. At the call centre one of the trainers left a lasting impact on me. I kept in touch with her, read her blogs, and also checked-in on her every now and then out of respect and admiration.

Almost nine months after completing my masters, I landed a job as a copy editor with a science magazine. That role required my knowledge in microbiology and felt like my first true step into my career. Throughout this journey, my trainer from my previous job and I kept in

touch. In 2010, she called me about an opportunity to apply for a job at Zoho. Fast forward to now, and I have been at Zoho for 15 years. That one connection from my professional network that I nurtured turned out to have a significant impact on my life. In hindsight, this exemplifies the potential of strategic networking, sponsors and having people remember you when relevant opportunities arise. For me, networking isn't just a professional strategy; it aligns with who I am at my core.

It is key to define what networking truly means to you and to ensure it reflects who you are. This is especially true at work, where I collaborate across 50 different teams. Networking internally at Zoho isn't just about knowing people; it's about understanding the unique niche each person brings to the table. In every interaction, I need to leverage my leadership skills, critical thinking, and clear communication to collaborate effectively and help bring out world-class products.

Handling a variety of personalities means that my consistency, confidence, and reputation create a strong personal brand. Whether in person or online, people are always watching and evaluating you. Ultimately, I want people to know that if they connect with me, they can expect certain values and a standard. It's all about building a network anchored in authenticity and a strategy that scales with integrity.

This approach holds true for my external networking as well. When someone reaches out, I listen closely, balancing my time and energy in a way that feels authentic to who I am. At the end of a conversation, there should be a sense of satisfaction as we each walk away with a fresh insight or perspective.

It's important to remember that building this kind of network isn't instant; it's a strategy that takes time and effort. I am very intentional about my networking and conscious of the spaces I enter. I seek people and opportunities where I can learn and grow, as well as give back.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Stay conscious of who you are

It's easy to get swept up by everything around us, but taking a pause for some inner reflection helps to stay grounded and clears away self-doubt.

Make it a habit to jot down meaningful observations about yourself every now and then. Journaling has been a powerful tool for understanding my evolution. I genuinely believe the universe responds to this clarity, bringing the right people into your network when you're ready for them.

2. Balance giving and taking

"Strategy" in networking isn't a bad word. It's often seen as self-serving, but it's about balancing giving and receiving. The right network should provide opportunities to learn, and it should also be a space where you can give back through your knowledge, connections, and experiences.

3. Network without FOMO

Don't let FOMO, the "fear of missing out" drive your networking approach. Strategic networks can't be built from a place of "catching up" or "ticking boxes" on some imaginary list. True connections require depth, not the rush of trying to keep up. Each step forward or connection should bring you closer to something meaningful, not just higher up a ladder.

CHAPTER 12

Vidya Laxman

Technology Director, Tesco



Vidya is a senior leader with 18 years of experience in India and the United States (US). She is an experienced technology leader and also has an entrepreneurial spirit with commercial acumen in products and the services business. Vidya's career has been shaped by her adaptability and resilience, learned from growing up in a military family that moved across various regions of India. Sports played a pivotal role in her life, teaching her the value of purposeful connections and strategic networking. Throughout her career, Vidya has often been one of the few women in technology. However, her ability to build meaningful relationships, her integrity, sense of humour, and her willingness to embrace vulnerability have helped her drive change and build supportive networks. She is among the few women technology leaders who works closely with the business and focuses on agile product development, programme management and strategic planning.Vidya has also contributed as a core committee member with NASSCOM, CII, Anita Borg Institute, and Women Leadership Forums. She serves as an ambassador for Everywoman, a UK-based organisation that champions women in business and promotes gender diversity.

I grew up in a military family, with my dad serving in the infantry of the Indian Army. This meant we moved frequently due to the transfers that came with his job. We lived in various parts of North India, including Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Sikkim, Goa and Rajasthan.

Unlike most military families who enrolled their children in Army-run Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs), my mother insisted on sending my brother and I to local convent schools. She believed this would give us a stronger foundation in English and a richer learning experience.

Being in local schools, instead of being surrounded by other army kids, meant that we were constantly exposed to new cultures, places, and people. This taught my brother and me adaptability, resilience, and agility. By the time I finished class 12, I had attended nine different schools. I learned early on in life that to succeed, you must come out of your comfort zone, adapt to change, and truly understand the world around you.

I've always been an extrovert, eager to connect with people. In second grade, even though I didn't know much Hindi, I confidently ran and became a class monitor at my school in Gwalior.

I love engaging with others and building relationships because I'm naturally curious and a "knowledge sponge," eager to learn about their cultures and life stories. When my dad was posted near the Pakistan border, close to Firozpur, I noticed how different the local culture and mindset were from what I'd known. Interacting with people there taught me a valuable lesson that we can be vastly different, yet there is no "right" or "wrong." This insight has shaped how I approach relationships throughout my life.

Growing up, sports has been a huge part of my life, and being in an army area meant I had access to great facilities. One of my earliest lessons in purposeful connections came on the badminton court. Officers had priority over court time, so if I wanted to play, I had to either be patient or strategic. I didn't think of it as networking at the time, but I knew I had to get to know the "uncles" and establish a rapport if I wanted a chance on the court. They soon noticed I was pretty good at badminton. Once I earned their respect, my time on the court was secured. Through these organic connections, I also found an amazing coach who helped me take my game to the next level.

I went on to study engineering at R.V. College of Engineering in Bangalore, where I took part in several inter-college sports competitions.

This gave me new perspectives and introduced me to diverse people and ideas. In 1994, I pursued a master's in Computer Science at Boston University. It was an entirely new country, a new culture, and one of the hardest phases of my life. I arrived with no friends and only hazy ideas of what America would be like. I had to build connections just to handle day-to-day basics like finding a roommate, getting around in the brutal cold with no car, and adjusting to a very different education system. Back home, I was well-known and knew how to work the system, but here, I had to set that aside, unlearn what I knew, and start fresh. Gradually, I made some local friends who were instrumental in helping me adjust. It was this network that helped me settle down and survive in this foreign environment for two years.

During my master's, I was one of the few to secure a job in the middle of a recession, thanks to my campus connections. My professor, who had received some funding, asked if I wanted to work with him and join his startup. One of the other students who had been selected spoke highly of me and referred me. This incident is a reminder of how it helps to have a network where you have visibility and good relationships.

> **So much of life unfolds through the connections we make. Networking serves so many purposes in life right from brainstorming, career growth right to having those individuals who can elevate you when you are really low. In fact, your networks are a crucial path to achieving the things we set out to do.**

While I was in Boston, a city known for its innovation, I would take extra classes at Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). It was there that I met like-minded people who shared my passion for learning and growth. One of those connections even led me to participate in the MIT 50K Challenge for entrepreneurs, a truly unforgettable experience.

Throughout my career, I've often been one of the few, if not the only woman, in the room. The tech guys around me had their own circles, not out of intent to exclude me, but because they had never worked with a woman before. Most of them were intensely focused on their goals. I remember one principal engineer at my organization—brilliant but

known for being blunt, even rude. He held back for no one, whether you were a man or, in my case, the only woman present. Once, after I shared an idea, he shot it down immediately, saying, "You're in the wrong profession. Maybe you should take up acting or something." I looked him straight in the eye and replied, "At least I have a choice. You don't seem to have one." For a moment, there was silence, then he burst out laughing, and we both cracked up.

Humour has always been my way of handling difficult individuals or environments that aren't naturally conducive to building connections. When I joined Tesco, my responsibility was to bring about engineering transformation in the organisation and operations in India. I was excited and knew I had the ability to make a positive impact. But you can't do it alone. You need allies and sponsors when pushing for something bigger. Change is rarely easy, and as a disruptive leader, I faced my share of resistance. That's where my supportive network and sponsors came into play. Some of the leaders and peers encouraged me to push for change and stood by me like rocks, even in challenging moments. In the end, you can't be successful without a supportive network and strong sponsors.

But here's the thing: networking can't be a one-way street. You can't just reach out expecting something without offering value in return. If you do, people will forget you quickly. A quote by Jack Welch from GE resonates with me, "Every great leader has a generosity gene." People may possess many great qualities, but the one that truly sets leaders apart, is generosity.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Integrity at the bedrock

Integrity should remain at the core of every relationship in your network. Maintaining this principle reinforces your credibility, ensuring that connections built are both authentic and sustainable.

2. Be transparent and embrace vulnerability

Sharing your true self, including your challenges and vulnerabilities, helps build trust and makes your connections deeper and more genuine. Being transparent in your communication invites others to do the same, laying the groundwork for meaningful relationships.

3. Build a network with clear outcomes and intent

Keep your network focused, purposeful, and aligned with your bigger vision. It starts by defining what you want to achieve and why. Once you've aligned your goals, take purposeful actions to connect with the right people, ensuring every interaction adds value.

CHAPTER 13

Nandita Lakshmanan



Founder and CEO, The PRactice

Nandita has consistently prioritised building a few high-quality connections, while nurturing strong networks throughout her life. With over 30 years of experience in Public Relations (PR), she is the Founder and CEO of The PRactice, one of India's leading PR firms, that has just completed its 25year milestone. Nandita attributes the launch of The PRactice in 2000 to her "invisible network" that came to the fore. This network wasn't built intentionally, but was a natural outcome of the connections she fostered with her professionalism and consistent effectiveness over the years. Nandita's peer networks played a role in getting her an opportunity to be a radio jockey at All India Radio (AIR) during college to landing her first job in Public Relations at Genesis PR. Nandita is committed to giving back to the industry that has shaped her life and is a Founding Member and is part of the four member Managing Committee of Global Women in PR (GWPR) India.

