

“Consequential Strangers”

Consider the people closest to you. They are bound to be of similar age, share similar interests, and views. You listen to the same music; you play the same movies, and video games. You share similar perspectives and similar outlooks on life, but you aren't stretching yourself.

I have learned the importance of, “consequential strangers.” Strategically, they may be as important to you as close friends and family. Casual acquaintances in countless social settings can provide a kind of emotional ballast and stability in our lives. Picture the old college buddy who made a critical connection to a business opportunity or the guidance counselor who offered up useful advice at a critical time in your life.

Consequential strangers can be vital to our growth. They represent the strength of weak ties (people you barely know). My wife met a woman at a social event. They hit it off and arranged a couples gathering. Her husband and I were of similar age with very different backgrounds. He had an unusual job which I found fascinating. He arranged a job interview for me. The interview process involved meeting several members of the department concluding with a department head meeting. As I was brought into his office, I scanned his desk piled high with over lapping folders, binders, and yellow page notepads scribbled with notes; I saw something unusual. It was a Polaroid photo of a rare antique chair. I recognized its significance immediately. It seemed we had similar interests. Toward the end of the interview, I called his attention to the photo of the chair. I shared with him details of its history. He looked up at me stunned! I could read his thoughts, “How on earth would you be aware of something so obscure?” I also knew at that very moment I had the job!

The reality is job opportunities will most likely come from people in the more distant reaches of your personal network—such as old bosses, former co-workers, and college connections. The phenomenon has shown that information, intelligence, and job opportunities are often the province of weak ties. You meet an executive for the first time, and s/he decides to help you by spending time with you to assist you in advancing your understanding or provide a critical referral that opens a new door of opportunity that aligns with your goal. They do this without ulterior motives, expecting nothing in return. They're just passing on a similar favor granted to them when they first started out.

Twenty-first-century social life provides a wide array of personal connections, not just intimate; such personal connections might include co-workers, neighbors, gym buddies, fellow volunteers and congregants, and providers of goods and services. Typically, peripheral or weak ties far outnumber close relations. Analysis of the broader social landscape suggests that consequential strangers provide important strategic benefits, as well as many distinct and complementary functions. Admittedly, undesirable acquaintances cannot always be avoided, but to thrive in a modern society, it is vital to extend oneself and develop a variety of connections.

