



LEARN &
ADAPT

A Do-It-Myself Manager Learns to Rely on the Network

CASE CONTEXT

A rising-star leader is pulled into a crisis with a key client shortly after being promoted. To solve the problem and fix the relationship, she engages the network, fosters learning and manages collaborative overload. She discovers the value of letting go and working through others.

Not long after she was promoted to lead a customer-facing department of 200 employees, Ashley was faced with an angry client, whose negative experience was jeopardizing the company's long-standing relationship. The client's representative was also known for having high demands, being quick to call out problems and wanting to take a deep look at operations and solutions.

The business needed the problem to be resolved and the relationship mended. Personally, Ashley was in the spotlight. She approached the problem at its root, to trace back the experience of individual customers using the service as well as the experience of the client who contracts the work. "That's where networking came in into play. Instead of sitting there and putting an action plan in place on my own and demand that my staff follow it, I went out to talk to people on the client side, the sales and support side, my frontline managers, the data people. I talked to people who have interacted with this individual before and know his personality. I needed their information, ideas and insight about what we can do quickly and what long-term plans we should put into place. What ideas do you guys have? I had to listen to what they had to say and not just make a decision on my own of what I thought we should do."

"To be honest, that's been a growing experience for me because I'm quick to think *Hey, here's what we should do!*"

Frustration, negativity and defensiveness had the potential to block Ashley and her team's energy and motivation to solve the problem. "I wanted to make sure we took it on as a challenge and really turn it around ... We had to pay attention to the negative. Something happened to cause the client's reaction and perception. So, if it is what it is today, what can we do to make it different? We could get hung up in that negative piece of it, and there were times I got frustrated through the process. But, by going through this to help that client, we would learn and improve my overall business."

For herself and her team, Ashley focused on the positives. Doing well meant improving and building experience in an important market. It was an opportunity for her team to be seen as successful. "I also had an up-and-coming leader on my team, and I thought this was a great opportunity to engage him and really give him a chance to have leadership exposure. He would help me with the challenge, but it was a good way for him to step in and grow and develop as well."



FEMALE

Level: MANAGER OF
MANAGERS

Industry: HEALTHCARE

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.



The process “was a long road,” involving staffing changes and new customer service processes and behaviors. A workshop was held with employees from the client organization to gain perspective and deeper understanding of the culture and context. Ashley’s team worked hard at every level to address client concerns and re-build trust. When the client rep visited a year later, “He took a moment to really have a conversation, to talk to me and to leadership. He said some of the things we had put in place and our people have been game changers. We are in a good direction. He was ready to look forward rather than reflect on the past.”

The win was important for the company, and it was also a transition point for Ashley as a manager and leader. “It was a moment for me to dig in to the role and really push my team. It was a huge step for me in the role I am in, to not always be the person who has to do everything.”

As Ashley’s workload expanded to include managing a large additional project involving people in multiple locations and functions, she kept learning to let go and work through others. In addition to the potential for personal overload and burnout, Ashley saw the negative side of her tendency to do it all herself:

- Creating bottlenecks and inefficiencies, as people wait for information, decisions or directions.
- Preventing new ideas from surfacing.
- Limiting buy-in if people have not had a voice in the conversation.
- Holding back development and opportunity for others on the team and in the network.

Shifting her mindset was not easy or automatic. Her comfort with it still varies depending on time frame, risk level and trust among the people involved. “I am challenged with this constantly, because I still tend to think, *I’m going to make my to-do list and get going*. But, I have learned to sit back and think it through ... I don’t find myself as often thinking, *What am I going to do about this?* I find myself asking, *What’s the primary objective? Who else do I know that connects to this type of work or brings in a different view? Who can I involve who needs an opportunity to shine or grow?* I approach things a little differently now than I would have two years ago.”

Network Insights

- **Embrace negative or de-energizing ties rather than avoid them.** These relationships can be key learning and improvement opportunities. Engaging them early also keeps these people from undermining project success later on. This might be a customer or resisters, nay-sayers or complainers in the organization.
- **Leverage boundary spanning ties in early stages of problem solving to get a full view of problem and multiple possible solutions.** Don’t over-rely on your own expertise or a tendency to jump in with a solution right away.
- **Engage others so that they are motivated to bring their best effort to solutions, rather than looking to you for answers.** As you progress in the ranks, the desire to solve problems yourself can lead to overload and burnout. Practice letting go and bringing others in.
- **Identify influencers early.** At the beginning of something new, ask around to see who people turn to for help on certain topics. Use their responses to learn who is influential in the group (often they are more introverted people that you would not assume are opinion leaders).

How to Practice Network Thinking

Working through the network is essential for performance as work becomes bigger in scope and more complex. Ashley, like many high performers, had a hard time shifting from being an individual problem solver to using networks for better results. To develop a network mindset, try these steps:

1. **Pause.** Jumping in might seem most efficient but the impulse to solve a problem as presented narrows your options. While this “get-it-done” behavior makes you successful to a certain point, your ability to slow down and bring in the right network will allow for more innovation, greater efficiency and stronger performance over time.
2. **Check assumptions.** Reflect on the primary objective. What people or groups might have expertise or different vantage points on the objective and would help define the problem space?
3. **Consider the roles.** Then consider who could get involved in this with you to scale your idea. Bring people in based on their direct benefit or role, necessary expertise or perspective and the opportunity to learn and grow.

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.