My first experience of a supportive network beyond my immediate family came from the home support staff we had during my childhood. He was affectionately called Nilandan (Neelakanthan). He was a kind, steadfast presence, and had served as an assistant during my grandfather's stint in the Army. When my mother got married, he continued to help her manage our small nuclear family, which consisted of my parents, two siblings, and I.

I grew up in Press Enclave, New Delhi, as my father was a journalist. His professional network, though modest, was built on genuine camaraderie, while my mother cultivated connections within our community based on trust and mutual support.

These relationships laid the foundation for my understanding of what a meaningful network truly is — one where people stand by each other without hidden agendas. Despite being somewhat of a recluse by nature, I've always maintained a small circle of high-quality connections at every stage of my life.

After completing my 10th grade, some parents from the community approached me to tutor their children. They had noticed They encouraged me to take on responsibilities and activities beyond academics. Their trust propelled me to win accolades, join the student council, and eventually become head girl. This early recognition of my potential not only boosted my confidence but also helped me develop a keen ability to identify and nurture talent in others, a skill that has served me well in my adult and professional life till date.

My interest in extracurricular activities continued in college. Without any grand plan or strategy, I began building networks based on shared interests and passions. One such moment of serendipity was when a friend and I connected due to our fascination for voice-overs and decided to visit All India Radio. On a whim, we took a bus to Sansad Marg New Delhi and auditioned. My work was well-received, and soon, I began receiving more assignments as a radio jockey. Word got around and I also got the opportunity to do voice-overs for advertisement jingles with the Times Group.

Juggling college and a job wasn't easy. My shift at All India Radio started early in the morning, at 6 a.m. which meant I had to wake up even earlier to be on time. It was a structured and precise environment, with strict rules and regulations. The experience really taught me discipline and time management, lessons that continue to stay with me.

My mother's influence was equally profound. Although she was a home maker, she was deeply determined that my sister and I pursued

meaningful careers. She would often say, "You should never have to hold your hand out to anyone for money."

It is this refrain that got me to look for a job after I pursued my master's degree, inadvertently leading me to set my sights on achieving more.

While completing my master's, I enrolled in a Public Relations course at Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan in New Delhi. Around this time, my network stepped in again. I bumped into a friend who asked if I would like to meet her current boss. The 'boss' turned out to be the legendary Prema Sagar herself, who has been instrumental in shaping the landscape of Public Relations (PR) in India since 1992 and also founded the leading agency Genesis PR (now Burson India). One interview later, I became the fourth employee at Genesis PR, setting the stage for a career I hadn't consciously planned but seemed destined for.

> **In my experience, strategic networking is the result of the conscious choices and values you embrace, and the people who naturally join you on this journey as a consequence of those decisions. It is also a lot about the genuine relationships you can offer or take support from, as needed.**

Throughout my career, I've relied on the sheer dint of professionalism to build my network. This includes setting clear boundaries, fostering relationships free of obligation, and preserving my personal space. As a team member and later as a founder, I've cultivated deep connections with all my colleagues, while maintaining a healthy distinction between my work and personal life. For women, I believe these values of honesty and boundary-setting are essential in navigating both professional and personal relationships. That said, professionalism doesn't mean being cold or detached. Empathy and sensitivity are just as critical in building relationships that matter.

When I started my own PR Firm, The PRactice, in 2000, I believe it was what I like to call my "invisible network" that truly came into play. This network wasn't something I intentionally built but rather it is an outcome of who I am. I have always been sincere and diligent in everything I do. Now as I look back, I realise that combining these traits with effectiveness and efficiency became my powerful formula for building

lasting connections, even if it happened subconsciously. When I left Genesis, a senior leader who I had met a few months ago, asked me to consult for their new business. Remarkably word spread and to this date 85–90% of the work we've done at The PRactice has come through recommendations and unsolicited business. It almost feels like there are angels everywhere supporting us, and that invisible network continues to thrive in ways I could never have anticipated.

After spending a few decades in public relations, I felt it becomes essential as a leader to find avenues and networks to give back. Engaging with industry forums and networks allows me to pay it forward and contribute to shaping the PR industry that has given me so much. For me, this is not just a choice but I take it as my duty. Besides, my love for Indian handloom has also led me to interesting paths, including supporting and learning from an NGO, Mauna Dhwani.

Here, I must mention the Entrepreneurs Organisation (EO) which brought me in touch with people I would never have met, otherwise. A concept called the Forum, brought eight of us together and for almost 15 years, we met once a month for several hours sharing updates about our lives. I have made friends for life, in this group.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Harness the strength of self-awareness

I believe it's important to understand every grain of yourself around what makes you comfortable and uncomfortable, and who you truly are as a person. When your actions authentically reflect your identity, it becomes easier for others to connect and interact with you.

2. Always respond back

Acknowledge every credible email, call, or message, even if it is a single line. No one should feel too insignificant to deserve your response.

3. Be present

When you engage fully in each interaction and are available in that moment, you build trust and create an enriching interaction each time.

CHAPTER 14

Dr Sunita Maheshwari



Chief Dreamer and Co-Founder, The Telerad Group

Sunita is a leading Doctor and the driving entrepreneurial force behind The Telerad Group. From her shy beginnings to stepping into leadership roles, she found her voice and purpose through perseverance and the power of networks. A Yale-trained paediatric cardiologist, she broke barriers in a male-dominated field and leveraged strategic connections to co-found and grow multiple startups parallelly - a primary care chain RxDx healthcare, Telerad Tech and Teleradiology Solutions, revolutionising teleradiology with a global network. As a board member of GSK (Glaxo Smith Kline) and HDFC Bank, she continues to bring diversity of thought and fresh ideas to the table. Sunita is a firm believer in the importance of proactive engagement in networks, contributing meaningfully, and paying it forward to create lasting impact.

As a child, I was painfully shy. Speaking up felt impossible, and social situations often left me retreating into silence. At weddings, I'd sit quietly beside my best friend, avoiding the crowd. I was someone who found comfort in the familiar, uninterested in venturing into the unknown.

But I wasn't completely withdrawn. In small, close-knit groups, I thrived. At school, I found myself stepping into leadership roles like school captain, and by the 12th grade, I became the student president in

junior college. Even in my quietness, I discovered ways to lead, connecting deeply with those around me in spaces that felt safe.

For me, leadership has never been about commanding the spotlight. It's been about rolling up my sleeves, diving into meaningful work, and inspiring others to come along for the journey. Throughout my education, from school to medical college, I immersed myself in diverse activities, often taking on roles that required organising and collaboration. I've always been known as a "diplomat", someone who naturally avoids conflict and builds connections. It's this ability to bring people together that often led me to positions of responsibility.

I owe much of my growth to the teachers in school and medical college who believed in me. They saw potential I hadn't yet recognised. Their encouragement, often in small but impactful nudges, helped me push past the imposter syndrome that clouded my confidence. Bit by bit, I began to see myself as someone capable and deserving of the opportunities that came my way.

When I moved to the U.S. for my residency at Yale, another transformative chapter began. The environment demanded that I speak up, not just to share ideas but to survive and succeed. Staying silent wasn't an option. It was there that I learned the true art of communication. I grew not just as a doctor but as a person who could articulate, connect, and lead.

Paediatric cardiology became my calling because it married everything I loved, that is working with children, handling emergencies, and building long-term relationships with families I applied to top programs and was thrilled to be accepted at Harvard. But life threw me a curveball. My fiancé, Arjun, was accepted into a program at Yale, and we were about to get married. Living apart at such a pivotal stage didn't feel right. After much soul-searching, I turned down Harvard and decided to wait two years to re-apply to Yale.

One night, while on call in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), the head Dr. George Lister asked me about my plans. I explained my situation and my decision to put paediatric cardiology on hold. A few days later, I received a call from Dr. Charlie Kleinman, Yale's head of paediatric

cardiology. He told me they were opening a spot just for me. Dr. Lister had advocated for me, using his network to create an opportunity which I thought was closed. That act of generosity taught me a powerful lesson that it is important to always open doors for others, just as they did for me. The more we give to others, the more the Universe gives to us.

When I moved to Bangalore, the confidence I had gained from my U.S. networks became invaluable.

With determination, I picked up the phone and called the famous cardiac surgeon Dr. Devi Shetty, which led to me heading a team at one of Bangalore's leading hospitals. Being a paediatric cardiologist has been deeply fulfilling, but it hasn't been without challenges. In a male-dominated field, I faced subtle gestures of doubt, moments when my work was overlooked, and unspoken scepticism about my place.

I refused to let those challenges define me. I stood firm, proving my competence not just to others but to myself. It's a message I often share with young female doctors to stand your ground, speak up, and make your voice heard. Persistence, I've learned, is the key to thriving in environments that may not always welcome you.

But competence alone isn't enough. Visibility is just as critical. No matter how capable you are, people need to know what you bring to the table. As an example, in my case, I joined the Paediatric Cardiac Society of India (PCSI) as a member, forced myself to speak up at conferences, volunteered to run the e-classes for post graduates and ultimately became President of the society. Strategic networking is about creating that visibility, connecting with the right people that become your tribe, and positioning yourself where opportunities can find you.

