

GiRL GANGS ARE NEW GIRLS

Networking is a powerful way to meet people and get things done. Unfortunately, it's one of those important but not urgent things that don't always get the attention they deserve. For women in particular—who may also be running households and raising children (and who almost always shoulder most of the responsibility for those things, according to recent reality checks)—there isn't enough time to attend a formal networking meeting. And the more informal contacts one makes could be more helpful by being more specific and less guarded about giving advice and sharing information. It's easier to ask a friend about salary negotiation than to ask someone sitting across from you at a luncheon meeting.

They got it goin' on.

Main Points

- Many women have risen to the time-crunch challenge by forming small groups called Girl Gangs that get together regularly in person, by phone, or via email to talk about life and career.
- Given the demands faced by the average American woman juggling work and family, an informal group offers a great way to harness the energy of different people in similar situations.
- Typically, exchanging ideas informally leads to better formal work and getting tapped for larger, more visible projects in the organization.

By Ann C. Logue

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Many women have risen to the challenge by forming their own small groups—Girl Gangs—that get together regularly in person, by phone, or via email to talk about life and career. These buddies share ideas and contacts, celebrate personal and professional successes, and help their members get more done. The power they represent is as awesome as that of any the Powerpuff Girls on Saturday morning TV.

No less a personage than Oprah Winfrey says she relies on informal networks. In the July/August 2000 issue of her magazine, *O*, she writes about her “Spa Girls,” a group of friends who get together to encourage each other in their diet, exercise, and personal growth programs. Because the members are all me-

dia executives, there’s at least some professional networking going on during their workouts.

In this era of multitasking, Oprah isn’t the only woman who is mingling her personal and professional lives with the help of an informal network of like-minded people. Given the demands faced by the average American woman juggling work, family, and life in general, an informal group offers a great way to harness the energy of different people dealing with similar situations.

Let’s look at a few groups that have formed informally and that are helping their members advance professionally while providing friendship and personal support. Perhaps we’ll inspire you to draw on this power for yourself or for your organization.

True stories

The Corporate Manager. In a big company, one needs to network just to navigate efficiently. In fact, it’s as important to network within a company as it is to network outside of it.

Daimler-Chrysler has 13,000 people working in its Auburn Hills, Michigan headquarters. Kathryn Lee, staff labor programs administrator, is proud that her company supports a Women’s Network Group and provides a number of opportunities for after-hours networking, including guest speakers and presentations. But as a working mother of two young children, formal networking is a low priority for her right now.

“Being perfectly candid, I would rather spend my evenings with my family and pass on the optional business gatherings,” she says. Intentionally or not, her company has provided a networking opportunity for women in the exact same circumstance.

After her second child was born, Lee started spending her lunches and breaks in Daimler-Chrysler’s lactation room, where she met a lot of other women.

“You could spot us a mile away,” she says, “with the sweater or suit jacket to cover up leaks and the oversized Pump-N-Style bag. Since we were all on a schedule, we got to know each other pretty well. It felt like we were in a secret club.”

In part because they didn’t work together, these women would use their pumping sessions to share ideas for

work as well as to talk about kids. Lee credits the group for helping her stick to nursing for a year, which isn’t easy. She says she’s also grateful for the opportunity to meet others in her company without taking extra time to attend meetings after work.

“I learned which areas in the company have great bosses, which departments have a lot of international travel, and other information that I can use on my job,” she says. And her companion nursing mothers formed a cross-departmental network as strong as any within the company.

The Academic. Universities are hardly free from the political and career-management demands of corporate life. Marita Golden is a writer and professor in the M.F.A. Graduate Creative Writing Program at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. She often meets with a group of other African American women teaching at colleges in the Washington, D.C. area.

“The group has helped us feel that we are supported in the trenches, even though we’re not all at the same university,” she says. “It’s very good to know that you’re not alone and that your experiences are valid.”

Golden believes these groups are vitally important. “Even in a university, there are very few situations where we get together to talk about what we are doing creatively,” she says.

In Golden’s experience, an informal group gives members a better chance to talk about their research or their articles in progress than in an organized faculty forum, which often degenerates into discussions about students, grading, and university policies. Her group finds that exchanging ideas informally leads to better formal academic work in the long run. They also enjoy discussing their lives in general with colleagues who have become friends.

“One woman in the group was a grandmother who provided great wisdom about life that we came to rely on,” says Golden.

That powerful combination of the personal and the professional is one reason that members come to rely on their girl gangs.

The Entrepreneur. Betsy Beaumon is an electrical engineer by training who worked for Lam Research and Cisco

Systems before starting an Internet company, selling it, and then joining another startup as a vice president. In fact, if she weren't a woman, she'd be the very stereotype of the young Silicon Valley executive.

Beaumont is part of a girl gang that has been a source of great camaraderie and professional support as she has moved up in her career. The group formed years ago, when she linked up with five other women who were going to the same trade shows "even though we lived only 10 miles apart. We were just too busy."

The group gets together regularly to help each other navigate the ever-turbulent waters of high technology. The members communicate almost daily by email. "It's the same kind of things guys do," Beaumont says. "We even get together and slam down a goodly number of cosmopolitans when the opportunity arises."

Though their meetings are generally social, their discussions are not. Among other things, Beaumont says the group has exchanged leads on office space and phone systems as well as shared advice on cultural issues within startups and technology companies.

"It's an interesting dynamic when the group is together," she says, "and it's helpful to have someone you can bounce ideas off of and explain how things work. With my current job at a startup, it was great to have friends who knew how to negotiate stock options and salaries for a high-level position."

Although the economy is changing quickly, the shared strengths of Beaumont's girl gang let the members view the change as a fabulous opportunity.

