How valuable are the people you have influenced or who have influenced you in the maintenance and reliability profession? What is the intangible value to you, your company, and your professionalism of the numerous contacts you have made over the years? Have you even considered a network as part of your career development?

I am constantly blessed by my network. I did not even consciously build one; it just happened. Writing this column has given me occasion to reflect and pass along some things I learned about creating a valuable network:

- Give of yourself without expecting anything in return. Like just about anything else in life, giving is more precious than receiving. People recognize when you freely and sincerely give of your time, talents, knowledge, and practical experience. One of my wisest past supervisors advised me: "If you see a void, don't just call it to someone's attention or pass it off; take the initiative to deal with it." How many times have I wished people working for me had done the same. Those who did built a special credibility with me. Their reward came along.
- Take responsibility for learning. Many companies today have recognized that continuous learning is a key strategy in staying competitive for the long haul. Participating in company-sponsored seminars, outside symposiums, etc., presents great opportunities for meeting professionals from diverse backgrounds.
- Be active in your professional community. ASME, IEEE, AFE, SMRP, and NACE, to name a few, all have committees that pertain to facilities and maintenance. Don't just join a professional organization; step up and provide leadership, especially at the local level. Give a talk, hold an office, or take on a special project. Is there a national-level committee that can benefit from your experience or particular skills?
- If your company is considering best practices committees, highly consider getting involved. There are two types of best practices committee members: those who have expertise and want to find ways to share it, and those who are seeking expertise and want to understand and deploy it to help their business or plant. Volunteering for committee work should be taken on only if you expect to freely give it your best capabilities and your extracurricular (personal) time to accomplish the mission.
- Learn to speak in public and accept the honor whenever asked. It is a high compliment that you should be asked to share your knowledge. The greatest growth in my professional maturity came when I made the decision to overcome my fears of giving talks.

I cannot begin to tell you how painful public speaking was for me. Fortunately, my employer gave me multiple opportunities to get training in this area. It was not until my career path forced me to do it with some routine, however, that I finally overcame my fears. A Dale Carnegie 12-week night course on public speaking and human relations was my most valuable preparation.

- Find ways to participate in benchmarking events. These opportunities are unique whether internal (e.g., plant, business unit, corporate initiative) or external (through a professional organization). Your learning curve will accelerate tremendously, not to mention the benefit of sharing ideas and opinions with your benchmarking peers.

I have come to appreciate these benefits:

1. Professionals on whom you can rely to give straight answers to technical questions. They will often bend over backward to assist you, including plugging into their own network.
2. As you extend your network, the speed with which you can locate expertise or specific answers increases dramatically. I have witnessed huge company savings from the hands of the network locating obsolete spare parts. This was not a purchasing network, rather an intra-company maintenance professional network.
3. Gratification that you are a member of a larger community that extends beyond the boundaries of your immediate job responsibilities. A sense that we all face the same challenges, both technical and organizational, enables us to temper our shortsightedness and sustain a broader vision of the value-added possibilities.
4. Your network contains a cache of references for your character, leadership, and technical prowess. Some can lead to rewarding job opportunities.

In the spirit of participating in the race, e.g., NASCAR: Gentlemen and ladies, "Start your network!" **MT**