> **Strategic networking at its core, is about identifying the people or groups you need to connect with to enhance your professional journey. It's about making the effort to show your competence, to introduce yourself and be visible.**

Life has a way of surprising you, often through the power of networks. My husband's opportunity to work remotely for Yale as a radiologist covering U.S. night shifts from India sparked the idea for our first business. In 2010, we founded a Teleradiology company. The concept

was simple but transformative: providing night shift coverage for American hospitals using doctors based in India. Today, TRS is India's largest teleradiology provider and has a network of 160+ radiologists servicing clients across the U.S., Qatar, Singapore, India and the Maldives. It's a testament to how networks, combined with boldness and opportunity, can lead to groundbreaking ideas.

Another opportunity came my way, thanks to my professional network. This time, it was to join the board of one of India's largest banks-HDFC Bank. At first, I wasn't sure. I had no background in finance, and I told them so. But the connection who reached out convinced me otherwise. "We're not looking for another banker," she said. "We want someone who can bring diversity of thought and fresh ideas."

It was a leap of faith and a desire to learn something new. I said yes, and it turned out to be an incredible experience. Being part of the board has not only been a learning journey but also opened doors to a network in banking I never thought I'd be part of.

At our core, we are social beings. Life is fleeting, and I've always believed that it's the connections we build that fill it with meaning and beauty. Relationships bring richness to our experiences, and nurturing them doesn't have to be complicated. It's about small acts like staying in touch, being there when it matters, and showing up with sincerity. That exchange is what makes life so vibrant.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Take on responsibilities and contribute

When you join a network, don't be passive. Whether it's a professional society, a business group, or a board, step up and take on responsibilities. The more you contribute, the more you'll learn and grow. With every role you accept, your network deepens, creating opportunities you might not have imagined.

2. Be fully present and engaged

Time is one of the most valuable things you can offer. Strategic networking isn't just about showing up; it's about being fully present.

Listen actively, focus on the moment, and make the interaction meaningful for everyone involved. Small efforts like these can leave lasting impressions and strengthen connections.

3. Let connections flow naturally

Not every relationship needs to be over planned. If you meet someone and enjoy their company, let the connection evolve organically. Some relationships stick, and others don't, and that's okay. Growth often comes from the conversations we have and the people we meet, without the need for grand plans. Don't overthink it - just let it unfold.

CHAPTER 15



Ruche M Mittal

Founder, Her Entrepreneurial Network (HEN)

Growing up in a business family, Ruche Mittal developed networking skills early on by observing her parents, who were natural at building connections. At just 20, Ruche embarked on her entrepreneurial journey in graphic design, which evolved into a self-funded business. Having faced the challenges of running her own venture, she recognised the importance of knowledge-sharing and community learning, which inspired her to launch Her Entrepreneurial Network (HEN) India in 2011. HEN is an online business networking platform for women-led businesses, with a vision to 'Inspire, Inform, and Support' a community of women entrepreneurs by providing essential resources and opportunities for building successful businesses while maintaining balanced lives. Today, HEN is a thriving community with a reach of 40,000+ women entrepreneurs across India. Ruche is, at her core, a true Connector, dedicating each day to engaging with new people and linking them to valuable resources, information, and opportunities that enhance their journeys. She firmly believes that connecting with others is not merely a social or functional need; it is essential for emotional well-being. For her, networking is a fundamental life skill and not an option.

Growing up in a family that ran a designer suits and saris business, I was constantly surrounded by business talk, the ebb and flow of guests, and connections being formed naturally. My parents were the best at it with my mom being the ultimate public relations expert, and my dad, an ace

salesman. I learnt networking skills by just watching how effortlessly they engaged with people.

Back then I failed in sixth grade. It was a tough moment, but my mother was the one who showed me that a setback is just a pause, not an end. That lesson has always stuck with me. Oddly enough, from seventh to twelfth grade, I was consistently chosen as a class captain. These small moments are where I first learned the art of bringing people together, leading a small tribe, or in this case a group of students.

After school, I made the unconventional decision not to pursue graduation as I was not getting the subjects of my choice. I wasn't inclined to study just for a certificate. My parents and even some of my friends stopped talking to me for a while.

But I knew what I didn't want, and that clarity opened up a world of possibilities. The curiosity to explore different options led me to join the Arena Institute in Kolkata, where I discovered the world of graphic design.

I started freelancing in graphic design and made my first income by designing a logo for Eastern India's first restaurant-bar. Seeing my work on billboards and in newspapers gave me a rush and a taste of glamour. It inspired me to dive deeper into design. Meanwhile, I was still helping out at my parents' business. I landed freelance gigs by casually chatting with customers.

I also began picking up commercial projects through Kolkata's close-knit circles. Around the same time, Orkut came onto the scene. While most people were using it for casual connections, I saw an opportunity. I started marketing myself by posting my designs and searching for contacts in the graphic design world. It was a new concept, and I was just as much of a novice as everyone else. But it paid off. I found my first client, vendor, and business partner through Orkut. Together, we launched Idea Perfect Communications, offering design and web services. That marked my transition from freelancing to running a business.

The one thing that remained consistent in both phases was my approach of reaching out to strangers, getting to know them, and using those

connections to explore opportunities. This is how I learnt that we need to be clear about what we want to build in life and take the initiative to find our path. Back in 2006, I was using a digital platform to make connections without expecting anything in return, yet those connections ended up giving me valuable business referrals.

> **Strategic networking, to me, has never been about transactions. It's about building genuine connections, consistently nurturing them, and then making sense of them when the opportunity comes along.**

Connections are not always made in a board room. In Kolkata, we often hung out at coffee shops after work, meeting friends and friends of friends. Conversations flowed, and sometimes those casual interactions turned into personal or professional relationships. To me, networking is about genuinely catching up with people, sharing a bit of yourself, and being open. The term "small talk" doesn't sit right with me—talk is talk. It's in those conversations about family, hobbies, and life that real relationships begin to grow.

In one instance, I had to request a client for an early payment to manage my cash flow. Because we had built a genuine connection, I felt comfortable approaching him. He not only understood my situation but also taught me the valuable lesson that there is no shame in asking for an advance payment or a loan in business. I wouldn't have received that support or guidance from him if we hadn't built such a strong connection.

When I moved to Denmark for six months in 2013, it was a blank slate. No one knew me, and I didn't know anyone or the language. But I couldn't just shut down my design agency, so I had to figure things out. I started by reaching out to the International House, which helps expats settle down in Denmark.

They connected me with a mentor who helped me navigate Danish culture. I attended meetings at the Business Network International (BNI) there, even though all the meetings were in Danish. Thankfully, someone was kind enough to translate them for me to English.

I also opened myself to several business classes in Denmark to network and learn something meaningful. Through those connections, I began exploring potential collaborations and work opportunities. Networking can open doors when the opportunity arises, but more importantly, it expands your circle. It's about putting yourself out there, without expecting anything, and seeing where the connections take you.

After getting married I moved to Bangalore and joined BNI for business referrals and The Indus Entrepreneurs (TiE), as it was one of the organisations that could help me with the learning and networking I needed to support my business. At TiE I got access to the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women Program, a development program for women entrepreneurs. For three months, I was part of a cohort of 30 women from diverse industries and experiences, yet we all had similar goals and questions. This was also a time where I kept wondering, how do we keep this amazing platform of networking and knowledge-sharing alive after the program ends?

And how can we make it accessible to more women who don't have access to such resources?

This inspired me to create Her Entrepreneurial Network (HEN) India, an online business networking platform for women-led businesses. Launched in 2011, HEN's vision is to 'Inspire, Inform, and Support' a community of women entrepreneurs by providing them with the resources and opportunities they need to build successful businesses while maintaining balanced lives.

We began as one of the first online platforms focusing on networking for women entrepreneurs only, starting with a Facebook page for women entrepreneurs. Our accessibility and affordability made us unique. We created a space for women who were self-funding and running their businesses on their own. As women, we're often trained to prioritise our families and responsibilities as a caregiver, even when we are entrepreneurs or professionals. Often, we don't get the support we need for our own ventures. That's why HEN exists, to support every woman on the growth path she has chosen for her business. This could be right from registration of the company to hiring or other business aspects. Watching HEN grow from metros to tier 3 cities across India has been

one of our biggest achievements. Today, we have a reach of and support over 40,000 women entrepreneurs.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Prioritise networking

Connecting with others isn't just a social or functional need, it's essential for emotional well-being. Networking is a fundamental life skill, and it's not optional. We begin learning to socialise as early as two years old and continue to seek connections throughout our 70s and 80s to maintain social relevance. Make it a priority to engage and network with people.

2. Embrace your true self

Embrace your uniqueness and present yourself genuinely in all interactions. Authenticity builds trust, sparks meaningful relationships, and allows others to recognise your true value. As an example, I stay true to myself, by greeting people with 'Radhe Krishna' no matter where I am or who it is. This reflects my personal style, grounded in authenticity rather than religion.

3. Be courageous

Believing in yourself gives you the courage to speak up. Take that first step to reach out and share your vulnerabilities as comfortably as you share your strengths. When needed ask for support, connections and how you can help people around you. Supporting people around you is the best way to nurture your relationships.