The email list

It's relatively easy to form a girl gang if you're running into like-minded people in the course of your day. But what if you aren't?

That was one of the problems facing Liz Ryan, co-founder and vice president of Ucentric Systems. She needed to hire a lot of technical people for her company and hoped for a good gender balance among the new employees.

"I thought, I want to meet these women. Where are they?"

Last July, Ryan started the Chicago Women in Technology—aptly shortened

The Girl Gangs in Your Company

Here are some suggestions for institutionalizing several aspects of informal networking.

There are many great ideas and good work being done within informal networks in your organization. Just be aware of the risks as well as the opportunities. After all, some of these groups are forming because people don't feel comfortable where they work.

Kirshenbaum Bond & Partners, a New York-based advertising agency, has a working mothers group that meets regularly to discuss various relevant issues. Angela Renfroe, the human resources manager who runs the group, has a few tips. The first is, once again, use technology.

"Here, the culture is that we communicate through email," says Renfroe. "I've set up an email address book for the working mothers, and they use it for referrals, tips, and support."

Renfroe also found that the members preferred holding meetings onsite rather than offsite, in part because they didn't have time for long lunches.

The support of senior management in setting up the group and listening to its suggestions has made the group powerful. Besides such relatively simple matters as getting a lactation room set up, the group asked for flextime.

"We were able to do it in accounting," says Renfroe.

Nina Adams, a consultant who helps organizations use technology to improve performance, is a big believer in the use of informal networking to grow organizations. One of the things she does is help companies use their intranets to create peer-networking opportunities. She points to a large bank as an example.

"The kinds of problems a teller su-

pervisor in Chicago has might be the same as those of a teller supervisor in Los Angeles. If a bank were to set up an [informal network] of teller supervisors, they could use email or Web meetings to share information and learn new skills."

That, Adams believes, could lead to increased power within the organization. Maybe the network develops a list of FAQs for supervisors that gets on the company's intranet. Then, the network members are affecting policy and could be asked to work on larger assignments, such as best practices."

You would think that any organization might want to use informal networks to create positive change from within rather than have people pooling resources to get new jobs elsewhere.

But that isn't always the case. One interviewee, who asked that neither she nor her company be identified, told this story:

When she was working for a large consulting firm, women within each department tended to meet regularly for lunch to talk about work and to share ideas. One year, the annual promotion list came out and no women in the firm were on it. When people started asking around, it turned out that many women throughout the firm had similar issues that had been discussed informally. Several de-

ecided to form a formal group to write a letter to senior management in the hope of making changes.

"Once it became formal, it was viewed as a bad thing politically to be involved in," she says. Instead of becoming agents for positive change, the women involved were considered to be whiners and complainers, and almost all of them left the firm within two years.

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How to Form Your Own Girl Gang

Chances are, you know people with whom you can share ideas and insight. But how can you harness that energy? Here are a few ideas to get you started.

First, there is no substitute for taking charge, whether your group ultimately becomes structured or informal. That's how Marita Golden launched her group. While she was teaching at George Mason University, other African American women who were teaching there kept telling her that they should get together for lunch someday.

"Finally, I just put my foot down and said, 'Hey, we're having a potluck at my house this Sunday.'"

If you have friends and colleagues with similar good intentions, maybe it's time to pick a date and invite everyone over. To make it easier, you can use an online invitation service like Yahoo! Invites (invites.yahoo.com) or evite (www.evite.com).

You can use technology other ways. Liz Ryan turned to Topica, an email list-management service (www.topica.com), when she started ChicWit. Topica lets people organize and operate their own email lists. It's one way to build informal contacts over a wide group of people, such as alums from your school, former co-workers, and people who work in the same profession in your town. Who knows? Someone may have already set up a list that's appropriate for you. To find out, check Topica.

Last, if you have a specific goal, such as changing your job or starting a fitness program, you may want to look at the ground rules that Oprah Winfrey established with her Spa Girls. She recommends creating a routine for meetings and keeping a record of members' progress, which may be what you need to do to reach your goal. Her Website has some information on how to get organized (www.oprah.com/spagirl/spagirl_landing.html).

to ChicWit—email list as a virtual version of a traditional networking group. It also quickly took on characteristics of an informal group as many subscribers use the list for help with nonprofessional aspects of their life. Along with job listings and announcements for business events, there are also frequent requests for recommendations for nannies, financial planners, and even hairdressers. Some subscribers have even used it to form their own version of Oprah's Spa Girls.

"People trust the members to help them," says Ryan. By getting help with some of the personal aspects of their lives, the list members can put more energy into their careers.

ChicWit spread quickly. "I told a couple of friends, and they told a few more," says Ryan, until there were more than 1,600 subscribers. They, including Ryan, almost immediately saw a need for similar lists in other cities.

"I started MassWit when Ucentric moved to Boston and I had to hire people there," Ryan says. When that list also took off, she took the list global. There are currently 29 local lists in the United States, Canada, and Australia, with more being added wherever there are women in technology looking to meet others. The email girl gang now has a formal name, WorldWit (www.worldwit.org).

The power of the Girl Gang

Networks don't have to involve monthly dress-up luncheon meetings at downtown hotels. There are people you know—or can find—who may have ideas for helping you run your business and your life better. By forming your own girl gang, you can draw on possibilities to make all of the members more powerful.

How do I know these networks exist? When I got the story assignment, I sent out two emails—one to my own girl gang of friends, relatives, and acquaintances and one to the ChicWit email list, which I subscribe to because I write a lot of Web content. Every anecdote, every expert, every person mentioned in this article came from those two messages. If my gang is that good, yours can be, too. □

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