

Supporting the Development of Networking Skills of Youth

A guide for integrating the
development of networking
skills into club programming



CANADA

Introduction

Networking is all about people – people you know, people you don't know, people with similar interests, people with knowledge and expertise you want to build, people connected to people you want to connect to. Networking has always been an important career skill. Whether looking to enter the world of work, change jobs, learn more or support others, networking will continue to be vital to career success.

Marissa King and Balázs Kovács's research for Harvard Business Review found that professional and personal networks are shrinking because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now more than ever, it's vital to remain intentional about maintaining connections to casual acquaintances.¹

Integrating skill building that supports effective networking into regular 4-H club programming can be easy to do, and the perfect opportunity to model this important career skill for members in natural ways. Based on feedback received in the 2021 Careers on the Grow survey, 4-H members in Canada indicated that they could benefit from additional opportunities for skill-building in these areas to feel career-ready.

Networking is built on effective communication, something that is part of every 4-H project in many ways. Members will come with various levels of experience and comfort with networking. Start with what they know and where they are, not where you think they should be.

In this resource, you'll find ideas for talking about networking, and tips to integrate skill building for effective networking into routine club projects. This resource provides the basics, but don't stop here! Look for other available resources to keep building knowledge and competencies in this important skill area.



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How the Positive Youth Development formula supports future careers of members

At 4-H everything we do centres around ensuring youth are strengthening and developing skills and abilities through the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach. This globally recognized, and research-based approach considers youth an asset and partner in the community. This general approach and philosophy is incorporated into all of our programming, including career development. The 4-H PYD formula, or “honeycomb,” supports youth development in becoming a responsible, caring, and contributing individual empowered to be successful!

The 4-H honeycomb identifies key assets that youth build through 4-H programming. In career development, assets are often referred to as transferable skills. Transferable skills support success in all areas of life including work, volunteerism and even leisure activities, such as creative and critical thinking. Including career preparedness in regular club activities ensures youth can improve skill mastery in transferable skills, are supported in planning and preparing for their future which enhances their sense of purpose. The connection between PYD and future career success is one that shouldn't be overlooked.



What is Networking?

Networking is the action and/or process of interacting with others for professional or social purposes and to exchange information and ideas. It can be formal or informal. It involves talking to people, being curious, asking questions, offering something in return and being open to sharing ideas. Effective networking takes time, practice, confidence, and abilities across a variety of transferable skills.

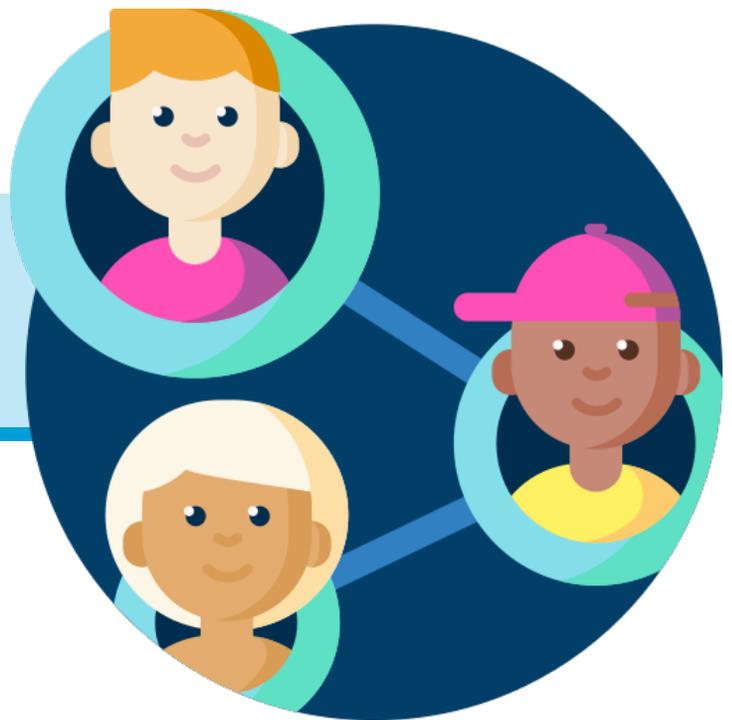
Your network is made up of the people you interact with, who have the potential to provide you with professional guidance, assistance, and insights. It can include:

- Coworkers
- Family
- Friends
- Teachers
- Fellow students
- Professional in your field or related fields
- Personal acquaintances
- People you interact with in other settings (e.g., community groups)

Networking involves people connecting and sharing information with each other, communicating ideas, interests, and passions with other who share those same interests and passions.