CHAPTER 16

Zainab Patel



DEI Changemaker and Social Entrepreneur

Zainab Patel's story is a testament to the transformative power of networking, rooted in resilience and curiosity. It all began in ninth grade, where her participation in inter-school science fairs not only ignited her curiosity but also helped her explore her scientific temperament. Zainab also tapped into the strength of her community connections to overcome the personal struggles that came with a suicide attempt. The network facilitated her healing and empowered her to embrace her identity as a transgender woman while stepping into full-time activism. She has held significant roles, such as the head of Diversity and Inclusion at KPMG India and Pernod Ricard India, advocate for education rights, and served on the Justice Verma Committee during the Nirbhaya rape case. Zainab has also contributed as an associate on the first study commissioned after independence examining the status of women in India. She credits her extensive network for her growth and opening these opportunities. She currently serves as the India Region DEIC Leader at Cummins.

At St. Paul's School in Mumbai, my world felt small. Everything happened within its walls. That changed in the ninth grade. I started participating in science fairs, and suddenly, my view of the world began to expand. These fairs weren't just about building models. They were about collaboration. I worked with students from other municipal schools in Bombay, and together we learned how to present ideas and communicate effectively. I distinctly remember one of my first projects

on HIV/AIDS in 1996-97. It pushed me to approach health professionals at nearby hospitals. That's when I realised networking wasn't just about making connections. It was about seeking knowledge and expertise.

Networking nurtured my curiosity and deepened my understanding of my scientific temperament, opening doors to new possibilities. But ninth grade wasn't just about discovery. Unfortunately, it was also a very dark chapter of my life.

Enduring persistent bullying and harassment at school led me to a breaking point. I attempted suicide by consuming poison. I ended up in the hospital, losing control of my peripheral nerves. I couldn't even hold a pen. My school doubted I could write my tenth-grade exams, even with grace marks.

Everyone seemed to know about my suicide attempt. Questions and judgment surrounded me and my family. I withdrew, spending most of my time at home, avoiding people. Recovering wasn't easy. It took two years of physiotherapy before I could write my exams. On my third attempt, I finally cleared them. By the time I finished school, I craved a fresh start; a chance to meet new people and leave the past behind.

Junior college at St. Andrews in Bandra gave me that opportunity. Traveling by Mumbai's local trains once again forced me out of my safe zone. The daily commute introduced me to strangers who became familiar faces. I had my go-to food stall for tea at the station and knew the familiar faces who boarded the same train each day with me.

College also expanded my mind. Being part of a Christian denomination encouraged me to think critically and use English more effectively. I was still figuring out my identity as a gender non-conforming person. Meeting people from different backgrounds broadened my perspective. I found inspiration in individuals who didn't fit traditional moulds. They weren't exactly like me, but their journeys gave me hope.

> **When I think of strategic networking, I see the strength of human connection fuelled by the innate desire to find those who share one's values.**

These connections helped me embrace my identity as a transgender person. They also gave me the confidence to speak up and pursue public speaking on subjects I was passionate about. I began sharing my thoughts publicly, overcoming my stammer in the process. Speaking out helped me heal from past trauma, including sexual abuse. Eventually, I won the Student of the Year award, something I couldn't have achieved without the support of my network.

Another turning point came when I volunteered for the St. Mary's festival in Bandra. Supporting a social cause taught me to think beyond myself. It wasn't about how others saw me. It was about the difference we were making.

During the project, I engaged with the management committee, traffic police, fellow volunteers, and church authorities As students without financial resources, our contribution came in the form of time, effort, and genuine passion for meaningful work. This involvement helped me actively build connections and explore whether this was something I could pursue more deeply.

Volunteering with the Humsafar Trust felt like a natural extension of my growing passion for LGBTQ+ advocacy. It marked a turning point that shifted my focus entirely toward activism. I visited their centers and joined a public protest in 2000 against Section 377, the law that criminalised homosexuality. It was a life-changing moment.

I enrolled in a Bachelor of Management Studies program at Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan. But after two years, I dropped out to pursue activism full-time. The institution made it clear there was no place for someone like me. At the same time, my family asked me to leave home. I found refuge in the transgender community.

Surviving wasn't easy. I begged on the streets because it felt like a better option than becoming a sex worker. My community stood by me. They protested when I was barred from completing my exams through distance learning. They made sure I had the chance to succeed. For the first time, I felt truly happy. I could finally live as the woman I wanted to be.

Strategic networking is largely about where you are in life and how you or your connections can support each other in whatever need may arise, whether it's accessing a job or getting time with senior officials. I've used strategic networking in my work with the National Council on AIDS and the National Council on Transgender Persons, connecting with ministers and the Prime Minister's office.

My role as the Diversity and Inclusion leader at KPMG India emerged from a network connection, demonstrating the tangible career impact of strategic relationships. But I didn't stop there. I worked on the right to education, served on the Justice Verma Committee during the Nirbhaya case, and co-authored a white paper that laid the foundation for the Nirbhaya Center. I have also contributed to the first post-independence study on the status of women in India. Every opportunity came through my network.

Networking is at the core of everything I do. It's not just about LinkedIn profiles or conference meetings. It's about consistent effort and genuine curiosity. I maintain a close circle for regular connections while staying active in professional groups. The personal and professional are now intertwined. I don't leave networking to chance and proactively work on it.

You don't need to come from a marginalised community to value networking. The COVID pandemic reminded us of its importance by bonding, reaching out, and checking in. Don't wait for a crisis to prioritise networking. Life is unpredictable, and connections often hold the key to unforeseen opportunities. My journey shows the power of these connections to uplift and transform.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Broaden your horizons

Limiting yourself to familiar circles restricts growth. Embrace diverse networks to gain new perspectives and evolve personally and professionally. It will help you shift your worldview, evolve your personality, and gain wisdom. Strategic networking means stepping

beyond your comfort zone and actively connecting with others to embrace the bigger picture.

2. Network for a greater cause

In today's world, people's roles are shaped by the stories, anecdotes, and information they encounter. Use networking as a platform to share stories that may not fit the exact context or expectations but still resonate with others. By doing so, you can make a meaningful impact as people relate to your experiences. Embrace the power of people by actively networking for a greater cause.

3. Proactively bring value to the network

Always contribute meaningfully to your network. Engage in two-way exchanges to ensure your interactions involve a reciprocal exchange of resources, avoiding one-sided relationships. Prioritise self-improvement by continuously enhancing your skills and knowledge to bring value to your network. This will help you to enrich each conversation, relationship, and group dynamic you participate in.

CHAPTER 17



Naiyya Saggi

Group Co-Founder, Good Glamm Group | Founder, BabyChakra

Naiyya's strategic networking philosophy is rooted in continuous learning and the purpose of giving back. Today she is the Co-founder, of Good Glamm Group - South Asia's Largest Content to Commerce Conglomerate and Founder of BabyChakra. The foundation and success of BabyChakra is built on a strong network of mothers, doctors, and FMCG companies, establishing it as India's most trusted parenting platform. BabyChakra is also among the few ventures from India to be covered as a Harvard Business School case study. Naiyya is a member of The National Taskforce for Regulatory Issues, DPIIT Ministry of Commerce India, on the Governing Council of Tech Entrepreneurs Association of Mumbai and also on the Hardvard Alumni Entrepreneurs. She has been a mentor at Facebook's flagship #SheLeadsTech, Google for India and The Government of India's National Startup Awards. She serves as an independent director on the board of the publicly listed Welspun Living, part of the $5 BN Welspun Group. Naiyya is recognised as one of India's Top Emerging Leaders by Entrepreneur, The Economic Times and Business World.

Networking has always served as a powerful asset for my learning and reaching significant milestones in my life. Looking back at my school days in Kolkata, I wasn't strong academically. Textbooks never felt like my medium. Instead, I discovered my ability to connect with people, absorbing knowledge from their experiences. That's how I started to

approach learning, by engaging in real conversations and drawing insights from those around me.

> **When you think about strategic networking for learning, it boils down to identifying people who excel in their fields, the ones who are actively shaping those spaces. Once you've found them, the next step is figuring out how to reach out and form a genuine connection, hoping to learn from their journey.**

When I was at Harvard Business School (HBS), I found it fascinating to observe how different people and nationalities approached networking and building relationships. It was like watching a masterclass in human behaviour. Amidst all of this, I had to constantly remind myself to stay true to who I was. I didn't really get caught up in the grand, traditional networking events that many gravitated towards. Also engaging in surface-level networking can be exhausting. I chose to invest where it mattered and got intentional.

Exploring beyond HBS, I found my passion and became a chair at the Hauser Center for Nonprofits. This role allowed me to connect with students across the Harvard ecosystem—from law students to public health scholars, even policy experts from the Kennedy School. I built a network that I can still rely on whenever I need to connect someone with a lead at Harvard.

One of the most defining experiences for me has been the Harvard India Conference. My first year, I volunteered; by the second, I was a co-chair. The conference was pivotal because, sitting in Boston, I was able to stay connected with what was happening back in India. More importantly, I leveraged Harvard's reputation to engage with some of the brightest minds. We brought these thought leaders to campus, spent time with them, and, in doing so, forged deep relationships that lasted long beyond the event. Through these experiences, I learned the importance of using your access.

