In his first book, *Never Eat Alone*, best-selling author and corporate adviser Keith Ferrazzi suggests you should never miss an opportunity to strengthen your business network, and that there is no better place to do that than over the dinner (or breakfast) table. In his latest work, *Who’s Got Your Back*, his message is even more forceful: basically, you should never be alone, period, in the sense that, in business, you should always have someone who’s monitoring and constructively criticizing your performance, goading you into delivering on your commitments, challenging and advising you on your goals, and telling you when you’re going off the rails. That’s covering your back.

In fact, he says, you should have at least three of these people who offer you rock solid support and blunt advice whenever it’s needed, and, to that end, the book even has a second subtitle: The secret of finding the three people who will change your life. The approach has echoes of Ferrazzi’s earlier work, particularly his stress on the concept of vulnerability as a positive personal attribute, but it goes beyond the author’s original emphasis on the value of having mentors to guide you. This time, he argues, you need peers. The distinction: mentoring is a sort of master-apprenticeship relationship; a peer is an equal.

To illustrate the point, he recalls the story of Jean Nidetch, an overweight woman fighting to shed the pounds and constantly undermined by the solitariness of her mission and the human weaknesses that defeat most dieters. Eventually she found success by developing a small circle of friends who supported each other and to whom each was accountable for dieting behavior. That’s peer pressure. Nidetch, of course, not only met her weight loss target but went on to expand her mutual support concept by founding Weight Watchers, probably the most famous and enduring diet organization in the world.

“Behind every great leader, at the base of every great tale of success, you will find an indispensable circle of trusted advisers, mentors and colleagues,” Ferrazzi contends. “These groups come in all forms and sizes and can be found
at every level and in nearly all spheres of both professional and personal life, but what they all have in common is a unique kind of connection with each other that I've come to call Lifeline Relationships."

These lifeline relationships help you to identify what success really means for you, to figure out the best way of getting there, to stop you doing things that get in your way, and to sustain change so you can transform your life from good to great. There are Four Mind- Sets you will need to create a foundation for those relationships and nine steps to building your “dream team.”

“In outlining his theories, Ferrazzi frequently falls back on his own personal experiences, rising from a humble background to found and lead Ferrazzi Greenlight, a strategic relationship management firm that has counseled the world’s top enterprises on how to accelerate the development of business relationships to drive sales, spark innovation and create team cohesion. En route, he established his own peer support network. He learned so much about himself, especially his shortcomings, he says, that in the year after establishing his Lifeline Relationships, his business tripled in size.

**The Four Mind-Sets**

Ferrazzi believes that the concepts of mutual support and concomitant intimacy are part of our DNA. It’s a basic need for human connection. But as Western society has evolved, we have become wary of admitting this need, lest we appear weak. To get us back on track, he proposes four interdependent characteristics we should employ that will open the way to establishing Lifeline Relationships. In developing them, you may need to test or practice your skills on others but these individuals need not be those you eventually select for your “inner team.”

**Mind-Set #1 – Generosity:**

A commitment to mutual support and a promise to help others succeed. We can all embrace this philosophy by listening, empathizing, caring, encouraging and we can put it into action by finding out what others need to be happy and then figuring out what we can do to get them there.

It is much more difficult to be on the receiving end of generosity. It can make us feel awkward and undeserving, or fear that we don’t have enough to give in return. But this overlooks the fact that people get a kick simply out of helping. Just think of the response you get when you post a question online. For no other reason than a desire to help, scores of people might suggest an answer. One of the surest ways to create a deeper relationship with a few people whose insights
and trust you value is to let them in by allowing them to help you. “The power of generosity is that it creates goodwill in both directions,” the author states. “The pinnacle isn’t just helping others but allowing them to help us. It’s the surest way I know to break the ice in a relationship and allow it to grow into something deeper and more meaningful.”

Mind-Set #2 – Vulnerability:

Letting your guard down and opening up to enable mutual understanding. It calls for the courage to reveal your inner thoughts, your doubts and fears, and the admission that you need support, a crucial mind-set but difficult to master because of our innate fear of appearing weak.

Nevertheless sharing your fears with those you trust has immediate benefits: a relief of emotional tensions; the likelihood that the other will become closer to you; a willingness on the part of others to offer you help. You can start with perhaps just one individual — a colleague or friend — you feel you can trust and just open up about one issue. You will probably find the person offers advice or shares something about himself. “One thing I’ve learned in business and in my personal life,” the author says, “is that when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable — when we expose our true inner selves to colleagues, with all our strengths and weaknesses, all our accomplishments, skills and failings — we create an electric connection that leads to trust and intimacy as nothing else does.”

Mind-Set #3 – Candor:

More than just speaking your mind, this is the “ability to engage in healthy, caring, purposeful criticism.” The key word is “caring.” You speak with candor because you care enough about the other person to want to help them improve and succeed.

But it’s a two-way street, the author warns. We need to be able to hear the truth from others as well as to deliver it and to understand the spirit in which it is delivered. Being able to do this is essential in reaching out to others for their counsel and for acknowledging the opportunity to change.

