



Strong Ties, Weak Ties and Social Networks

It has been said that “the most important single word in the any language is relationship” and relationships are established and nurtured as a result of connections between people. One of the important theories of social networks, pioneered by sociologist Samuel Lenhardt, has to do with strong ties and weak ties and provides a window of understanding into why a majority of people today admit to feeling disconnected and in search of meaningful relationships.

Relationships are defined in part by the frequency of interaction. Strong ties are frequent and developed over a long period of interaction. Weak ties are infrequent and exercised on an as-needed, rather than regular or ongoing basis. Strong ties are intimate; a person has a depth of knowledge about the other party and there is an emotional involvement between the two. Weak ties are controlled according to the situation and are emotionally neutral. Strong ties are broad in the sense that the parties may eat, play, work, and socialize together. Weak ties are narrow and more restricted to the purpose, task, project or need of the moment. Strong ties have stability in that there is little movement that affects the relationship. Weak ties are more mobile and frequently stretched from coast to coast. Often, they are unable to survive the moves and dislocation of contemporary life. Strong ties bring with them a sense of connectedness and belonging, whereas weak ties engender a sense of loneliness and lack of emotional support.

Communities, families, personal networks, effective teams and small groups consist of strong ties. When carried to excess, however, strong ties can become exclusionary and entry into the social unit for a new person is difficult or even blocked because their ties to others are weak or non-existent.

Weak ties have become more dominant than strong ties in our culture over the past forty years as we have become a disconnected people in search of identity and connections. Weak ties are superficial and can be easily manipulated by playing a role needed for the moment or the situation and then resuming one’s normal role. Weak ties are fed through electronic communications such as faxes, telephones, e-mail and the Internet. Finally, the greater the number of weak ties in a group, the more difficult it is to reach consensus and take the appropriate action.

This social network theory is also linked to the mass communication theory which states that even though a message can be communicated to everyone, it is rarely received and acted upon unless there are strong personal ties. This confirms the importance of establishing personal relationships for any venture to be successful. It also helps to explain why the communication of the Gospel and the disciple-making process are most effective when built around strong ties and personal relationships.

As a 21st century leader, can you identify and minimize the impact of weak ties in your congregational/organizational systems? Can you recognize and exploit the strong ties?

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