

# REBUILDING THE POWER GRID FOR WOMEN



WHY WOMEN NEED NETWORKS BUILT FOR POWER,  
NOT PERFORMANCE.

BY JILL HINSON

I'm going to out myself right from the start: I am a deep introvert. The idea of "networking" traditionally conjures images of large rooms, rapid-fire introductions, awkward small talk, and clusters of insiders orbiting one another. I'm not great at any of it, and I have decades of evidence to prove it.

A month ago, I attended a fantastic women's event. The content was powerful. The mission was inspiring. And yet, I felt that familiar sinking feeling: small groups of "the in people" gathered around each other, a few stilted conversations, and a sense of trying too hard.

The month before, I was at a small gathering where we were asked to respond to two prompts: What can you offer? What do you need? What followed was silence. People hesitated. The discomfort was palpable in the room. A few cautious offers and carefully framed needs surfaced, but nothing landed. The moment passed. The conversation moved on. There was no follow-up, no connection, no sense that anything had actually shifted.

I share this because this article isn't written by someone who has always been good at networking. It's written by someone who had to learn, slowly, awkwardly, deliberately, how to build the kind of network that supports the leader I want to be.

But I also share it for a deeper reason: I want us to change the way we network.

What I came to realize is that the problem is not effort or intention. It is design. Most of us have never been taught how to see our networks as systems, or how power actually moves through relationships. That realization led me to develop what I call the **Power Network Map™**. It is a way of making the invisible architecture of networks visible, so we can understand which relationships nourish us, which expand our reach, and which actually move opportunity and influence.

## The Invisible Rules of Power

Let's name a truth women know but rarely articulate. Power does not flow through performance. Power flows through relationships. The real decisions, the promotions, the deals, the opportunities often happen:

- in the "before the meeting" meeting
- in hallway conversations
- on the golf course
- in back-channel alliances
- over drinks
- in text threads and private group chats

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Men have designed, inherited, and benefited from these informal networks for centuries. I am not complaining or demonizing this; I want us to learn from what works and build our own inclusive, ethical, high-impact versions.

Women's networks can over index on emotional support. We spend time listening, validating, and encouraging. That support absolutely matters. But on its own, it rarely moves opportunity.

When women gather, I tend to see two familiar patterns emerge. We create what I call a cheerleader culture or a clique culture. In both, we are warm, affirming, and deeply loyal to those closest to us. What is missing is reach. These patterns build connection and belonging, but they rarely translate into access, influence, or momentum beyond the circle.

And then I heard a story that stopped me cold and showed me what becomes possible when networks are designed to move power.

Twenty senior women gathered for three hours.

Their only intention: exchange value and accelerate one another's success.

By the end, they had unlocked millions of dollars in deals, introductions, contracts, and opportunities.

This wasn't a fluke. This was a preview of what women's networks can become when they function as both engines of power AND containers for emotional support.

My vision is this: Women create networking opportunities that have relational generosity, identity clarity, and intentional network design to accelerate opportunity for themselves and each other. We can build this.

This article offers a shared playbook for building a powerful network and contribute to this vision. We'll explore the four core ingredients:

1. The structure of effective networks
2. The importance of relational intelligence
3. The role of a clear identity story
4. How to sustain power fluency in your networks

Plus: a short futurist sidebar on how AI will reshape networks.

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## 1. Build An Effective Relational Ecosystem aka Your Network.

Most people misunderstand networking because they misunderstand networks. Networking isn't a transactional event that produces a contact list. A network is a living system; it is the architecture of who you know, how often you connect, and how opportunities flow through your relationships. It is your outer relational ecosystem.

Just like natural ecosystems evolve through daily exchanges, your network evolves through your daily choices: who you follow up with, who you reconnect with, what you offer, who you help, who you ignore. New ties form, old ties go dormant, clusters shift, influence moves, and norms spread.

Connection is biological, not social. Our brains are wired for belonging, mirroring, and resonance. Our nervous system responds to people before our conscious mind even has a chance to interpret what's happening. You feel belonging, threat, vulnerability, or disconnection in milliseconds. Relationships literally change the chemistry of your thinking. Energizing relationships fuel creativity: toxic relationships spread burnout.

