

EPISODE 2 (Building Your Network)

{Intro Music}

This is the Institute for Music Leadership

Stephen: Hello, and welcome to another minisode of *Create. Inspire. Lead.* I'm Stephen Biegner, and today we have the second installment of our conversation with Dr. Blaire Koerner, our Career Advisor here at the IML. If you haven't listened to the first minisode, you can go back and find it in our feed - we talk all about gaining experience - and one of the things we talked about within that episode - just sort of brushed by it - was the idea of networking. And that could totally be its own topic. So - that's what we're covering today: Networking. I don't know about you, but the thought of networking - or at least, the thought of what I imagined networking to be - turned my blood to battery acid. And, well, that's what I shared with Blaire and this is how our conversation kicked off.

Stephen (from tape): Honestly, for me personally too, the idea of like going into a group of people with like a name tag and being like, "Hi! Stephen Biegner," you know, that idea of networking fills me with this, like existential dread. And I think that I'm getting that from the students as well. So I guess, like, what really is networking and why is it so important?

Blaire: So networking is not about... So let me rephrase that... It's not about networking, it's about building your network. So the process of networking is what most people are fearful of, as you mentioned, and get a little skippy, because it's kind of like the salesman knocking at your door and saying, "Here, you know, I'm going to sell this to you." And, you know, that's what people think of. It's like going up randomly to somebody in a conference and trying to sell themselves in some fashion, whether it's as a performer or a composition they have or something like that. No one's going to do that unless it's Girl Scout cookies. The doors slam in the face. And it's not an authentic connection, right.

Stephen: So, instead, you want to *build* your network of people. And that can involve people you don't really know yet, but more often than not, it's looking at your contacts, at people you already know and work with, and figuring out sort of where they rank in your network. And they basically fall into four categories.

Blaire: The targets, the supports, the allies, and the mentors.

Stephen: Now, each person will fit into these categories in a unique way - some will be squarely in one category, while others might straddle a couple, and still others will evolve as your relationships continue to change and grow. So, first. The targets.

Blaire: So the targets are the people that are basically the newbies to you... People - that might be alumni that are doing amazing things. People that have, you know, that've inspired you that you want to learn from. And you might have a connection to them. It might be cold calling, but, essentially, you want to get something from them, but it's usually not a job. It's usually not sales. It's usually just advice and information. And so setting up a session with them, whether it's in

person or online for 30 minutes and say, "I love what you do," or "I think your compositions are amazing," or "I would love to be a full-time teacher like you, could I pick your brain on how to do that?" Most people are very willing to give their time for a little bit to explain how they got to where they are and to support others who are interested in the same things that they are. So that's the targets.

Stephen: Now, remember, all of these are relationships you're hoping to grow. So, you might just reach out to someone once, say thank you, and that's it. But, it's often a good idea to follow up with a target after your first meeting to keep that relationship going. You could maybe share that cool project you're working on that you talked about and see if they'd give you some advice. Or, maybe add that person to your newsletter - if you have one - or at least follow up in a few months. Eventually, they might change categories. It's all about developing your network, and that means communicating.

The next category Blaire mentioned is support systems.

Blaire: Support systems are the people that would write your letters of recommendation or your, you know, be a reference for you. So those are your bosses. Those are maybe section leaders. They might be TA's, teachers, or studio teachers, etc. and they're the people that are going to support you in some way by writing a reference by... maybe even giving you: "Oh, I saw this cool grant opportunity or competition I thought would be suited for you," and they send it to you. So they're a little bit more committed. They know you at a better level and you are, you know, building that relationship for a bit. Hint, with supports, you do have to maintain that relationship in order to ask for a reference or a letter of recommendation. So if you've graduated from your school and you're three or four years out and you haven't kept in touch with your studio teacher, you can no longer ask for a letter of recommendation because they simply don't know who you are anymore. It's been a while.

