

Talking to Plants and Approaching Groups

In this book extract from "...and death came third!" Andy Lopata and Peter Roper show nervous business people how to network with panache.

At networking events, I will often look to start a conversation with people who are on their own. It is much easier than breaking into a group conversation and the chances are they won't tell you to leave them alone and go away. Very few people go to networking events for solitude.

1)

When approaching these people you are already at an advantage because they will both respect your courage (which they have probably lacked) and be grateful that you've taken the time and effort to relieve them from their anxiety. They are probably just as nervous as everyone else, and they'll be delighted to get into a conversation with you. You've rescued them from walking around, avoiding interrupting other people for fear of rejection.

2)

Having spoken to them, try not to leave them on their own again because you'll just return them to the same state as you found them. Move on with them and introduce them to someone else.

3)

If someone is talking and you interrupt, or ask if you can join them, people will stop listening to the person who's talking, and invite you into their group. That's great for you but not so nice for the person who is talking. Stand just on the edge of the group and wait for the appropriate time.

4)

Alternatively, it may be that they're talking about something in which you have an interest, in which case, when there's an appropriate pause, you can just say, "Excuse me, I heard you mention so-and-so. Can I ask you a question? Are you involved in that?" And you're in the conversation. Or it may just be that you have a pause, and you ask "May I join you?" But it's always best to wait for the right pause in the conversation.

5)

While the guidelines above are important, you need to be aware of the body language of people talking to each other and networking events. Whether in couples or groups, people will always send very clear signals about approachability by the way they are standing.

6)

Reading this body language may mean that you are better advised approaching two people rather than a group.

- A.** The one thing I try to avoid is approaching two people who are in discussion. If you see two people talking together, they may be building a rapport and interruption may break that. Alternatively, they may be discussing business.
- B.** The easiest way to approach a group is to catch the eye of one of the participants and smile. Usually they should invite you to join them at the appropriate juncture.
- C.** The other advantage of this is that your companion, in introducing you, may well talk about how you've helped them, how great you are at what you do or praise you in another way that you would not have been able to do. This will awaken a greater interest in you from the new contact than may otherwise have been possible.
- D.** You can often find these people around a bar or buffet table (they've probably read the advice above!) or by the walls. Nervous people on their own seldom stand in the middle of a room unless they are milling around trying to pluck up the courage to approach someone. Often they will be admiring the art on the walls or the flora in the room, which gives you a nice topic with which to start a conversation.
- E.** When you do approach them, take care not to dive in aggressively but be empathetic to their nervous state. Ask them if they mind if you join them before introducing yourself, rather than running up asking "So, what do you do then?"
- F.** If you see a group of people talking, approach the group, but don't butt in. Remember, as Susan Roane says in *How to Work a Room*, "There is a difference between including yourself in other people's conversations and intruding on them."
- G.** If their body language is 'closed', and they are facing each other, you should avoid interrupting them. If they are more 'open' and they are standing at an angle that leaves room for another party in the conversation, you are likely to be more welcome.