



LEARN &
ADAPT

Self-Awareness Leads to New Networks & Opportunities

CASE CONTEXT

A results-driven manager realizes his behaviors are causing problems at work and home. He changes what he can control, addresses skill gaps and builds ties to those who can help him learn and succeed in an expanded role.



MALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL
LEADER

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.



Driven, proven performers face transition points in their careers as they gain more responsibility or step into

new roles. One risk they face is becoming a “disconnected expert” — someone who does not have the skills and network needed to thrive at next level. By interacting with and relying on similar people over time, they limit their access to valuable know-how, perspectives and influencers. Doug, a first-level leader, stumbled for a time in his new role, before gaining the insight, support and experiences he needed to succeed. With guidance from his boss and a growing cross-functional, cross-level network, Doug was able to adapt his managerial style and take on a primary role in piloting a company-wide change initiative.

The challenge for Doug came when his team wasn’t performing well and, at the same time, he was dealing with significant family concerns, which required his time and emotional energy. “Things outside of work were negatively impacting my performance inside of work. We like to think we check ourselves at the door, but we’re human and that’s just not the case ... I am a results-oriented person, and I came to my team meetings saying, *OK, this is where our goals are, this is where we’re at, I need you guys to do better.* It didn’t work. My team was sinking; they became disengaged. I saw metrics and goals drop. People were missing work. It just blew up. I came into work in a bad mood. I was in a bad mood at work. I went home in a bad mood. It was a vicious cycle.”

“Driving home one day, I just thought, this is a bad situation. Something has to change. I may not have control over everything, but I do have control over what I say, how I say it, how I react.”

Doug took this moment of realization and acted on it. “I spoke to my direct superior. *What advice do you have?* She pointed out that she doesn’t react to me with anger or condescension when she thinks I’m not doing something right. It came down to treating other people how you want to be treated. That’s when I decided to change.” Doug started to relate to his team in different ways. Rather than pushing the metrics and motivating via force, he took time to check in with each person and connect with them on a personal as well as professional level. He ask for input from them about how to get better results. Small changes in behavior—adjusting his tone, not clenching his fist in frustration—had a calming effect on him and his team.

Over time, the team’s morale and metrics improved. Doug’s new effectiveness got him thinking about what’s next.

Again, a candid conversation with his boss was a turning point. “She’s very easy to talk to and she really cultivates development in her direct reports ... so it was OK to tell her that I feel like I’m just going through the motions on a day-to-day basis; I really need another challenge.”

Soon, Doug was given a key assignment (on top of his regular job) working on a high-profile pilot project that had the potential to be scaled and implemented across the company. “There was quite a bit of pressure inside my organization and outside of it to get it done right.”

“Getting it done right” was a moving target. At first, Doug’s role involved learning about new software, training employees and implementing the new process. This required him to operate outside of his department and learn to influence others. “Not only did I have to continuously engage people on my direct team, but I had to go out, face-to-face, to my peers and other supervisors and let them know who I was, my role, what’s expected.” Once the implementation was underway, it was clear the goal was bigger and the project “morphed into something different ... I had to engage with the data people. We had to bring in people from our quality and training groups to fine-tune the customer-service piece. And managers higher in my organization and in other departments were keeping tabs.”

“Each step prepared me for what to expect down the road and also let me show what I was capable of doing. I had a better sense of my skill. I got to network with people I never knew existed. The success and execution of the pilot program led me to be seen as an expert and be on the team to roll this out for the company. I have leadership skills and authority I wouldn’t have gotten otherwise.”

Looking back, Doug sees the experience of struggling and learning has paid off. He’s continued to be excited about the project work and his direct reports are genuinely effective and engaged. He knows what it’s like to have a good day at work, go home on time, and have focus and energy to give both personally and professionally.

“I have learned more on this job and working on this side project than in all other roles and jobs combined. It’s been wonderful.”

Network Insights

- **Rich, boundary spanning ties are associated with performance.** Build non-insular networks into other functions to break out of the disconnected expert trap. Actively build ties to people who are important to your work and who can help you address skill gaps.
- **Self-awareness is essential for understanding gaps in knowledge and behavior.** Pay close attention to your reactions—and the reactions of others—for insight into what is going well and what isn’t. Seek feedback from others to help you figure out what skill or expertise is important, but missing, for you.
- **First-level leaders are vulnerable to an insular network.** Your skills and network suited you in your previous role. You earned a promotion or gained new responsibility because of your performance. But managing people and increasing scope and scale of work demands different skills and new connections to help you find your way.

How to Avoid Being a Disconnected Expert

1. **Pick adjacent expertise to develop into—where there are synergies or innovation potential with internal or external clients.** Doug gained new experience by getting involved in a project that involved his current team, but extended into other functions. This helped him build his network and reputation into the organization.
2. **Be prepared for project to pivot and grow in unpredictable ways.** Doug stepped in to new opportunities and sought new connections as the work evolved. Project creep became an opportunity to shine.
3. **Value the network that is built at least as much as the expertise.** Pay attention to *who* as well as *what*. Doug had a good network within his department, but by building ties across function and up and down levels, he became well-positioned for future opportunities.

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.