The right way to get candor flowing is to try it with people you trust and in situations where there is little downside. For example, ask your boss how you are doing on a specific project or task, or ask for just one thing you could do to improve your job performance.

And when you invite candor, bear the following points in mind in your interaction:
• Stress the need for real, objective criticism; no holding back;
• Make it clear any feedback you get is a gift — thank the candid giver;
• Acknowledge your faults; don’t defend them;
• Ask questions to get more information;
• Offer to provide feedback to them;
• The decision on how or whether to act on it is yours alone.

Mind-Set #4 – Accountability:

Following through on the promises you make

The Weight Watchers example shows how the idea of having to account for your performance to others exerts pressure to deliver. This is such a powerful force that there is even a website (www.stickk.com) where you can declare your own commitments and pay a penalty if you fail to deliver.

There are many other models for achieving it. For instance the Billionaires Club (for aspirational rather than actual billionaires) pairs members with the aim of achieving one-to-one accountability. In another case, a men’s club discusses an individual member’s problems until a point is reached where a clear course of action to resolve them is identified. This is noted in a “little red book.” The member has to make a commitment to taking action on this and, the following week, must account for himself, explaining what he did.

In the author’s terms, formal, regular accountability to your inner circle of advisers — by phone, by email and through regular meetings — is the route to success. The important thing is that there should be a formal structure to the process. “Simply hoping buddies will call you out when you miss a deadline isn’t good enough.”

How do you do it? If you want to know where you stand on the Four Mind-Sets, you can take a simple test at www.KeithFerrazzi.com. Ferrazzi Greenlight’s “rDNA” diagnostic tool will assess you on your aptitude for building and managing relationships.

The Nine Steps to Lifeline Relationships

Assuming you have or are committed to the Four Mind-Sets, how do you go about establishing the relationships and then working with them to help you achieve your goals? The author lists nine steps:

1. Identify and define your aspirations. Where do you want to be a year from now? Three years? Which skills do you need/want to acquire or strengthen?
Where is your current focus — career, personal relationships, giving to others?

2. Find your potential Lifeline Relationships. Best to go outside your immediate circle of family and close friends, who may already have their own preconceptions about you. The author’s initial “dream team” comprised a film producer friend from whom he occasionally sought advice, a recently-retired former boss and mentor, and a person he met over dinner with whom he just gelled.

Ideally, he advises, you should look for people who share your values regarding dreams and goals — and you will just know when you have found someone whose goals for personal growth are aligned with yours.

Where might you find them? At work (we can trust people more than we might believe — try reaching out to a promising colleague or even a past colleague), at school (or more likely, former school connections, like alumni), at conferences and events (people you might get talking to and with whom the chemistry feels right), online (for example, checkout Ferrazzi’s own www.greenlightcommunity.com). You might even consider holding a barbecue to meet neighbors or using a professional coach — there’s nothing wrong with paying for help, says Ferrazzi.

To initially establish their Lifeline potential, explore how they match up to the Four Mind-Sets:

- Will he speak candidly to you and allow you to do the same in return?
- Can she be open and vulnerable with you and is she capable of understanding your fears and struggles?
- Will he hold you accountable in achieving your goals and allow you to do the same for him?
- Is she generous in what she does for you and sufficiently open to let you provide help to her?

In addition, look for what the author calls the Four Cs — commitment of whatever time and effort it takes, comprehension in the form of broad practical knowledge that is relevant to your needs, chemistry (when you just feel the relationship is right) and curiosity reflected in a desire to understand and get up to speed in the areas of your needs. There’s also a ‘D’ — for diversity, the need to create a team with varied backgrounds and experience. You don’t need all of these attributes in one individual. Just make sure that, overall, you covered all the bases.

3. Engage in a “courtship” process to test them out. You may start out with a number of potential “candidates” for your team. You will obviously need to get to know them better, in a similar way to a courtship process where you spend time with your partner, learning more about them and your feelings...
towards them.

However, you are not looking for a soul-mate here or mirror versions of yourself. It’s a preliminary exploration to test the fit. Harking back to his earlier book, the author suggests one way of beginning this process could be “the long, slow dinner” but this is merely a euphemism for saying: Don’t rush it. You need to confirm that both of you:

- Recognize the need in your lives to change and achieve more;
- Are interested in working together to achieve your mutual goals;
- Are willing to put your needs on the table; Recognize the benefits of the partnership;
- Are committed to honesty, rigor and self-reflection;
- Are willing not to let each other fail.

If you strike out, just keep on trying until you find the right people. But expect your small, intimate group, to change over time, as individuals’ availability and interests change.

4. **Broaden your goal-setting strategy.** Work with your advisers to test, develop and stretch your goals. Two (or more) heads are definitely better than one on this. There are different types of goals, the author explains — those related to performance that imply a finite result (like a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow) and those that get you there, which are related to learning (the rainbow). Another example: lose 10 pounds (performance goal); learn how to cook healthier meals (learning goal). You should set both.

