



## Meaningful CONNECTIONS



Adrian Parker, FACHE



Roy Hawkins Jr., FACHE



# 5 Tips for Making Meaningful Connections



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Networking can feel intimidating—especially when you walk into a room full of unfamiliar faces and leave without making a single meaningful connection. I've seen it happen too often, which is why Khadija Moody and I co-authored [Networking: The Hello BEFORE the Hello!](#) to provide a framework for building confidence, sparking genuine conversation and making those connections count. We wanted to explore not just the mechanics of networking, but the mindset behind it.

To bring this to life, I sat down with someone who exemplifies authentic connection: Roy Hawkins Jr., FACHE, senior vice president/president, North Area, Advocate Health. Hawkins is a servant leader known for showing up as his true self—whether in the boardroom or at a community event. In this Q&A, he shares how networking has evolved for him and how anyone—at any level—can approach it with intention, preparation and authenticity.

**Parker:** Many early career professionals struggle with networking—feeling unsure of how to approach conversations, especially when engaging with senior leaders. How do you think about networking, and what advice would you give?

**Hawkins:** I recently found myself in a similar situation, so I'll approach this conversation from that perspective. The first thing I'd tell your audience is that networking is a lifelong process—it's not something you outgrow or master once and for all. No matter where you are in your career, you're always networking.

Many students or early career professionals think, "I need to connect with these executives who have already 'made it.'" But what they don't always realize is that those same executives are trying to build relationships as well. Right now, I find myself in situations where I'm networking with Fortune 500 CEOs, and I feel like the little guy trying to make an impression.

So my advice is to reassure people that networking is an ongoing challenge at every level. It's not just about finding a job today. It's about building relationships that evolve over time.

Parker:In your experience, what helps someone stand out in a networking setting?

Hawkins:The people who leave a lasting impression are the ones with a story to tell. Think about it—when five people introduce themselves to you at an event, who do you remember? It’s usually the one who brings something unique to the conversation.

For example, I was at a gala at Howard University recently, surrounded by students eager to talk about their careers. One student stood out, not because he said, “Hi, I’m [Name] from [University]” like everyone else, but because he asked me, “Have you read any interesting books lately? Let me tell you about one I just finished.” That led to a 10-minute conversation, simply because he took a different approach.

If you’re a healthcare student, instead of just saying, “I’m looking for a job,” you could ask, “What are your thoughts on the impact of the new administration on Medicaid?” The goal is to come prepared with a topic that’s relevant but not transactional, something that sparks genuine engagement rather than just a job request.

Parker:Beyond the initial conversation, how can people ensure they build on those connections?

Hawkins:Networking is not a one-and-done transaction. Saying “Hi, I’m [Name], nice to meet you” isn’t enough. The real value is in the follow-up.

Let’s say you meet me at an event. Maybe we have a five-minute conversation. Out of 100 people I meet, only two or three will actually follow up. Those are the ones who truly capitalize on networking. The follow-up is where the real relationship-building happens.

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So here’s the shift in mindset. Instead of expecting a full conversation on the spot, aim to exchange contact information and schedule a follow-up. Say something like, “I’d love to continue this conversation. Do you mind if I reach out to set up a time?” Whether you’re an introvert or extrovert, that simple step changes the dynamic. The real work begins when you get on my calendar. That’s where meaningful networking happens.

Parker:What about different types of networking environments, like large events versus smaller luncheons?

Hawkins:The setting absolutely matters. In a crowded networking event, you need to be concise. You might have 30 to 60 seconds to make an impression. That means having a strategy before you walk in.

always suggest using a three-point framework:

1. Introduce yourself with a relevant touchpoint.*(Hi, I'm [Name], and I really admire your work in [area of expertise].)*
2. Bring up a current event or industry topic.*(I'd love to hear your thoughts on how AI is shaping healthcare operations.)*
3. Ask for a follow-up opportunity.*(Would you be open to a quick follow-up conversation next week?)*

For a luncheon or panel discussion, the approach shifts. You might be sitting next to someone for an hour, so the conversation can develop more naturally. But again, the key is to be prepared. Know who's in the room and have a few topics ready to discuss.

Parker: A lot of people feel anxious about networking. Any final tips for overcoming that?

Hawkins: Preparation is key. If you're uncomfortable with networking, go in with a simple three-step game plan:


- Introduce yourself.
- Bring up a relevant topic.
- Ask for a follow-up.

Having a structure makes it less intimidating. And remember, the real networking happens after the event, when you follow up and turn that initial meeting into a long-term relationship.

*Adrian Parker, FACHE, is an executive director, division of strategy and innovation, Broward County Public Schools. Roy Hawkins Jr., FACHE, is senior vice president/president, North Area, Advocate Health, Concord, N.C.*

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