

Feeling Out Of Your League?

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Even networking gurus get the occasional jitters when meeting powerful people. Here's how they overcome those nerves.

We've all felt it from time to time – the anticipation of getting an autograph from a childhood hero, the nervous energy before making a sales call with the major industry player, the one-of-a-kind rush and paralysis that comes from feeling just a bit out of your league.

No matter how much I personally think I've grown up from being that kid who caddied for his friends' parents and hid in the back of my family's beat-up, green nova, embarrassed at times of the very father who was trying to provide a better life for his son; there are still times when my insecurities from growing up poor among rich friends come rushing back. Recently, at the World Business Forum – New York, I experienced one of those modern day childhood moments.

I was at the World Business Forum to serve as “conference commando,?? just like I have at the past two Inc. 500 conferences. My task was to get the thousands of attendees excited about and comfortable with having meaningful conversations with other attendees, hopefully to start building some real relationships and not just firing business cards at each other. Furthermore, doing this performance is one of my most outstanding professional competencies (and later the audience feedback even suggested that I was perhaps one of the event's best speakers), so I should have had every reason to be supremely confident, right?

Well, for a moment, I wasn't confident at all. There I was, sitting in the green room, thinking about the speaking lineup: Rudy Giuliani going on before me; then Richard Branson, Jack Welch, and Colin Powell gracing the same stage after me. I really started to feel like I didn't deserve to be there. My mind was racing through scenes from elementary school, me showing up in a rust-spotted, green nova, while the other kids stepped out of Lincolns.

I had to kick myself. “Keith, you tell people every day that they have to take chances, step outside their familiar, and have the courage to connect with people for mutual benefit. Dammit, take your own advice!?? No sooner had I given myself that pep talk than who walks in... Richard Branson. Richard Branson, the

guy I even mentioned in my book as being one of my foremost “aspirational contacts?? for the past three years.

Okay, it's simple, I thought. *Start by portraying your basic personal brand. Be friendly and genuine.* I introduced myself, handed him a copy of *Never Eat Alone*, and said that he was, in fact, in it. *Then share your passions.* I told him how excited I was to be able to help people build better relationships that truly change their lives, both personally and professionally. *Now invite him to share, too.* I asked him what he was most excited about these days. After some talk of Virgin Galactic, his new venture to own and operate privately-built spaceships that can take everybody on sub-orbital space tours, he also mentioned Virgin Lifecare and the importance of health and wellness. *Pow. Right into my sweet spot. Now we're talkin'!* We talked about Big Task Weekend, my new summit for creating powerful strategic partnerships between leaders who are committed to transitioning people to healthier lifestyles. Then the fun really started flying. We were talking a mile a minute about our businesses and ideas and decided to set up a follow-up discussion. *See how you can be helpful to him.* I made several generous offers of things I thought could benefit his new ventures and teams, and since then I've been talking to his group weekly and will likely be doing business with them in the near future.

As intimidated as I previously felt being in the company of guys like Giuliani, Branson, Welch, and Powell, once I found the courage to practice what I preach, it wasn't difficult at all. So next time you're feeling out of your league, remember that it pays to be audacious, to help others be more successful, and to share your passions and dreams.