Isolated Expert Builds New Network for New Role

LEARN & ADAPT

CASE CONTEXT

A technical expert moves from an isolated independent contributor role to being the coordinator of a multi-year client project outside her expertise. With help of a new network, she learns how to manage the client, coordinate a sprawling team and influence without authority.

FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

HIGH-PERFORMING LEADERS LEVERAGE NETWORKS TO DO 5 THINGS

Based on 20 years of research in more than 300 organizations, we know that the quality of your professional relationship play a significant role in your success. We have extended this research to describe the way high-performing leaders leverage their networks to: Innovate, Execute, Scale, Thrive and Adapt.

INNOVATE   EXECUTE   SCALE   THRIVE   ADAPT

Arianna had been working in a narrow field as a technical specialist—a job that was repetitive and independent.

The isolation was personally and professionally unsatisfying. "There was no interesting collaboration. I had no reason to talk to anyone … I expressed interest in trying out a coordination role on a small project to see if that sort of work would bring some of the interaction that I was looking for." Soon after, she was pulled in as a coordinator on a large, multi-year account in a field outside her expertise.

Shifting from doing the work directly to coordinating and working through networks is a common transition. And it's often a difficult challenge. Typically, the skills and connections that were most valuable before are not the ones needed for success in the new role. Understanding how to create and leverage an effective, new network allows people like Arianna to avoid becoming a "disconnected expert," unable to address skill gaps and learn in an unfamiliar context.

At first, Arianna struggled but assumed she would figure it all out. "I was just thrown in the deep, and I felt like I should be able to do everything, even though I didn't know a lot of stuff. I was tentative about asking for help to fill those knowledge gaps. I would try to hide what I didn't know and ask my questions in a sort of a sneaky way … I was new to a client-facing role, and I didn't want the client to think that I couldn't deliver for them."

She realized something had to change when the one person she relied on most was unavailable. "I recall being overwhelmed when she went on vacation. I was very comfortable asking her questions, so when she was gone, it was like, *Oh, crap!* I didn't know how to get to the answers."

Arianna's instinct to hide her uncertainty was understandable—a natural response to the pressures of moving from a role of being a deep expert to one of coordinating work, people and clients. Fortunately, she realized there was, in fact, lots of support around her. She opened up to a peer doing similar work. She started asking more questions of team members and subject-matter experts more broadly in the organization. "As I had a bit more comfort in the role, I realized I could ask everybody questions. It was OK to not know things; that was part of the role. Now I'm much more comfortable to say, *I don't know the answers, but I will get them for you*."

The client relationships also added to Arianna's ability to learn and improve in her role. She took cues from two leaders on the client side, learning how to communicate and engage with the larger team.

She also built an honest relationship with a project manager in the client organization. This confidante helped her understand the internal client dynamics and politics. "I could go to her to get background, to understand the real timelines and priorities and what's happening between the lines. That was pretty key to me understanding where I needed to push and where I could let things slide."

Knowing where to push also was important for coordinating her project and tapping into the high-end technical experts elsewhere in the firm. She improved her ability to influence others through clear communication and a tailored approach. "Some people like to see the full context. Other people are like, *I just want to know my thing and do it*. I had to figure out who wants what and how to interact with each of them … There's definitely been a learning curve to figure out how different people work."

Arianna learned from early mistakes and negative experiences, too. "At first, I wasn't communicating very well with my supervisor. I didn't know if I was doing things right; I wasn't getting any feedback. I finally talked to her about it and it was great. I would have saved some pain if I had asked her sooner."

Later, the client was unsatisfied with the quality of the work. "I didn't know how to handle that. I was getting exhausted and frustrated. I ended up bringing in leadership to help figure out how to staff and meet the client needs. Looking back, I should have yelled for help sooner and louder … Because I hadn't been through this process before, I didn't know if we were genuinely derailing or if it just felt like we were … If we'd figured it out sooner, maybe we could have nipped it in the bud before it got bad."

The client is now appreciative of the effort given by the team; the relationship is solid. Over time, Arianna has grown in her role, gaining an understanding of how all the components and people involved in a complex project fit together. She established relationships with peers and with her manager, with the client and the internal project team. Now she feels good and is succeeding in the new role. "I joke all the time that I don't personally do anything in my job now—I just coordinate and interact so other people can do things! It's a complete switch from before and the right decision."

Network Insights

- **Use newness to your advantage.** During the first six months in a new role, give yourself permission to ask questions, seek help or admit that you do not know. Don't try to hide things. Meet people and learn before you are expected to know.

- **Build 2-3 close relationships with people in a similar role.** You can turn to them for real-time, tactical advice.

- **Establish effective communication with your boss.** Communicate resource needs and uncertainties. Don't be afraid to ask for feedback directly. Your supervisor will think well or poorly of you. Either way, you are better off knowing.

- **Engage in ways that build client confidence**. Build one close client contact to help provide guidance on needs and how to navigate politics. Draw on the team and bigger network to over-deliver, meet commitments and solve problems.

- **Learn influence skills to operate in a network.** When you do not have direct authority, you need to establish rapport, build trust, create context and tailor communication.

How to Help Employees Leverage Networks in Role Transitions

Many early-career professionals and rising stars do not cultivate or adapt their networks when they transition from one role to another. Often, they have done well because of their expertise. When the role becomes more complex, success does not come through individual effort—it requires the right networks.

As a leader, you can guide employees to build effective networks when they take on a new role.

1. Help employees gain self-awareness about their knowledge and skill gaps. Give feedback and encourage them to seek it from peers and experts, teammates and clients (internal or external). Help them identify people, experiences and functions that can help address gaps.

2. Let employees know that being new in a role is an opportunity to learn. Encourage them to meet new people, ask questions and be OK to say, *I don't know.*

3. Guide employees to build boundary spanning connections. Advise them to build relationships outside of their group or function with at least one leader, two or three people that consume the output of their work, and one or two experts.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH & ROB CROSS

Building on 20 years of research with more than 300 organizations, the Network Leader Research Project seeks to understand the approach and strategies that enable certain leaders to consistently achieve peak performance. The research includes 160 in-depth interviews conducted by Rob Cross, a Professor of Management at University of Virginia's McIntire School of Commerce. The Connected Commons is currently focusing its research on leadership effectiveness, talent optimization and organizational alignment and change—three areas where network insights can clearly drive performance. For more information visit www.connectedcommons.com or email Rob at rlcrossjr@gmail.com.