

## **The Old Boys Had It (Mostly) Right**

By Stephanie MacKendrick

The Old Boys Network – it's a term of disdain and contempt for many women who have felt the sting of its rejection or exclusion, and one more associated with cronyism and unmerited advantage than with excellence and positive contribution.

But I don't really share that view.

The Old Boys did a lot of things right. For starters, they understood and leveraged the power of relationships and that's not a bad thing. In fact, if you take out the unfortunate exclusionary aspects, I would advocate that what we need right now is more of what the Old Boys did, which was chiefly to create a community of support.

Now before you guffaw at the word support, I'm not envisioning teary eyed men at the Toronto Club talking amongst themselves and feeling each other's pain. No, I'm sure support in that kind of venue is more of an unspoken agreement NOT to talk, a good manly thump of friendship on the back and a few rounds of drinks. But regardless of the approach, it's still support. In addition to non-verbal camaraderie, there was also likely a discreet word to a few people who had influence that would often lead to a face-saving, mortgage-paying contract between permanent positions or an opportunity to start afresh somewhere else. In a network that by unspoken agreement takes care of its own, there is a sense of security, a bit of a safety net in the face of setbacks.

If ever we needed that kind of support in the industry, it's now. Our members, across the country, are telling us that they're reeling from the cutbacks in the media and telecom sectors. Anxiety about the future, stress from the present and yearning for the security of the past are endemic. And it's not just those who have been downsized who are afflicted, but the ones who are left, with more to do, less resources and the constant fear that they're next. On top of it all, these very real fears and insecurities are ones that nobody wants to express openly, lest they call attention and potential expendability to themselves.

But given the business issues facing most sectors of the communications industry, downsizing isn't going to go away any time soon. So the question becomes, how to cope?

As an organization, we've been turning our thoughts to this challenge. We have a number of resources at hand, most notably our Careerline job posting service (any of you who are hiring should consider posting on our site – it's free) is a key one. It helps our members to keep track of the opportunities in our industry, and hopefully that helps keep the talent and industry history within the sector. So if we can play the role of connector in helping someone with industry experience connect to a job and stay within the industry, I think we're all better for it.

But perhaps the most important thing that we have going is the members themselves, some of whom are in transition right now, some coming out of it and some going into it. There is an opportunity to build a community of support that could contribute significantly to alleviating the sense of dislocation and insecurity that is plaguing so many of us in the current environment.

While I wouldn't say downsizing is in any way a good thing, it sometimes creates opportunities and in this case, I think it presents a chance to take the networking and sense of "community" to a new level. The Old Boys rallied round each other when things went badly and I think that certainly we all have a role to play in making the connections that help relocate talented people within the industry.

And this is where perhaps we part ways with the Old Boys Network. In my view, where they went wrong, wittingly or not, was in failing to be inclusive, of accepting only those cut from the very same cloth. So, as much as I don't want an Old Boys Network, I also don't want to see an Old Girls Network. What would be far more useful would be a New Network, where women and men in the industry can be part of building a community of support.