After spending a few years abroad, I returned to India with the dream of being an entrepreneur. At this point I had no idea of how to raise money, build a team, or even register a company. I turned to LinkedIn, searching

for people who were building exciting ventures or funding innovative businesses. I was upfront about my lack of knowledge, and eager to learn from their experiences. I requested for meetings to gain insights, and over time, many of those early connections blossomed into lasting friendships.

There's another great example that demonstrates how networking benefited my entrepreneurial journey. For anyone at the beginning of their career, this might be relatable, especially when it comes to finding opportunities. In 2014, one of the big names in angel investing was Mumbai Angels. I kept hearing that I should try raising capital through them. I didn't know anyone there, nor did I know how to approach them. Through a kind introduction, I met the head of Mumbai Angels, who mentioned an upcoming summit that brought together key angel investors from across South Asia, the U.S., and other 500 Startups. It was a perfect opportunity for exposure, but there was a catch – the ticket price was steep, somewhere around 25,000-30,000 Indian rupees. I wasn't sure I wanted to spend that kind of money just to attend.

I asked if there was a more affordable way in, and to my surprise, they needed a presenter. I immediately said yes! I ended up hosting the summit, moderating panels, and meeting all the key players in the angel investing world. At one point, people were even asking me, "You're from Harvard Business School, why are you hosting this summit?" But for me, it was all about learning. Backstage, on stage – everywhere – people were talking about angel investing, discussing the hottest sectors, portfolio companies and sharing insights. It was an incredible learning experience and led to BabyChakra's seed funding from Mumbai Angels!

Sometimes, you just have to put yourself out there and stay humble about the process. As a founder, it's important to be open to doing whatever it takes to gain access and opportunities. It was one of my Mumbai Angels investors that told me about the Grace Hopper Conference for Women in Technology in 2014. I was among the winners of the Women Entrepreneur Quest that year, which earned me an experiential learning trip to Silicon Valley, US.

I frequently use social media to share personal and professional updates, as well as to follow the journeys of people who genuinely interest me.

The principle remains the same, connect with the right people. I also believe that conferences can sometimes be inefficient, so I recommend joining smaller, focused groups or cohorts within your industry. For instance, after delving into the consumer sector for two years, I felt disconnected from tech, which had always been my core interest. This year, I made a deliberate choice to re-engage with tech by joining the governing council of the Tech Entrepreneurship Association of Mumbai. I got elected, and now once again I'm immersed in the world of technology. I am meeting younger founders and getting exposed to what they are thinking about the future of technology.

My first entrepreneurial venture, BabyChakra, thrived because of a strong network centered around parenting. From mothers and doctors to policymakers and FMCG companies, this network has been crucial in shaping BabyChakra into a platform for meaningful discussions on parenting.

Networking is deeply intertwined with my life's purpose and my passion for helping others. I view it as a privilege to leverage the network I've built over the years. When I can introduce people and connect the dots across different contexts, geographies, and sectors, I feel like I'm truly fulfilling my role of being supportive and impactful. It's a way to amplify others' potential while also enriching the communities I work with. Life is an ongoing journey of building relationships and giving back whenever you can.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Dive deep and define your expertise

Immerse yourself in whatever space you're pursuing. There's immense value in becoming an expert in what you stand for. It all circles back to understanding who you are, what you represent, and how you choose to grow.

2. Identify your connects

Be deliberate about the connections you make and align them with your goals and the distinct journey you want to create for yourself.

3. Reach out mindfully

Be intentional about your reasons for reaching out. People have time constraints and appreciate meaningful, value-driven conversations. When you reach out with something valuable to discuss, you'll earn greater respect.

CHAPTER 18

Madhura Dasgupta Sinha

Founder and CEO, Aspire For Her



Since the age of 18, Madhura has been driven by a deep desire to create meaningful change for the women of India. Data that showed India ranked alarmingly low in women's participation in the economy and some real-life experiences, inspired Madhura to leave her successful banking career of 25 years and create Aspire For Her (AFH) — a groundbreaking platform to motivate and empower women to join and stay in the workforce. Madhura's networks that she has built through her career and her alumni, have been highly supportive of the mission of AFH and come forward to contribute as sponsors, partners, mentors and volunteers. Today, AFH has grown into a vibrant global community of over 600,000 women across 23 sub-communities. Within the community there are ambassadors who imbibe the passion and purpose of Aspire For Her, and pay it forward in their own way.

Over my 25 years in banking, I have had the privilege of moving across roles and departments, each one offering a new adventure. Right out of the XLRI Campus, I started in consumer banking sales with ANZ Grindlays Bank, and then moved to branch banking. Later, I transitioned to finance, and eventually led the high-net-worth business and priority banking and customer experience for India and South Asia for Standard Chartered Bank. Each of these roles provided opportunities to build and deepen my professional connections, including with my bosses, team members, and colleagues from other departments.

To earn trust, establish visibility, and create opportunities for career growth, you have to put yourself out there in your network. That means raising your hand to take on different projects and embracing new responsibilities that give diverse exposure and interesting ways to collaborate.

This incident in my journey clearly illustrates the power of networks and visibility. At one point, I was the Branch Manager at the 90 MG Road branch of Standard Chartered Bank, the largest and busiest branch in the country.

The role provided me access to some of the senior members of the organisation, who worked just upstairs from the branch. I saw this as an opportunity to engage with them, by sharing updates about our work, and seeking their feedback. One day, the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) approached me with an offer to join his team.

It was surprising because the team was traditionally made up of Chartered Accountants, but they were looking to bring in others from the business side for a fresh perspective. The role was one of the best experiences of my life. It gave me a solid understanding of profit and loss statements, balance sheets, and the ability to analyse numbers intuitively.

> **Networking is all about taking a genuine interest in people and connecting with them as human beings. You should try to make the effort to remember what's important to them.**

I've noticed that even relationships that aren't very deep can become incredibly meaningful.

Since I was 18, I have felt a deep desire to do something significant for the women of our country. Over the years, while managing a busy career, I contributed in small ways wherever I could. Yet, I yearned to create something bigger and more sustainable, that would leave a lasting impact.

In 2014, life nudged me closer to that purpose during an interview for a role at IDFC FIRST Bank. To my surprise, the interviewer told me I was not being considered for a consumer banking role, despite my 20+ years

of experience. Instead, they wanted me to lead “employee experience”. At the time, the term wasn’t widely recognised.

When I asked, the interviewer explained that they wanted to treat their employees with the same care and thoughtfulness as their best customers. It was a bold and unexpected proposition, since I had never worked in HR before. Yet, I took the leap.

Looking back, this experience gave me an incredible understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) through the lens of HR. It also laid the groundwork for building Aspire For Her (AFH), providing me with a solid framework and language that resonated with corporate India.

As I delved deeper into data to understand the barriers women face, I was struck by an uncomfortable truth: India was at the bottom when it came to women’s participation in the economy. Even more disheartening was the declining trend in workforce participation among women over the years.

I couldn't help but think, that while I am surrounded by some of the most brilliant and talented women in the world right here in India. why aren't we seeing that brilliance translate into economic progress for our country? It became clear to me that deep-seated mindset shifts were necessary. A series of real-life incidents of bright and young women I knew, leaving the workforce and all this data sitting in my head was really bothering me.

When I vented to my mother and said, “The government, policymakers, and corporate India need to do something about this!” My mother, who is always pragmatic, looked at me and said, “What are you doing about it?” Her words hit me like a wake-up call. She was right. I couldn’t just sit there pointing fingers. That moment sparked something deep within me, and that’s how Aspire For Her was born — a platform to inspire women to join and stay in the workforce.

I have always believed that if you approach something with a genuine desire to make a difference, and no hidden agenda, you naturally draw others in. They not only accept the work you’re doing with warmth and affection, but they also feel inspired to walk with you on that journey.

My entire MBA batch from XLRI, Jamshedpur and connections from the banking industry have been incredibly supportive of AFH. Some of my former colleagues have opened doors, introducing AFH to people and organisations. Others have stepped up as guest speakers, mentors, and role models, willingly sharing their time and expertise to help us grow. When we launched AFH in March 2020, the world came to a standstill due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Everything we had envisioned as physical interactions suddenly was no longer possible. We had to very quickly adapt and figure out a way to build operations and relationships in the digital space. I can now confidently say that the digital relationships we built during those days were nothing short of extraordinary.

We started with a small group of young college girls, many of whom were my daughter's friends. At the time, they were anxious and uncertain about their academic futures. Exams were being postponed, classes were disrupted, and their world felt out of balance. Through AFH, these young women found a way to channel their pain into purpose. This network of enthusiastic girls was instrumental in rolling out the initiative even in those uncertain times.

Our mission to add one million women to the workforce by 2025 became an epiphany for them, making them realise the profound importance of economic empowerment and having their own voice.

Today we have an extensive community for whom we have managed to sow the seeds of economic empowerment across the world. These ambassadors of AFH imbibe the passion and purpose of Aspire For Her, and pay it forward in their own way.

In May 2021, we launched a community called Not Alone. This community was specifically created for women who had lost their primary breadwinners to COVID-19. These women were not only financially insecure but also emotionally devastated, having lost their husbands or other close family members who supported them. We used the AFH model to help them rebuild their lives and become financially independent. We often meet these women at various sessions, and their

progress is heartwarming. Recently, during a job fair in Bangalore for returning women, I met one of these women.

