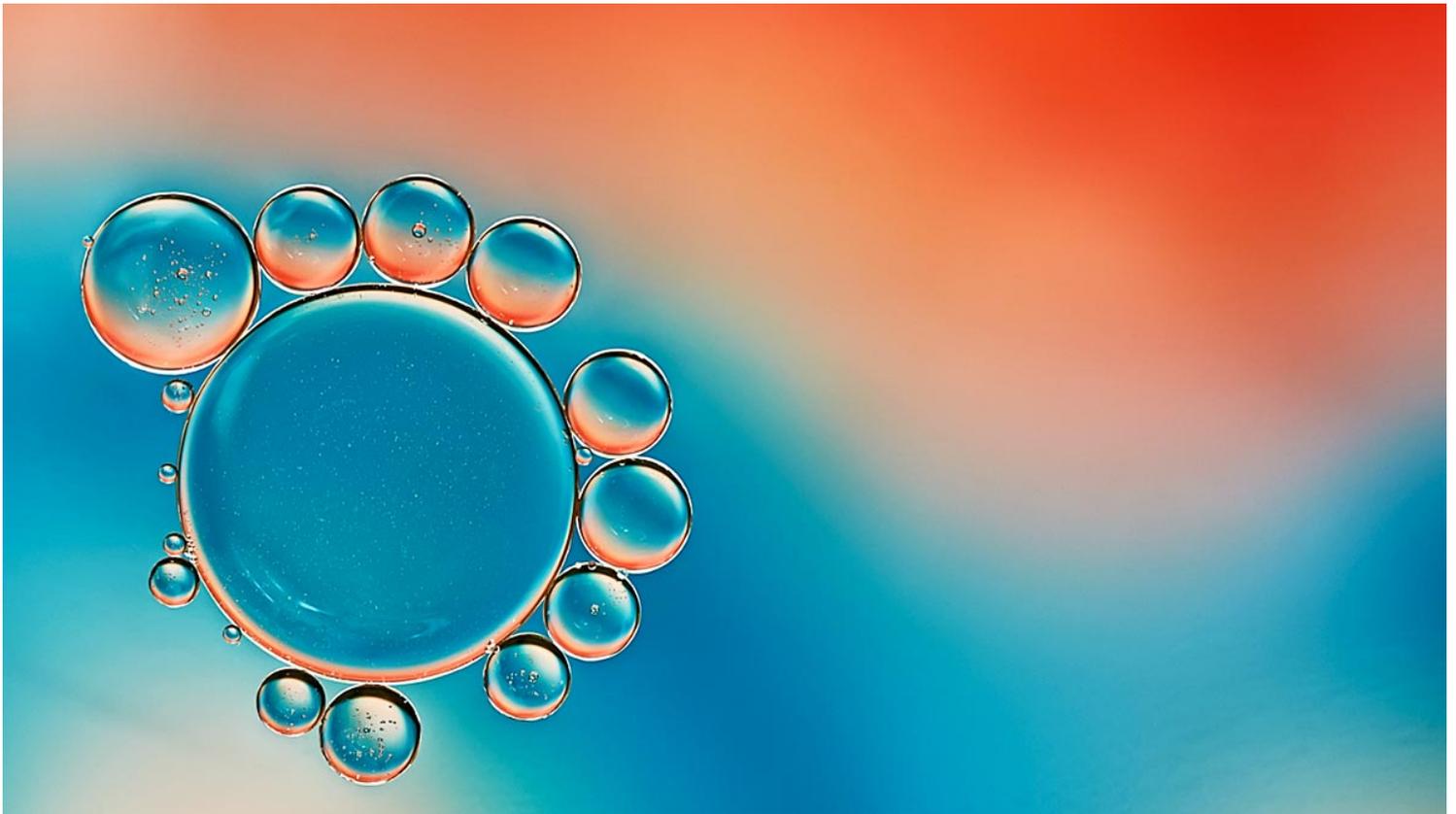


COLLABORATION

# Create a “Mastermind Group” to Help Your Career

by Dorie Clark

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Getting to the top of your field is a challenge, but it’s easier with the support of a strong peer network. A group of trusted colleagues - often known as a mastermind group - can provide honest feedback, help you refine your ideas, and share insights and leads. They can also

inspire you with their successes and support you when you face setbacks. Most of us have some helpful professional contacts, but if you want to be part of a community of people focused on helping one another, you'll likely need to take action to create it.

In my new book, *Stand Out*, I profile Kare Anderson, an Emmy-winning former journalist who has started two mastermind groups that have been running continuously for over 20 years. Few endeavors these days can boast such longevity, and Anderson says the impact on her personal and professional life has been profound: "You look back on notes you've taken, and it's a way of realizing how much we've evolved," she says.

