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IMAGE: YASMINA EL HILALI

They caught his eye back in his days as a politician for the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA): those people who end up with all kinds of cushy jobs in fancy committees without being particularly good at anything. Their trick, Bos revealed, was to arrive late for meetings and leave again before the end, thereby ensuring that everybody noticed them and thought “Who’s that? They must be really busy.” He also noticed that these characters always seemed to be the deputy chairperson of the committee, a position that guaranteed them more status than an ordinary member, without having to do much in the way of extra work.

Offended
Bos admitted to feeling a little offended at first when he was asked to give a talk on how he had shaped his career through networking. After all, the invitation implies that his success was down to his network rather than his intellectual abilities.

Wouter Bos attributed many of the advancements in his career to hard work, discipline, ability but above all to good luck. However, he went on to emphasize that while you can’t influence luck, you can influence your readiness to seize the opportunities that present themselves and that’s something in which networking can play a part. He recalled the time when he was working for Shell in Hong Kong and he was contacted by a representative of the Dutch Labour Party who was on the look-out for new political talent with experience in business. It was a contact that would never have come about if it hadn’t been for networking. The same
applies to Bos’ current position at VUmc. He was also keen to stress that knowing the right people isn’t enough in itself: those people also need to know that you are a good person to work with.

Tip 1: a good story
A VU alumnus, Wouter Bos started his academic career as a student of political science, and opted to combine it with economics after a year. While it’s closer to the truth to say that he didn’t find political science challenging enough, Bos revealed that his official explanation is that he decided to study political science because he wanted to change the world, and then took up economics to find out how much it would cost: it’s not the entire truth but it is a good story. This was his first tip for first-year students: come up with a good story if you want to go far.

‘Networking has its risks. By restricting yourself to the same circle of friends, you sacrifice any chance for renewal’

Tip 2: recommend one another
When Bos joined Shell as a graduate, his job as a recruiter was to find the right people for the right job and keep them in the company. On joining the company he was sent on a course where he was given a priceless tip. To illustrate his point he picked two volunteers from the audience: Nathan and Rosa. He told Nathan to ask everyone he met to recommend Rosa, and Rosa to do the same for Nathan, and he predicted that if they did so consistently for twenty years, they would reach the top.

In other words, his message is: reputation and image do exist and are essential. It’s great to be good, but you won’t get far if nobody knows about it. He also pointed out that everything is relative: the experience he gained working for Shell in China taught him that everything Europeans learn about how to make friends and influence people comes across very differently in China. While the British say the early bird catches the worm, the Chinese say early birds get shot. His point being that standing out from the crowd is not appreciated in China.

Old boys’ network→ the 2008 banking crisis
Wouter Bos was Finance Minister in 2008 when American bank Lehman Brothers went bust and triggered a worldwide banking crisis. He recalled a comment from European Commissioner Neelie Kroes at the time: “If it had been Lehman Sisters, there would have been no crisis.” While it is not a statement Bos would endorse, he does believe it exposes an uncomfortable truth: too much emphasis on an old boys’ network where there is no fresh input of ideas and where everyone is keeping everyone else happy, is fatal. Networking has its risks. By restricting yourself to the same circle of friends, you can sacrifice any chance for renewal.

‘It’s great to be good, but you won’t get far if nobody knows about it’

It’s all about quality
Bos is the first to admit that it’s handy to have plenty of useful numbers programmed into your iPhone, so that don’t have to go through the secretary in order to speak to the person in charge. For instance if VUmc has a dispute with an insurer, the best way of dealing with it is to speak to the head of the company right away. But Bos warned his audience that networking is never the whole picture. In his days as a recruiter, he used the HAIR criteria to estimate how far a person would go over the course of a 30-year career: Helicopter view, Analysis, Imagination, Reality. In the end he believes that it’s all about being good at what you do, knowing why and showing it to the world. That long list of numbers on your iPhone has to contain people who like working with you, who like you and are willing to be motivated by you.

Wouter Bos’ CV
1963 Born in Vlaardingen | 1988 cum laude graduate of VU University Amsterdam in political science and economics | 1988 various jobs at Shell: management consultant in Rotterdam, general affairs manager in Bucharest, planning and development manager in China, New Markets consultant in London | 1998 Labour Party MP | 2000 State Secretary of Finance | 2002 Labour Party Chairman | 2007 Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister | 2010 partner at audit and consulting firm KPMG | 2013 President of the Executive Board at VUmc