She came up to me and told me that she was using our model to counsel six other women who have lost their husbands. She has become their pivotal point, guiding them just as AFH had guided her.

We keep our community alive with our winning and scientific model which looks at giving every woman access to employment, education and entrepreneurship. We enable this through our four pillars of mentors, courses, career opportunities through our corporate and other partners and community support.

While we have formal channels and structured programs, there is surely an organic impact of our work. Today the strength of our community is 600,000+ women and 23 sub-communities across the globe.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Build meaningful connections

Take the time to genuinely know and engage with the person on the other side. Show interest in who they are, their experiences, and what drives them. If you connect with someone with the right intent, they'll often remember you and the work you do. Over time, those connections can evolve into strategic and significant relationships.

2. Expand your horizon

Seek opportunities and connections beyond your current job description or immediate circle. It's amazing how diverse connections that are built overtime, can create opportunities to inspire, impact, and collaborate in interesting ways.

3. Your friends matter in your network

Nurture friendships who are not connected to your work. It is very important. These friends will provide you with fresh perspectives, emotional support, and a safe space to face challenges and for your personal growth.

CHAPTER 19

Gunjan Soni



CEO ZALORA & Management Board Member Global Fashion Group

Gunjan is a seasoned leader who believes that the most effective way to build networks is by excelling in what you do and then nurturing relationships that are rooted in trust and mutual growth. Currently, Gunjan serves as a Management Board member and the Chief Operating Officer of Global Fashion Group (GFG). In her role, she is also the CEO of ZALORA, GFG's Southeast Asia business. Recently, she was appointed as an independent member of the Board of Directors of CBRE Global, a Fortune 500 company (rank 135). Curiosity has always been a defining trait in both her professional and personal life. During her career spanning over 24+ years, she has consistently demonstrated that true networking is about proactively contributing and creating value long before seeking any personal gain. Gunjan has also been the Chief Marketing Officer at Myntra and Head of Jabong, both major fashion verticals under the Flipkart Group in India. Gunjan's extensive experience also includes serving as the Executive Vice President for Strategy and CEO Office at Star India (a 21st Century Fox subsidiary) and was Partner at McKinsey & Company having spent 10 years with the firm.

Looking back on my networking journey, I trace its roots all the way back to my childhood. Those years were a true blessing. The family bonds I experienced shaped my habits, my courage, and ultimately, my ability to be where I am today. I grew up in a typical middle-class family

in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. We were a close-knit family, with two siblings and parents who filled our lives with love and care. In hindsight, I realise that my early life was so full of support and equality that I never even realised women might face disadvantages at times.

Curiosity has always been a defining trait of mine. Long before computers became a household norm, I already knew I wanted to study engineering and computer science, which I pursued at Barkatullah University in Bhopal. I loved math and science, and computers captivated me like nothing else. The sheer power of technology and the endless possibilities it offered were exhilarating.

After graduating, I joined Infosys, an exciting place to be. It felt like an extension of campus life with all the fun, energy, and interestingly, at no point during college or while pursuing my MBA was I consciously thinking about the concept of networking. For me, it was more about surrounding myself with like-minded individuals, supporting each other, and getting involved in opportunities that aligned with my passions.

I joined McKinsey in 2003, and it turned out to be one of the most formative phases of both my professional and personal life. It was at McKinsey that I met my husband. From a networking perspective, it became my greatest learning ground. The connections I made there continue to be invaluable to this day, and I still tap into them for support whenever needed. My focus on excellence organically helped build my network. The partners and colleagues I worked with on various projects became strong supporters, and some turned into mentors, further expanding my network.

Moreover, McKinsey had formal practices in place to support people early in their careers, such as a structured buddy system that paired you with more experienced individuals. They guided me through much of the learning I needed.

I began to formally build my network in the middle of my career, recognising that at this stage, it's crucial to demonstrate your expertise, pursue valuable opportunities, connect with the right people, and offer meaningful support to others. The training and skills I received in how to approach these connections at McKinsey have been incredibly

valuable. The same principles can be applied to just about any other aspect of life.

If there's a goal in mind, you can either tap into an existing network or decide to build a new one that aligns with that objective.

> **The most important aspect of building a network is being really good at what you do. Adding a "strategic" element to networking means bringing intent into the process. First, have a clear objective; second, create a structured approach to achieve it.**

I derive great value and support from my MBA and McKinsey networks, but after stepping into the CEO role, I realised I needed a network that was even more diversified in expertise, backgrounds, industries, and reach. To achieve this, I joined the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO), a global network with a chapter in Singapore. YPO is diverse and formalised, which makes it easy to navigate.

Once you decide to be part of a network, the key is to be proactive about contributing long before you even think about what you'll gain from it. If you approach it with the intent of seeking personal gain, you will end up building a transactional network, not a strategic one.

We don't act on every request in our busy schedules, but we respond when someone we trust reaches out. A credible, reliable network also reflects your personal brand, one that shows you're not just a taker but a giver, too. Even at conferences, if you are genuinely there for knowledge-sharing, networks will happen naturally. You don't have to fight for it!

A strong network isn't something you set out to build; it's the outcome of the time, effort, and genuine care you invest in your connections and what others invest in you. To be honest, I can't think of any phase of my life that hasn't been influenced by my networks. On the professional side, at least two of my job changes were influenced by my network. Not only did the opportunity itself come through my network, but I also relied on those connections to test and evaluate if the role was truly right for me. It's your network that gives you the real story and insider details

about the people you will be working with. That candid guidance has been priceless for me.

More recently, I've been focusing on health goals and have been able to tap into my YPO network again. They have a dedicated subsegment for it, which is very active, offering high-quality content and organizing events I can tap into directly. It's really helping me pursue my goals in a structured way, from finding healthcare practitioners to discovering the best Pilates classes.

One challenge I've noticed is how social dynamics can vary, especially when it comes to how men and women choose to spend their time after work. This can impact the strength of work relationships because, ultimately, trust is built through both professional and informal interactions.

Guarding my time and adhering to the 80/20 rule is important to me. This stands true for all aspects of networking including online. Instead of aiming for a certain number of posts, I prioritise quality over quantity. If something is meaningful and resonates with me and my audience, I'll share it. Choosing the right conference, publication, or interview allows me to prioritise effectively and maximise my influence within the time I want to allocate for networking.

Networking is about doing it in a way that matters most to each group of people. For example, we have put together a fantastic monthly newsletter, in which I share a personal message alongside everything else we cover. We also ensure our town halls are high-quality. Similarly, for our brand partners, we publish an annual trend report, which serves as a key touchpoint to reinforce our role as their trusted advisor. I make time to meet with my top 15 to 20 clients through in-person and sometimes informal gatherings. My approach is definitely more offline, believing in the power of trusted and deeper networks.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Focus on excellence and passion

The most powerful way to build a network, is by being really good and passionate about what you do. Mastering your craft is a natural magnet for attracting the right people, who share that same energy.

2. Care for the people in your network

Support and nurture the people in your network through genuine contributions or by simply doing the right things. Over time, this creates lasting bonds. Genuinely caring for the people within your network is just as crucial as valuing the network itself.

3. Prioritise your time and energy

In today's world, it's crucial to choose the voice you want to have, and equally important to decide when and how to express it. Prioritising this is key, as time is finite, and doing so helps you make the most of your energy and efforts.

CHAPTER 20

Soorya Themudu

Chief Human Resources Officer, Sodexo



Soorya grew up in a modest household in Kepong, Kuala Lumpur, where she learned the value of education early. Her career at General Electric (GE) instilled a leadership philosophy combining individual excellence with building relationships, which became central to her networking approach during key roles at GE, Bumi Armada, and Sodexo. Today, as a versatile leader in Human Resources (HR), she excels in optimising operations, inspiring teams, and driving market growth. For Soorya, networking means nurturing a "web of influence", that gives you those few supporters that make all the difference. She strongly believes that in today's digital and automated world, we still need a balance of human connections as it provides insights, grounding, and a unique form of support that no technology can replace.

I grew up in Kepong, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in a modest household. Fortunately, my father always emphasised the importance of academics for a better future. Since my family couldn't afford private education, excelling academically to secure a place in a public university was essential.

The importance of a good education was ingrained into me. It was my only ticket to stability, a good job, and financial independence. While I focused on my studies, I also played a lot of sports at school as it was free and let's be honest, it was the cheapest way to stay out of trouble!

Between studies and sports, I didn't have the intention or much time to focus on building strong connections. Reflecting on those days, I realise that being involved in sports, and leading my team as a captain, taught me valuable lessons in teamwork and discipline, indirectly showing me how essential strong relationships are in achieving goals.

My father wanted me to become a doctor, which influenced me to choose biochemistry in college. I soon realised I couldn't handle the sight of blood, and that a lab job wasn't for me. Since switching courses wasn't an option, I completed my degree and started looking for roles in the professional services industry. I landed my first job as a management trainee in HR. My first job opened my eyes to the power of connections, which can offer learning experiences far beyond textbooks.

When I joined GE in 2006 as an HR Manager, my understanding of networking expanded further. From day one, it was clear that performance alone wasn't enough and relationships within the organisation were equally critical. GE's leadership philosophy emphasised that success was a combination of individual excellence, your executive presence and the connections you made along the way.