5. **Create your personal success wheel.** You can see and download one of these from www.KeithFerrazzi.com. It’s a graphical way of displaying your learning and performance goals in seven sectors of life (though you can add your own): personal, professional, financial, wellness, intellectual, spiritual and giving back.

Use these to prioritize the amount of time you allocate to each area, then produce layers of timed (one year, three months, one month etc.) goals and sub-goals. Crucially, identify all the key people who will help you achieve them.

6. **Learn to fight. Or rather, how to “spar.”** As in boxing and other sports, sparring is a form of vigorous training, in which two partners test each other and learn new skills. The goal is not to determine a winner. Even so, although it’s not really a fight, sparring with your advisers can be tough. The idea is to test and challenge each other’s ideas. At heart though, the give and take among you and your advisers is all about improvement and learning, changing and growing. In the process, partners can be expected to tell you things you don’t want to
hear (bring on the candor), make you defensive (vulnerability), challenge you to deliver your goals (accountability) — but only because they genuinely want to help you (generosity). Participants are encouraged to use rigorous questioning to flush out weaknesses of thinking. It’s okay to get angry too but only if it’s because the other person is ignoring an important point.

“The goal in sparring is to get to a better place,” says Ferrazzi. “Ideally one of you will change your perspective in such an interaction because you will have learned or been exposed to something that you could not have thought of yourself.”

7. **Diagnose your weaknesses.** Everyone has them — self-defeating behaviors that block the route to success. We may already be aware of them or discover them by carefully examining our behavior. Or we may learn about them through others’ candor — either we ask them or they tell us. For sure, we should call on their support to help us defeat them.

It’s a good idea to use the one-at-a-time approach, starting with a weakness that is both easy to identify and excites you about overcoming. Ask your advisers to hold you to the changes you hope to make and to let you know when you’re slipping.

8. **Commit to improvements.** A natural successor to the previous step, this measure calls for a declaration you make, of your own free will, to some course of action. It’s different from an obligation, which is usually something imposed on us that is both rigid and inflexible.

The author explains: “It’s a promise you make to others — an enduring promise, with a timeline, to overcome certain challenges and stick to it, even in the face of expected and unexpected obstacles.”

The process involves expressing what you want to commit to, then seeking and acting on feedback you get from others. Then hold a special accountability check-in once a month with your advisers.

9. **Fake it till you make it.** This notion comes from a well-practiced element of many self-improvement and anti-addiction programs. Fear of failure is a major threat to any changes we seek to make in our behavior, but acting with more confidence than we really feel enables us to fight past those fears.

It has nothing to do with being phony. It is more akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy — our tendency to live up to our own expectations. The author suggests the following steps for practicing this approach as part of a group:

- Commit to a small behavior change you can make today;
- Take action to support it and see what success feels like;
• Discuss how it felt with your support partners;
• Do it again;
• Once the new behavior is ingrained, commit to another change.

**Living It**

It is important to stress that although part of this book covers how to identify, set up and work with your small “dream team” of close advisers, Ferrazzi’s message, especially with regard to the Four Mind-Sets, is much broader. He wants us to practice his principles of openness throughout our business and personal lives.

Don’t just call for advice and candor from your inner group. Certainly, they are the ones with whom we have frequent, structured interaction, but there is a much wider circle of people we can work with and mutually support, in our personal as well as our business lives.

“Each of us can make it our personal movement to speak forthrightly and with caring on the job or in our neighborhoods,” he says. “If we can learn to be honest and vulnerable at work, surely we can do the same at church and at home.”

“Anyone who practices accountability in a staff meeting can hold himself accountable to his own children. But why stop there? Once you’re in the habit of being generous with colleagues and clients, it’s a small leap to helping complete strangers.”

The final section of the book is devoted to the tactics, strategies and structures, from formal organizations to do-it-yourself peer groups, that help you stay the course. There are, for instance, a number of established mutual groups, such as the aforementioned Billionaires Club, the Young Presidents’ Organization (www.ypo.org), the 15,000 member strong Vistage group (www.vistage.com) and the Entrepreneurs’ Organization (www.EOnetwork.org).

You may also consider setting up your own mutual-support group of three to six people that meets regularly and follows a set format, for instance: each member shares personal successes and challenges; one memberspotlights a specific issue; the issue is subjected to the sparring process mentioned above; specific solutions are suggested; and finally review of the meeting and setting of commitments for future discussion. (This, presumably, would be a different approach to an inner circle where the individual members might not interact with each other, only with you.)
Conclusion

Ferrazzi’s declared aim in this book is to teach you to expand the circle of people with whom you are intimate by using the Four Mind-Sets of candor, vulnerability, accountability and generosity, then use his nine steps to create and work with your inner circle of advisers.

In doing so, it is critically important to select your closest advisers with care, testing them for compatibility and commitment, never rushing and always being prepared to pass on a particular relationship if it doesn’t feel right.

“Your ultimate goal in finding those three people who can help you change your life is to bring people on board with whom you can build trusted, respected lifeline relationships,” he explains.

Beyond this inner circle, he urges readers to strengthen their relationships with others, again based on the Four Mind-Sets, and, in the end, to seek to make this new approach a core element of the way you live.