Here's how she structured her groups to be a positive force in their members' lives for more than two decades.

**Identify your ideal group makeup.** Start by making a list of the people you'd most like to have in the group. Depending on your preferences, it can be a mix of people from different professions (which gives you access to cross-industry insights), or folks in the same industry (who can trade knowledge and experiences). In the latter case, it's important not to invite direct competitors into the group, to ensure members feel comfortable speaking freely. Whatever you decide on, says Anderson, "Extreme diversity within that framework will make it much more valuable, and you're going to grow more."

**Choose members wisely.** Don't rush into offering a group membership to someone you haven't fully vetted - "firing" someone once they're a member can be extremely awkward. It's fine to target people you don't know well as possible members, but go slow and get to know them as individuals before issuing an official invitation. Invite them out for coffee or lunch to see them in different situations. Finally, host an informal gathering of several potential members to see what the social dynamics are like. If one person dominates the

conversation or creates a contentious atmosphere, perhaps he's not the best fit. Depending on how the group is structured, the founder may have exclusive say on who joins, or - as in Anderson's case - once someone signs on, they may get an equal vote on future members.

**Set ground rules.** It's important for members to know exactly what they're getting into. Stating the group's goals and values up front will enable potential candidates to make an informed decision about whether they'd like to participate. After all, you want the group to be a commitment they're making for the long term. Anderson's groups have three key rules: confidentiality, no referral fees if members send each other new business (to avoid making the relationship transactional), and if you make a commitment to another member, you keep it. Group members strive to be on the lookout for ideas and opportunities for their colleagues. "You ask yourself, 'Am I giving as much as the others are?'" Anderson says. "It sets a standard." It's not a quid pro quo, but there's an expectation that members will contribute.

Other groups may choose to emphasize different ground rules. For example, some may not need to focus on confidentiality if the topics discussed aren't personal, or referral fees may be encouraged as a part of the group's operating model. The key is to provide clarity around the purposes you'd like the group to serve (emotional support, business leads, sharing best practices, joint revenue opportunities, etc.).

**Develop a structure.** Anderson's groups meet monthly - not often enough to become a burden on members' time, but enough to keep up with developments in each other's lives. "When you're meeting monthly and you continue to do so, you know so much, you talk in shorthand," she says. "Together, we can bounce ideas more clearly off each other because we know each other so well and give candid feedback." Each meeting has a specific structure. The group connects via Skype and members speak in the same order each month, mentioning something they need and any help they can offer to others. The other members

chime in if they can assist (“You’ve said you need a new accountant, and I know a great one,” or “You need advice about speaking to an insurance company, and I’m very familiar with the industry”). But when something important comes up, like a new job opportunity or a family upheaval, the group is flexible enough to abandon the typical structure and spend the entire call supporting the member in need by listening, offering advice, and sharing resources.

Anderson has benefited professionally from the group in many ways, from learning about new technologies that improve her business to staying abreast of industry trends. It’s also put dollars into her pocket. When she was being considered as a keynote speaker for a conference and had little experience in the industry, the conference organizer was willing to take a chance on hiring her - purely on the basis of two people from her group vouching for her. She believes the biggest benefit of the group, however, has been the personal growth that’s come from cultivating deep, long-term professional relationships. “It’s scalable, not in terms of more [group members], but in the ways we know to help each other. There’s a record of witnessing each other’s lives,” she says. “It’s made me a better person because of the mutuality at the center of it.”

The public conversation around networking is often about the quick hits: how to shake more hands and grab more business cards. But creating a longer-running mastermind group, whether you want it to last a few years or a lifetime, is a testament to the value of depth over breadth. In a fast-moving world, having people in your life who have watched you grow and progress can be a powerful touchstone, with lasting results.

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Dorie Clark is a marketing strategist and professional speaker who teaches at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. She is the author of *Reinventing You* and *Stand Out*. You can receive her free Stand Out Self-Assessment Workbook.

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ARTEMISUE Johnston 2 years ago

These groups really work in my experience. I'm a member of CQ (Collective Intelligence) which has around 20 of these groups operating in New Zealand. I'm also very fortunate to facilitate four of these groups for CQ. What I see is some very powerful shifts and changes in people and the groups. The membership of each group is very diverse in industry, age, geographical location which heightens the impact. [http://www.c-q.co.nz/about/what-is-cq/#how\\_it\\_works](http://www.c-q.co.nz/about/what-is-cq/#how_it_works).

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