At GE, they had a structured system that trains everyone from fresh graduates to experienced professionals on building relationships. Employees were sent to their global leadership institute - Crotonville for training and development. I have had the opportunity to participate in several management and senior executive training programs there. We would spend one to three weeks immersed in classes and networking with staff from around the world. This served as a think tank with some of the best talent in the organisation, as we got an opportunity to brainstorm and exchange ideas about leadership, innovation, sustainability, and trends with clients. These connections became bonds that I could rely on for guidance when needed.

One memorable instance in my career was when a former leader, who became a close friend, introduced me to my current role at Sodexo. When you have spent several years nurturing an association with someone, these connections are more than just career moves or transactional benefits. Staying connected with others in a meaningful way opens doors for growth, learning, and ongoing support.

At Sodexo, my networking philosophy truly evolved. As an HR leader, I've built meaningful connections across diverse regions, helping drive real change in the lives of our teams and clients. At Sodexo, networking isn't just about career progression—it's about fostering collaboration that directly impacts quality of life and strengthens our global mission. In March this year I lost my mother. A dear mentor of mine, who lost her own mother just last year, has been incredibly supportive through this grief. We connected years ago, originally through my professional network when she was a head-hunter. Since then, we've stayed in touch often calling each other for brainstorming or just to talk. The best connections are those that show up when it matters the most.

> **Strategic networking is about cultivating relationships with people who inspire, support and challenge you. In today's digital and automated world, we still need a balance of human connections as it provides insights, grounding, and a unique form of support that no technology can replace.**

The best innovation and ideas spark, when you are in-person and bouncing thoughts off one another. To me, it is all about balance and the hybrid approach to networking. Sure, there are times when solitude works wonders, and you want to enjoy that coffee on your own. But we all need those moments when we can sit and share that same coffee in the company of others.

Throughout my career, I have had to build relationships and networks to lead teams across the globe, managing as many as 17 countries at one point. In cross-geographical leadership, credibility and maintaining a high "say-do" ratio are critical. If I commit to something, I ensure I follow through. It is also extremely important to build a "web of influence". It is that one or few strong supporters that make all the difference, in your network. As women we need to practice self-advocacy, to grow our careers in the direction we want to. Networking and having that web of influence amplifies your visibility and access to support, guidance, and opportunities. I've been lucky and have also worked on having strong supporters in my network.

When it comes to building connections, we're often encouraged to focus on networking with peers or those more senior. But I've found some of

my most valuable connections are with the younger workforce and fresh graduates I've brought on board.

They bring a fresh perspective and are often more tuned into the latest trends. In turn, I share my own insights from experience. It's a two-way street. Knowledge truly flows in all directions, which is why I value having a network that spans generations.

I also approach my online networking very strategically and sparingly. I believe it's not about knowing everyone; rather, having a few solid connections that can make a significant difference. When I'm networking online, I am mindful of what I post and say. Instead of posting every day, I prefer to be intentional about my contributions ensuring they add value to others and myself.

Introverts like myself, often grapple with self-doubt when it comes to networking. There's this nagging feeling that we might not have anything valuable to offer. I experienced that doubt during my earlier days, questioning my worth in conversations and connections. But in HR, wanting to grow meant I had to shift my mindset. Once I shifted my perspective, networking became much easier and more fulfilling. So, I started with taking small and manageable steps.

I began expanding my reach by speaking at universities, connecting with people outside of my immediate work circle. As my confidence grew, I took on speaking engagements at HR events, industry forums, and eventually started presenting in front of boards of other companies. When building my network, I've always focused on making authentic connections and strengthening those relationships where my values align. Networking, to me, has to be more than just ticking a box. Building meaningful relationships takes real investment of time, energy, and intention to support one another.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Authenticity wins over transactional networking

Authenticity is everything. Build connections that genuinely align with your values. I've been to events where the networking felt too transactional, and people seemed solely invested in personal gain. I tend

to shy away from those interactions because it's about quality over quantity. Being honest about your purpose, even when seeking support or a specific benefit, shows authenticity and clarity. It helps build trust in the connection.

2. Be open and curious

Openness and curiosity are essential for building a valuable network. Don't rush to be judgemental, because some of the most valuable and impactful connections can emerge from unexpected places.

3. Giving back is important

It's not just about what you get from a connection, it is about what you give back. Building strong connections means investing as much into them as you hope to receive. It's that mutual effort that really strengthens a network.

CHAPTER 21

Veena Venugopal



Head of Aircraft Data Analytics, Airbus India

Veena exemplifies the power of self-awareness, strategic networking, and stepping beyond comfort zones. Her journey is grounded in the values of discipline, sincerity, and courage instilled by her parents. Veena began her career at Honeywell, where an internship evolved into a full-time role — a testament to her hard work and early networking efforts. At Airbus, she has taken on several initiatives, including leading the Women India Network and participating in diversity and inclusion efforts. Each of these opportunities has helped her create meaningful connections and make a positive impact within the organisation. Veena views networking as a cumulative process that fosters collaboration, trust, and career growth. Her philosophy of "need-less networking" highlights the importance of building relationships beyond immediate needs, often unlocking opportunities that may not be visible at first. Veena was named among the "100 Most Influential Artificial Intelligence Leaders of the Year" in 2024 by Analytics India Magazine (AIM) and honoured with the title of "Transformational Woman Leader of the Year" in 2024 by the Indian Inspirational Women Awards (IIWA).

The cornerstone of any network lies in the people who inspire and shape you, and for me, that foundation began with my parents. The values that define who I am are a direct reflection of their influence, guiding how I build connections and nurture relationships. My father worked in the corporate world while my mother was a school teacher. I have imbibed

the values of discipline, sincerity, and integrity, qualities from my parents. The one thing that I especially absorbed from my mother was courage. Her determination taught me the importance of having confidence and being true to yourself. She was the first person in her village to pursue a master's degree, a groundbreaking achievement at the time.

Whenever there was a reference to a senior woman leader in my father's organisation he would turn to me with a sense of pride and determination and say, "I want to see you there someday." These were the kinds of conversations that influenced me in my childhood. They were my early lessons in ambition, possibility, and the belief that I could carve out my own place.

I attended an all-girls convent school and was surrounded by an incredibly talented cohort of students. This gave me a glimpse of what excellence truly looks like at a very young age. The environment ignited a fire within me to be different, try new things, and to stand out.

As a top student, I earned several awards both within my school and at inter-school competitions. These achievements were more than just accolades; they validated my efforts and gave me the confidence to believe I could make the positive impact I aspired to.

Growing up, my family moved frequently due to my father's job, and I completed my schooling in various parts of India. This constant change exposed me to people from diverse backgrounds and languages. While I didn't know the term "networking" then, I naturally formed connections with friends, their parents, and teachers. These experiences broadened my perspective and made me open-minded and comfortable engaging with people from all walks of life.

I pursued my Bachelor of Technology (B.Tech) in Electronics and Communications from Vellore Institute of Technology, stepping into a campus that felt like an entirely new world. Surrounded by unfamiliar faces, I quickly realised that no one here knew me as the accomplished student I had been in school. With four years ahead of me, I knew I wanted to make my presence felt. I was determined to once again be

recognised as someone serious about academics, and capable of making a meaningful impact in this new environment.

College gave me several interesting opportunities to do just that. One of my fondest experiences was setting up the first Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) student branch at my college. This initiative opened the door to connect with students and faculties beyond my own institution. I got to interact and work with like minded individuals who were driven by the same passion for brilliance and technology and create an impact.

We organised events such as student conferences and festivals, where I was involved in tasks like collecting and reviewing research papers, setting up processes, and coordinating the entire structure. It was a wonderful opportunity that expanded my horizons and network. I am glad I could make a meaningful contribution to my institution.

Honeywell was my first job, and it truly underscores the power of networking. It all began during my eighth semester when I was offered an internship in aerospace, a field I had always admired. During the internship, my manager suggested that we collaborate on a white paper, which became an important experience for me. This opportunity also allowed me to build meaningful connections within the organisation. I had insightful conversations with colleagues and leaders, often over coffee or breakfast. Through these interactions, I gained invaluable insights into the importance of networking and the need for self-awareness in recognising your strengths and weaknesses.

To my delight, the white paper we worked on was recognised as one of the best at Honeywell India for that internship programme. This achievement, combined with the connections I had made, validated my efforts, bolstered my self-confidence, and inspired me to aim even higher. I went on to have a fulfilling tenure at Honeywell, working there for two and a half years.

In 2017, I joined Airbus in India as a systems engineer working on simulator platforms. Recognised for my technical expertise, my career progressed steadily, allowing me to take on diverse roles. These evolved from leading projects to stepping into leadership positions, where I

gained experience in areas new to me, such as business processes and people management.

In my career, and for anyone else's, I believe there are three types of networks to build. The first one is the peer network that gets formed more informally.

These are the people you join the organisation with or connect with casually through shared experiences. The second is the operational network, on the other hand, which is more intentional and focused on executing tasks. It requires you to go beyond your immediate function and collaborate across teams.

> **Then there's the strategic network, which involves understanding the broader organisational landscape and identifying key influencers, such as senior leadership and those managing critical portfolios. It's essential to excel in your work to earn the attention and respect of these connections, as they can potentially become sponsors who significantly accelerate your career growth.**

Approaching these connections thoughtfully is crucial. Focused and respectful engagement ensures you make the most of these valuable relationships. It's essential to be intentional, identify the right connections, and nurture those relationships to shape your path.