Consider these facts about networks:

- Your close ties influence your beliefs, emotions, worldview, and norms.
- Emotions, joy, burnout, ambition, fear, spread quickly in tightly knit networks.
- Your network filters the information and opportunities that reach you.
- Loose ties matter. If you have 20 close friends, and each has 20 friends, you're effectively connected to 8,000 people's resources.

That's the unseen power of your "invisible network."

Across decades of research by Ibarra, Burt, Granovetter, and Cross one truth repeats: Leaders succeed because of their relationships, not just their abilities. Structure and relational quality beat network size every time.

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So how do we design a network that accelerates opportunity and provides access to power?

Rob Cross and Ron Burt highlight four structural elements:

- **Structural diversity:** Develop networks with high levels of diverse connections across industries, perspectives, and domains.
- **Relational diversity:** Develop relationships across differences including race, role, function, worldview.
- **Behavioral quality:** Invest time to develop deep, trusting, energizing relationships.
- **Purpose alignment:** Be intentional about creating a network that supports the future you're building not the past you've outgrown.

Networks provide the structure but that alone is not enough. A network without depth is just scaffolding.

## **2. Relational Intelligence: The inner skill that makes networking work.**

Depth in networks comes from connection. Relational intelligence, the ability to navigate human relationships with awareness, empathy, attunement, boundaries, and discernment, provides connection. It is about reading emotional signals, understanding context, and responding with intuition. Without relational intelligence, networking feels: exhausting, performative, inauthentic, and unsustainable. Traditional networking models often feel misaligned with women's natural strengths because they emphasize transaction and underemphasize connection. But when networking is rooted in relational intelligence, it becomes an extension of your leadership not an obligation.

Networking builds access.

Relational intelligence creates impact.

## **3. A Clear Identity Fuels Power Exchanges**

One of the biggest misconceptions about networking is that it begins with other people. It doesn't. It begins with you. To exchange power, you need a clear sense of the identity and purpose. When you embody this, you lead from a story others can understand, see, and trust (and contribute to).

Herminia Ibarra's research is unequivocal: Identity does not form through introspection. It forms through interaction.

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Interaction becomes powerful when you are anchored in who you are becoming. When identity is unclear, people tend to perform, adjust, or shape-shift to fit the room. When identity is clear, you embody it. That embodiment is steady and energizing, both for you and for others. With this type of clarity, networking becomes intuitive. People cannot help unless they can locate you. You can't offer power if you don't understand your own sources. This is where your **Genius Pattern™** becomes your advantage.

Without that clarity, people may admire you, but they cannot amplify you. Your story becomes the interface between your identity and your network. If your story is foggy, your opportunities will be too. If your story is sharp, your opportunities become precise. Your story defines:

- How to help you (what to send your way).
- Where to place you (which rooms or circles you should enter).
- How to talk about you (your distinct value).
- Why your work matters (the larger meaning).
- What future you're championing (your trajectory).
- You can use this short prompt to begin creating your story.

**"I'm a leader who is driven by (value/impact), known for (genius pattern), and currently focused on (future direction). I need opportunities that (open access to) and resources to (allow me to)."**

Example:

"I'm a leader driven by designing humane power, known for translating complexity into clarity, and focused now on building ecosystems where women's leadership becomes a strategic advantage and builds the table for us to sit at instead of asking for a seat. I need opportunities that open access to investors and partnerships and resources to allow me to create a 18-month runway for the business."

Give your network the story it needs to help resources flow towards you. Listen to others story to help generate resource abundance for others.

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## 4. Sustaining Your Network: The Practice of Power Fluency

Once you have designed your network architecture and crafted a clear identity story, the next step is to keep your network alive through the intentional circulation of support AND power. Most women unintentionally fall out of the game here. We think of "maintaining relationships" means polite check-ins. But powerful networks don't grow through politeness. They grow through the steady flow of opportunity, insight, access, and advocacy.