Stephen: Very quickly, from my old admissions background, please have a relationship with your support system. Make sure your recommender really knows you, and make sure you ask them to write a recommendation or be a reference for you. It's never great for this person to just receive an email saying, "Hey - your old student you may not remember needs a recommendation letter" - meanwhile, they haven't heard from you in years. I can tell you, we used to get a lot of letters from recommenders who barely knew the applicant, or who would have said no if they'd been asked for a letter. And some of the letters were innocuous - they'd just say I haven't heard from them in a while - but others were outright detrimental to someone's application. So please. Make sure you've kept in touch with your support system!

Ok. Up next? Your allies.

Blaire: And then there's allies. Allies are your colleagues. They're the people that are in your studio, in your classes. They're the people that you work with side by side. They might not be the same age. They may be older. They might be younger, but they, I would say, are on the same plateau or level as you. So you feed off of each other.

Stephen: These are people you might share cool resources with, or bounce ideas off. You might help each other prep for auditions or interviews. Or even split a hotel room at a conference or something.

Blaire: So they're the people that you would collaborate with. Maybe they have your pom-poms and support you. "Oh, my God, Congratulations." First, people respond to you on your social media when something amazing has happened and you do the same.

Stephen: Which leaves the last category: mentors or coaches.

Blaire: ...you don't have a lot of these. You could have a handful of them, maybe on one hand. But I would encourage you to have more than one of these because they might mentor you in different parts of your life. And these are the people that are... when you have a problem or you need advice, you sit down and you listen to them because you trust their valid opinion. So this might be a faculty member or studio teacher that you really bonded with. And they're more than a support, they're a mentor in some way. Same thing with a boss, same with a target that ends up as being a really, really good connection. They move up into that field. So these are the people that you really want to nurture these relationships with. You probably communicate with them more frequently.

Stephen: Okay. So maybe you're already putting your network into some of these categories. But the next question is, do all of these relationships get treated in the same way?

Blaire: ...you do not need to treat everybody in the same way. That's exhausting. But in order to maintain relationships, you do need to keep in touch. So when you do finally connect with these people, reach out to them periodically. So this past year, because of COVID, I realized that I hadn't reached out to a lot of these people because I hadn't seen them. It wasn't just passing them in the hallway. So during my holiday newsletter, I reached out to everyone, said, "Hey, I miss my friends and I value our friendship. Would you like to have a virtual coffee with me?"

Stephen: Blaire got thirty five responses from a bunch of people she hadn't talked to in years.

Blaire: And it was really a lot of fun and enjoyable, and I learned things about people that I didn't know. And it was natural. And that's the thing about building your network. It should be authentic.

Stephen: But of course, the first step - just reaching out, especially to people on the margins of our networks...?

Blaire: Now, the first step of reaching out is a little less authentic. And that's, I think, the part that makes people the most nervous. So the two things I would advise around that: First, research yourself. Why are you reaching out to this person? What are you trying to gain out of it? Is it knowledge? Is it an insight to a particular career path? Is it an opportunity to go and

volunteer and connect? Is it something... what's the point, right? And you need to be able to describe that really succinctly, you know, and not in a way that's sales-pitchy. But more like, "I would love your support, advice, knowledge," you know, help, you know, in whatever this field might be.

And then the second thing is you've got to research them. Right? So in addition to their job, what's the thing that you can make an authentic connection to?

Stephen: There are a number of connections you can make. It might be music related. Maybe you're both into contemporary music, or early music, or both. Maybe you're both interested in mental health and wellness. Whatever that common point is - that's your in. But to know those points, you need to know a little bit about the person.

Blaire: So when you go to a conference, you're not going to meet everybody there. But you should have a pitch that you can say about yourself really briefly if you just meet some random person and one or two questions that are generic enough that, you know, they can give you information.

And it's not just like "Where are you from?" or "What do you do?," but "How do you get into music," or "What inspires you the most?," or "Why did you come to this conference?," or "What are your plans for the rest of the summer?," or "What is the project that you're working on?" One of those things.