“True networking occurs when there’s an understanding that everyone in the room has equal value.”²

Networking isn’t just about talking, it’s also about listening. To be effective, networking needs to be reciprocal. This is where the listening comes in. When done in a genuine way without expectations of personal gain, stronger relationships are formed that support everyone in the network. Why is Networking important?



Networks have many benefits. In addition to growing social and professional connections, they support the current and future careers of members. There are many ways networking can support members on their career journey including:

1. In the workplace

- Referrals to job leads, mentoring, and practical experience
- Connecting you to work placements, job shadowing, and internship opportunities
- Supporting your development as an employee through self-improvement

2. In career development

- Finding out more about a specific job and/or career
- Learning how someone's career developed over time
- Connecting about possible or future career vacancies and opportunities

3. In job searching

- Referrals to open positions
- References and recommendations



Networking skills

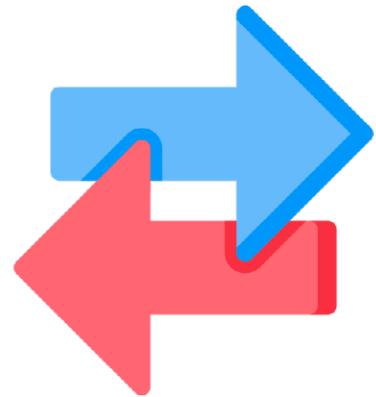
“Networking skills are social competencies you need to have to maintain professional or social contacts.”³ There are many transferable or soft skills that support effective networking.

- ✓ **Communication Skills** are vital to networking. From initial conversations and emails to maintaining connections and relationships to being able to professionally ask for help.
- ✓ **Active Listening Skills** include making eye contact, nodding to show understanding, and responding appropriately. Active listening helps us ask the right questions and keep conversations moving forward.
- ✓ **Social Skills** are used to create trust and understanding with people in a network.
- ✓ **Public Speaking Skills** help to articulate ideas to others effectively and improve the understanding of them.
- ✓ **Nonverbal Communication Skills** are the messages we send with our body. Understanding body language helps with interpreting the messages of others and that mixed messaging is avoided.
- ✓ **Interpersonal Skills** are “people skills”. These skills impact the way we communicate and interact with others.
- ✓ **Empathy Skills** are the ability to feel what another person is feeling by putting yourself in their shoes. They build strong relationships and understanding.
- ✓ **Attitude and Demeanor** aren't often seen as a “skill,” however, people are naturally drawn to those with positive attitudes and friendly mannerisms. Building skills in **resiliency** can support approaching others and life situations with positivity.

How to Network Effectively

When it comes to effective networking, one of the most important keys is the people we're connecting with. A network should hold a variety of people with different skills and experiences. Some should be formal connections (e.g., work, school, etc.) while others should be more informal (e.g., teachers, coaches, 4-H leaders, etc.). Encourage members to think about who they go to for advice and who may be a mentor in their lives. Whether a family friend, or other caring adult, mentorship is an important part of their growing network.

It's also good to have people in a network that we don't know as well. Members need to use caution when connecting with new people, however they can be valuable additions to their network. Whether they're in a career or field that members are interested in, they share views or interests, are people who inspire them or they look up to, these individuals hold valuable information and knowledge that can support members.



Here are some tips for supporting members in networking effectively.

<p>Start networking before you need it. When there is no ulterior motive, members can begin to build relationships and a reputation with their contacts for being generous vs self-serving.</p> 	<p>Have a plan. Every person we speak with has value. It's important that members know what theirs is. They should clearly know what talents, strengths, skills, and connections they bring to their network. They should know in advance what they want to talk to a member of their network about and including how they can help others now and in the future.</p>
<p>Forget personal agenda. Members should go into networking with simple goals such as being open, honest, friendly, and building connections between people who may be able to help each other. This will make a positive impression and people will think of them when opportunities come up or they need to ask for their help.</p>	<p>Never dismiss anyone as 'unimportant.' There is always value to be found in a new connection. Support members in recognizing the importance of looking past job titles, current employer and focusing on knowledge, skills and lived experience.</p>
 <p>Connect the dots. Part of what makes someone a skilled networker is that they connect people they think have something to offer each other. Whether it's job opportunities, help, or knowledge, connecting people to each other is part of networking.</p>	<p>Figure out how to be useful. Before ending a conversation with someone in their network, members should ask how they might be able to help the other person. People may be surprised, but grateful. They may not have an answer right away but will know they can come back to members later.</p>