During my time at Airbus, I have built my networks by getting involved with several initiatives such as joining the diversity and inclusion initiative. I have led a group called the Women India Network, an employee resource group established for the women at Airbus across sites in Bangalore and Delhi. Our vision was to create a sisterhood, a safe space where women could share their experiences, network, and support one another by saying, "Hey, I've been through this too."

I have also been actively involved in internal communications and company events, such as contributing articles for our newsletter or participating in townhalls.

I often say that one should think of "need-less networking". Sometimes, you may not feel an immediate need to connect, but stepping beyond

your current job and building other relationships can open doors you never anticipated. Each of the initiatives I have got involved with at Airbus has offered me an opportunity to connect with numerous people and contribute meaningfully to the organisation. It also gave me an opportunity to understand what other functions within the company were doing. Without this broader perspective, it becomes challenging to grasp the bigger picture or communicate effectively across different levels.

As I reflect on my career and the networks I have built, I see them as the result of a cumulative effect. By engaging in various initiatives and establishing myself as an industry leader, I have earned the trust of others by consistently showing up. Trust is incredibly powerful, and people are far more likely to place their confidence in someone they know than in someone unfamiliar.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Be self-aware and confident

Before building a network, it is essential to develop self-awareness regarding your strengths and weaknesses. Having areas for development is perfectly natural, and being conscious of them allows you to embrace and own them, fostering a sense of security in who you are. This awareness forms the foundation for the self-confidence needed to engage with others authentically.

2. Build a network of sponsors and mentors

Networking is a crucial aspect of both personal and professional growth, particularly when striving for advancement. Success cannot be achieved in isolation; it requires connections, collaboration, and support from others. Therefore, it's essential to invest time and effort in building relationships with sponsors and mentors who are willing to support your progress and development.

3. Step beyond your comfort zone

Start stepping out of your comfort zone because that's where the real growth begins. It's about pushing yourself into situations that challenge

you, even if it feels uncomfortable. There will be days of tears and doubts, but you have to move past them. It’s those uncomfortable moments that ultimately lead to progress and self-discovery.

CHAPTER 22

Jaya Virwani



Global Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Ethics Leader at EY Global Delivery Services

Jaya leads the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) strategy and the Ethics office for Ernst & Young's (EY) Global Delivery Services, covering eight countries, including India, China, Spain, and Argentina. With EY since 2004, Jaya assumed the DE&I leadership role in 2012 and the Ethics leadership role in 2018, continuing to create a lasting impact in both domains. Inspired by her mother's effortless ability to connect with people and the resilience she learned through sports, Jaya's journey highlights the power of strategic networking and visibility in transforming opportunities into meaningful leadership roles. She firmly believes that even exceptional work can fall short without the right connections to establish a strategic network and gain the visibility needed for career acceleration. Jaya's influence has earned her notable accolades, including the Diversity Leadership Award by the World Human Resources Development (HRD) Congress in 2016 and recognition by the UN Women's Empowerment Principles (WEP) Awards in 2021.

When I think about what first inspired me to connect with people, my mind always returns to my mother. She had an incredible way with people. Watching her, I saw how effortlessly she built relationships and formed networks. She was approachable, warm, and could talk about anything. Whether the conversation was intellectual, light-hearted, or humorous, she had a remarkable ability to meet people where they were.

Another powerful influence on my ability to build connections came from sports. During my time at Bishop Cotton's in Bangalore, I represented my school in table tennis, javelin, and other athletic events. In college, at Mount Carmel's, I took on a leadership role as captain of the softball team.

Sports taught me discipline, resilience, and the importance of teamwork. It didn't just build my physical strength, it shaped my character and set the foundation for my leadership journey. But perhaps the most valuable lesson was how to deal with failure. In sports, losing isn't personal. It's part of the game. You win some, you lose some, and then you move forward. That mindset has stayed with me throughout my life, serving me in leadership and in building networks.

Networking, for me, is not just about relationships, it's about creating the right ecosystem, one that fosters growth and opportunity for everyone involved. This is a skill I first honed through sports, and it has shaped how I approach networking as leader. I've learned that one of the most valuable skills is understanding how to position people for success. It's not just about competence; it's about aligning people's strengths with the right roles, opportunities, and connections.

I've always loved the saying, "It's not what you know, but who you know."

> **You can be doing the best work, but without the right connections, you'll struggle to build the strategic network needed to accelerate your career.**

My own journey at Ernst & Young (EY) is a testament to this truth. It began in 2004 through a connection. At the time, I was at a crossroads. My kids were growing up, and I began to feel a vacuum in my life. Being a mom is deeply fulfilling, but it isn't the only facet of who I am. I wanted to explore the parts of myself that had been waiting quietly in the wings.

One day, during a conversation with a close friend, she encouraged me to get back to work. But she didn't stop there, she made the connection that changed everything. EY was looking for someone to work a four-hour day as a communications specialist, a role that fit perfectly into my

life at the time. My friend introduced me to the CEO of EY's shared services, and after a meaningful conversation, the job was mine.

I couldn't have imagined how that opportunity would shape my career and leadership journey. What started as a single conversation, fuelled by a blend of personal and professional networks became the gateway to a transformative journey at EY.

By 2012, however, I was approaching 40 and experiencing a kind of existential restlessness. I began questioning whether EY was all I would ever know. That uncertainty led me to reach out to my network once again.

One evening, over dinner, a family friend who exported baby garments said, "I'm growing my business and could use your help." The idea intrigued me. I took a leap and left EY, working with her independently for five months. But very quickly, I realised it wasn't for me. I missed the corporate structure I had left behind. Fortunately, I had maintained strong professional networks at EY, and when they began designing a DE&I leader role, they reached out to me.

"You're the perfect person for this job. Come back," they said. I returned to EY, stepping into a role that fit me like a glove. Once again, it was my network that opened the door to a pivotal opportunity.

At the time, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) were still emerging concepts in India. Interestingly, my personal network played a significant role in shaping my perspective. One of my yoga buddies was the APAC DE&I leader for CISCO, and her stories and experiences fascinated me. Another friend led DEI and Ethics for Dell and her journey inspired me and opened my eyes to the possibilities within DE&I, influencing how I approached the role at EY.

Driving DE&I across 11 regions and cultures has taught me that internal networks are invaluable. Success lies in inspiring people, giving them the freedom to share, and understanding what works within their specific cultures.

In 2008, we launched our LGBT+ inclusion efforts in China. It was a challenging endeavour, given the region's sensitivities and regulations.

But leveraging our internal networks proved to be the key. In just about a month, a significant population of employees in China signed up as allies, championing the initiative and driving momentum forward. Strategic networking is about more than just making connections. It's about aligning with allies, advocates, and champions who can amplify your efforts when it matters most.

One lesson I always emphasise to women is this: don't just put your head down and work. Results are important, but so is visibility. You need to talk about what you do and showcase your value. My journey into the ethics role at EY exemplifies this.

In 2018, after leading DE&I for six years, my CEO reached out to me. He needed someone to build the ethics role and hold people to the highest standards. "The qualities we're looking for are exactly what you've been demonstrating," he said.

It wasn't just my work that earned me the role, it was the visibility I had built within the organisation and the network I had nurtured. At every forum I attend whether I'm chairing, speaking, or simply part of a panel, I make it a point to highlight the top three achievements of my team or the changes I've driven. It's not about boasting; it's about showcasing.

As you grow in your career, technical skills will get you noticed, but relationships will take you further. Without investing in people and nurturing those connections, you risk stagnating.

One of the most effective strategies I've learned is what I call "the meeting before the meeting". Before a critical decision-making meeting, I reach out to key stakeholders one-on-one. I share my perspective, seek their input, and align on the direction. By the time the actual meeting happens, I've already laid the groundwork and built consensus.

This strategy has helped me move work forward, accelerate decisions, and navigate complex discussions. It's a way of how you connect at different levels of your network and get things done.

Lessons for Strategic Networking

1. Genuine connections drive impact

The ability to leverage your network and get things done starts with building genuine connections. When relationships are rooted in authenticity and shared purpose, they often grow beyond work into something far more meaningful. Genuine connections also foster valuable collaboration, bringing together people who share your passions and goals.

2. Own your boundaries

Women juggle many personal and professional stakeholders, each with their own expectations and demands. Often, the struggle lies in navigating these complexities without clear boundaries. The tipping point comes when you learn to manage relationships, both personal and professional without losing yourself. It's not just about setting boundaries; it's about finding confidence in your own space and owning it. That's when the real shift happens.

3. Invest in your network

Building a strong network means stepping out of your comfort zone and staying genuinely connected. Networks thrive when you engage authentically, nurture relationships, and invest in understanding people beyond the surface. Give others space to speak, share, and be heard. People enjoy talking about their work, experiences, and journeys. Opening that window for conversation creates meaningful opportunities to connect.

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Charu Mathur

Editor and Curator of this book



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With every story, it became even clearer that we are shaped not only by the networks we are born into, but also by the ones we choose to build with intention.

I truly hope each story inspires you to consciously build and nurture a network that supports your growth, leadership, and purpose.

Thank you.

Warmly,

Charu