



WHAT WOMEN OF COLOR CAN TEACH US ABOUT NETWORKING

Women of color have learned to use networking with great effect to break down barriers in the industry that exist because of race and gender.

BY ERIKA MORPHY

It was the mid 1980s when Collete English Dixon joined CREW in Atlanta. She was a newcomer to the industry, having joined Prudential as an associate investment manager about two years prior and she was interested in developing more connections. “I really didn’t have a mentor and they served that purpose for me,” remembers Dixon, who is now the executive director of the Marshall Bennett Institute of Real Estate at Roosevelt University.

She stayed with the group as her career advanced and in 2011 she became its president. That same year CREW was invited to join the Real Estate Roundtable. “When we were invited to go, it was one of those experiences of walking into a room where you know of the people there but never had a chance to engage with them.” It wasn’t lost on Dixon that she was one of a few women present and the only woman of color.

“The fact that I was representing an organization like CREW gave me an instant

credibility and people knew who I was because of that role. It was a credibility that I could not have gotten any other way.”

That is why she tells younger women that networking is worth every minute that can be devoted to it. “It pays for itself in the long run,” she says. “Take every opportunity you can to be in the room and add value to the conversation.”

Commercial real estate is a business built on relationships, so networking is part of the job description. However, for women,



and arguably women of color in particular, it is also something more. It is a way of gaining a seat at the proverbial table. It helps you create a presence, build a knowledge base and, as Dixon points out, develop credibility not only throughout the industry but also within your own firm.

Not to put too fine a point on it: Women, particularly women of color, have learned to use networking with great effect to break down barriers in the industry that exist because of race and gender. Therefore, we

turn to them to learn how to build better bridges in an ever more diverse world.

Working Harder at Relating

For Kelli Dickerson, vice president of Asset Management for BentallGreenOak, networking at the beginning of her career in property management was extremely difficult. “Networking as a black female, I felt I had to work much harder at relating or that I needed to find someone to help introduce me.” Her comfort level rose as her

career expanded but it was not always an easy process for Dickerson. “You have to take it upon yourself to disable your own mind and stop projecting on other people what you think they will think about you.” Just as importantly, she adds, “you need to find organizations that are there to do business and able to push bias out of their minds. You want to find the people who are looking to get work done and can bring deals to the table.”

In some ways, Dickerson was ahead of her peers starting out because her background was in public service and the concept of networking was part of her study for her masters degree. “We learned the best way to get interns of color and gender into male dominated civil service roles was to introduce ourselves and have our elevator speech ready. My first understanding of networking was to market myself to people, knowing you are a diverse candidate who may be at a disadvantage.”

When Dickerson made the jump to property management—running office buildings is much like running small cities it turned out—she went to networking events designed for women or minorities. She kept her network small, focusing on a handful of people with whom she feels she can be authentic. “It is a testament to these people that I have been successful in my career,” she says.

However, she is quick to say this is not the norm for the CRE industry, nor an indictment of networking in general. “I have a high regard for networking—it is really just about finding people who enjoy what they do.”

Interestingly, Dickerson also thinks there is a shift underway in networking after a year in which most industry gatherings took place over Zoom. “The virtual space allows a new opportunity to present yourself. That, and the racial reckoning of the last year, made me feel like I was my most authentic self. I think people’s armour was stripped away.”

Learning to be Teachable

The concept of networking was interwoven throughout Nalie Lee-Wen’s early experiences. Now chief financial officer for The Casoro Group, she was born in a refugee camp in Thailand before immigrating to this country.

“The idea of networking starts off when you are young, although you don’t realize that is what you are doing,” she says. “You start off with one teacher who believes in you and that person introduces you to someone else. That experience led me through my adolescence and high school and college.” Eventually, Lee-Wen was seeking input from anyone who could help her excel. “I would just talk to people and ask them what led them to decisions that they made in their lives. I started going to seminars and asking for mentors. I didn’t want to be the smartest person in my circle. I sought out people who had what I wanted and learned from them. And I learned to be teachable.”

Being teachable is Lee-Wen’s secret to networking. “People will always want to help you if you are teachable.”

People also tend to help the people they can see, she adds, and means it quite literally. “Whenever I went to an event where there were not a lot of females or minorities, I sat in the front to be physically visible in order to connect with the people in the room. It can be very intimidating if you don’t have a professional resume or look like everyone else. But I found that if I made myself physically present where I could not be ignored, that would put me in the mind frame that I have something to contribute. I have learned to carry that throughout my career.”

Lee-Wen had other tricks to get through what could be nerve-racking events in her early days. She would create an alter ego in

her head from someone in the public she admired or had attributes she could use during the event—think Oprah.

“That way, if I were rejected, it was Oprah being rejected, not me. Especially in the early years, that helped a lot.”

More advice: Tap into your inner networker. Women are by nature great networkers, she says. “We just have to switch up our thinking and realize it doesn’t have to look like what other people are doing. You don’t necessarily have to be playing golf. We are natural connectors and that translates into doing business.”

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE MARSHALL BENNETT INSTITUTE OF REAL ESTATE AT ROOSEVELT UNIVERSITY

How It Should Look

Charlotte Kang, the national valuation director for hotels at JLL Valuation Advisory, knows first-hand the value of networking. It is how she landed at JLL.

She had a good friend and business associate who worked at the company and with whom she kept in touch. They met for lunch one day and he started talking about what JLL was doing and how it wanted to expand in certain areas and, as Kang described, it was as if a lightbulb went off. “He said, ‘you know, you could do this.’ He later introduced me to the head of the hotel advisory and ultimately a position was created for me.”

It is possible that women of color have

difficulty with networking, but if that is so it is because they don’t recognize networking for what it is, she says. “Networking is simply relationship building in what is a very relationship-driven business.”

To succeed, you have to be respectful and provide value to the other person, she says. However, at the same time, it isn’t transactional and it is important to remember that it takes time.

Kang’s colleague, JLL Managing Director Simmi Jaggi, who leads the Land Advisory Services division in Houston, is of a similar mindset. “For me, I view every person as a networking opportunity. Take, for example, associates in the office. They have the ability to refer business to me or to work jointly on a new account.”

Not one to be shy, Jaggi threw herself into networking when she began her career in commercial real estate. “I worked very hard to get to know the industry and the people. I was involved in women’s networks, both outside and within JLL. Every opportunity I had, I raised my hand to volunteer to lead something, because those were inevitably networking opportunities.”

A self-described extrovert, Jaggi also believes that being of Indian descent has helped her forge connections. “It has made me open to different cultures and helped with my ability to connect with a diverse population. And at the end of the day, I just like people.”

Jaggi too has her favorite networking success story, albeit a little more offbeat than landing a job following lunch with a colleague.

She tells of the time she was in a convenience store and a woman there had left her wallet at home. She needed \$10 for her purchase but Jaggi gave her \$20 because that is what she had. “Then we talked and we realized we were both in the CRE business and I gave her my card. Today she is a good friend and client.”

Always be closing, or ABC, is Jaggi’s mantra and tip for fellow networkers. “Be aware of who you are connecting with and always be kind. You never know who is a potential client.”

And, she could well add, it also doesn’t hurt to carry your cards everywhere, even to the convenience store. ♦