<p>Follow up and follow through. It's important members understand the importance of following through on what they said they would do. Everyone is busy. People appreciate and remember someone who sticks to what they say.</p>	<p>Be adaptable. As the world of work changes, so too are the ways of networking. It doesn't have to be face-to-face. Emails and social media as just as important and effective tools for networking. Encourage members to use all of these.</p>
 <p>Believe in the power of networking. Whether an extrovert or introvert, starting a conversation, reaching out to someone new or asking for help can be hard. Encourage members to go at their own pace. The more they network, the easier it will become.</p>	<p>Clean up their digital presence. Not only are more employers using automated systems to check if a candidate fits their company, but many potential connections also do the same. Have members check their social media to ensure what's posted makes a positive impression. Delete old or unused profiles. Encourage members to reflect before posting.</p>
<p>Sharper writing skills. Practice writing skills to write like a pro. Help members learn skills to keep writing professional, meaningful, concise, avoid technical 'jargon' and spell out unfamiliar acronyms. Encourage proofreading.</p>	<p>Get social media on your side. There are benefits to following companies in industries members are interested in for their own career. By liking, commenting, and sharing interesting posts, members grow their own social presence.</p>
<p>Grow skills. Members can make use of online resources, webinars, and course materials to build their networking skills. There are online groups to connect with those who have similar career goals and interests. Members can also share what they learn with their connections who might find it helpful.</p>	<p>Keep things easy and fun. Encourage members to set achievable goals for their networking and remember what it's all about: getting to know people virtually or in-person and letting them get to know them.</p> 

Things to Talk About

- Ask members to share their experiences with networking, why they think it's important to their career journey and how it can help them.
- Share networking stories, the good, the bad and the awkward.
 - Talk about the dos and don'ts from the different experiences as well as lessons learned.
- Have members brainstorm a list of people who are in their network.
 - Have member try "recommending" connections to each other based on who they know that could help another member.
- Develop a list of things that members feel are either holding them back or challenges when it comes to networking.
 - Talk through each and develop strategies for overcoming each one.
- Poll members on their confidence in various networking skills.
 - Brainstorm ways members can work on strengthening these skills within regular club activities.
- Brainstorm a list of conversation starters that members can use for in-person networking opportunities.
 - Create a list of email openings that could be used to open a dialogue with a new contact.

Incorporating Networking into Club Projects

A good place to start incorporating networking is to include conversations and real-world examples that are natural and meaningful, with examples that apply to the members in your club. When members see and understand how networking works, they're more likely to naturally integrate it into their lives.

Here are just a few ideas on how to incorporate networking in club projects.

Community Engagement & Communications



- Host a networking event with community members.
- Thoughtfully practice active listening. Talk about how it supports effective communication.
- Play games to strengthen non-verbal communication skills and the interpretation of them.

Science & Technology



- Plan how could someone with expertise in an area of STEM connected to agriculture could help your club project if they were part of your network. Connect with them and ask!
- Ask someone in your club's network if they could give a hands-on demonstration or teach a STEM related skill.
- Send an email or direct message to someone in STEM who inspires you.

Environment & Healthy Living



- Have a 'walking meeting' with another club member. Talk about your career goals and how you can help each other through your networks.
- Connect with an expert on supporting your local environment. Ask about actions your club can take that work within current projects.
- Find out how you can help a 4-H member in your network and follow through with that help.

Sustainable Agriculture & Food Security



- Connect with someone using sustainable agriculture practices you'd like to learn more about.
- Explore groups (in-person or virtual) sharing information about urban agriculture. Learn things you can apply in your own life and share your knowledge with others.
- Research food insecurity in your area. Connect with those working in this area and how your club can help through your project work.

Endnotes

- 1 King, Marissa and Balázs Kovács. "We're Losing Touch with Our Networks." Feb. 2021. hbr.org/2021/02/research-were-losing-touch-with-our-networks. Accessed May 9, 2022.
- 2 Vest, Andrew. Forbes. "How to Network the Right Way: Eight Tips." July 2014 www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2014/07/28/how-to-network-the-right-way-eight-tips/?sh=6a1f30746d47 Accessed May 24, 2022.
- 3 Indeed Editorial Team. "Top Networking Skills You Should Have (And How to Improve Them)." March 21. www.indeed.com/career-advice/resumes-cover-letters/networking-skills-on-resume Accessed May 29, 2022.

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