Stephen: Research helps get your foot in the door, because the real conversation - the real relationship, the network building moment, usually comes as a follow-up meeting after that quick handshake and pitch in the hallway. Offer to meet them at the conference happy hour or take them out for a coffee.

Blaire: So there's different ways that we network. You do need a plan for it. It can't be willy-nilly because you need to know what you're trying to get out of it and you need to know how to make conversation feel authentic and natural so that if you do meet random people that weren't on your target list, that you can still potentially build your network through them.

Stephen: So, that all sort of deals with people you do have some sort of connection with. But what about those who aren't even in your peripheral network?

Blaire: Right. It's always preferable when you have an "in," right? So that might be a direct connection where it's your professor's best friend and then you get an introduction. It might be because you went to one of their festivals or summer camps and you were able to take a few lessons with them. It might be because they have the same alma mater as you. I mean, it's always great to start with that because it's just something that brings you together automatically.

Stephen: If there really is no connection that you can find, now you're doing something called cold-calling, or, I guess today it's more cold-emailing. Cold because, there isn't that connection. You're going out on a limb. And, if you want to do that, there are some best practices.

Blaire: Again, developing a really good short message to them is to really call out what's going to happen? Who are you? Why are you interested in them and what do you want from them? And then give them a time. Bring in, "The next two weeks or in the next month, I would like to have a..." and then follow up. If you don't hear from them in a week, follow up with another message. If you don't hear from them after that, take a step back because they might not be interested in it.

Stephen: So, in that case, it's good to give them an out - let them know it's ok if they're too busy. A good way to help them get off the hook is to ask if they have a recommendation for who else you could reach out to.

Blaire: Because then they wouldn't necessarily feel as guilty or they can go, "Oh, go to my TA or go to this person that I've worked with or go over here because they can do similar things and I'm just not in a space for this right now." And then you've got another person that you can connect with and then you've got a reference saying this person recommended you and no longer is it a cold call, even if you don't really know that other person anymore.

Stephen: That's right. Because now, you have a connection. And even though your original cold call didn't work out, you're still growing your network. Now, cold calls aren't the best way to get responses, but some people can get lucky doing it this way. Just make sure you're actually asking for something - advice, knowledge - you want to learn from them. It's not just a way to, like, share your CD or tell random people about your concert or project. It's a process. Like, if you were to cold call Blaire. If your objective is unclear or unrelated to Blaire's expertise, she's really busy and probably can't connect.

Blaire: But if you're going to ask me, I would like to learn more about how to write for the bassoon better. Oh, I'd be all over it. We could totally have a session and then we could talk about that, right? So it's really about what angle you're coming from.

{outro music}

Stephen: So, there you have it. Hopefully that takes some of the fear, the existential dread out of networking. But if it doesn't, I promise a one on one conversation with Blaire will totally help. Don't forget that you can set up appointments with her through Handshake - I'll be sure to link to that in the show notes, so check that out. And technically, by meeting with Blaire, you'll be expanding your network, so what are you waiting for?

Thanks again to Blaire. Be sure to stay tuned for the next minisode in this series, coming soon. A reminder that you can follow us on SoundCloud, or follow the IML on Facebook to get updates about upcoming episodes and podcast news. If you liked this episode, or one of our older ones,

it would be a huge help to share with a friend, or colleague - you know - your own network. We would really appreciate it.

Today's minisode was mixed by me, and I also provided some of the incidental music and intro music. And the outro music was composed by Alexa Silverman. Thanks also to Emma Gierszal and Frances Inzenhofer for helping to prep a lot of the content for these conversations. Contact info for the show is in the show notes, as well as a full transcript and helpful links. As always, if you have an idea for an episode, any comments, complaints, kudos - let us know.

Now, go out. Make art. Do good work. From the IML, I'm Stephen Biegner. Until next time.