This is power fluency in practice, the ability to move influence through your network with precision and generosity. Think of your network as an economy. Power accumulates when it circulates not when it sits dormant. Below are six core moves that sustain a power network:

**Move 1:** Share Opportunities, Not Just Information: Forward access, not just articles. Pass along speaking invitations, introductions, open roles, podcasts, partnerships, funding opportunities, board leads. Every opportunity shared creates momentum.

**Move 2:** Make Strategic Introductions That Change Trajectory: Not the "you two should meet." But: "Your work belongs in her world let me bridge you."

**Move 3:** Trade Insight, Foresight, and Pattern Recognition: Share what's shifting, what's emerging, who's rising, what you see coming. Become someone who helps others see around the corners.

**Move 4:** Offer Credibility, Not Just Encouragement: We need amplification; say women's names in rooms they're not yet present.

**Move 5:** Practice Opportunity Reciprocity: If someone opens a door, open one back. Reciprocity isn't transactional, it's exponential.

**Move 6:** Engage in Power Conversations, Not Perfection Conversations: Drop the "I'm fine, everything's fine." Replace this narrative with: "I'm going for X." "I need a connection to Y." "I'm building momentum in Z area." Power networks require transparency about ambition.

Power networks require transparency about ambition. These micro-moves keep your network "switched on" demonstrations of your value, not reminders of your existence.

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## Closing thoughts: Consistency compounds.

Networking to build reciprocal generosity and share resources is an important part of leadership work. Investing time here spreads abundance within and across your networks. Imagine if everyone in this network followed this rhythm:

- **Weekly:** Move one opportunity, introduction, or insight.
- **Monthly:** Add one new relationship that expands your network and relational diversity.
- **Quarterly:** Audit your power portfolio, who energizes you? Who are you accelerating? What needs pruning? Take action.
- **Annually:** Redesign your network based on the future you're stepping into, not the past you're exiting. Determine strategic moves for you and others.

This is not maintenance. This is leadership. This is how power circulates through a community. This is how women shift the architecture of influence.

## My Call to Action

Let me be direct. Power flows through networks. If women don't intentionally build power networks, we won't own our power. We have centuries of evidence. And yet, every now and then, we glimpse what's possible.

- Twenty women.
- Three hours.
- Millions of dollars moved.
- Not through performance.
- Through clarity.
- Through reciprocity.
- Through relational generosity.

This is the new power infrastructure. Let's design networks that expand possibility, not reinforce scarcity. Let's accelerate one another. Let's build ecosystems worthy of our genius.

This is exactly what the **Power Network Map™** is designed to support. It offers a practical way to see your network as infrastructure, not activity, and to design it with intention so power, opportunity, and advocacy can actually move.

Your network is one of the most powerful assets you will ever build.

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## Sidebar:

### Networking in the Age of AI: What Women Leaders Need to Know

A Futurist Sidebar

The next decade will rewrite the rules of connection. AI won't replace the human heart of networking, but it will radically alter how relationships form, deepen, and create opportunity. For women, who have historically been excluded from the informal networks that accelerate power, AI offers unprecedented access.

Here are the five shifts shaping the future:

#### 1. AI Becomes Your Relationship Radar

AI will surface the people your future requires not just those you happen to meet.

Action: Ask your AI tools to identify five strategic people who align with your future direction.

#### 2. Networking Moves from Events to Micro-Interactions

The power shifts from performance to resonance.

Action: Choose one weekly touchpoint to keep relationships warm.

#### 3. Weak and Dormant Ties Become Supercharged

AI will remind you who to reconnect with and why it matters.

Action: Reopen one dormant relationship each month.

#### 4. Your Digital Presence Becomes a Proxy for Identity

Your ideas become your magnet.

Action: Publish one piece of thought leadership monthly.

#### 5. Human Energy Becomes the Ultimate Differentiator

AI scales reach. Only you scale presence.

Action: Protect the relationships that energize you.

Together, these shifts point to a powerful truth:

AI is not the end of networking. It is the beginning of women finally having equitable access to it.