LEARN & ADAPT

Technical Leader Avoids Collaborative Overload When Scope Expands

CASE CONTEXT

A technical expert, engineering consultant and project lead gains greater responsibility and scope during a merger. Now, he draws on a bigger network and new tactics to develop his skills, strengthen his team and prevent collaborative overload.

MALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL LEADER

Industry: ENGINEERING

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

Jalen, an experienced project leader, was accustomed to leading a small team of 10-12, managing work within his technical specialty and covering a focused geographic region. He worked closely with his supervisor to bid on projects, coordinate the team, interact with clients, and ensure quality work, on time and on budget. If a project required expertise outside of his group's function, he tapped a network of potential subcontractors and partners—or the work wasn't pursued.

When the company merged with another global engineering entity, regional operations consolidated and a range of functions became interconnected. Jalen was promoted to operations manager within a newly created business center, changing the scope and nature of his role. With a team of 60 in several locations (including 20 direct reports), a new boss and a much larger pool of resources, he was well aware of a significant learning curve ahead.

The need to coordinate and collaborate in new ways was an initial challenge. "Before, we were technical consultants, with a client and a project. Now, the company is trying to work as one team and create the full package for our clients, covering all the needs for a project. We have internal clients, from many different disciplines. People come to us to be part of their team, or the opposite: we have the project and have to manage the other groups. Initially, we had to build up the relationships, so people would start coming to us. Now, it is important that we coordinate our resources and communicate internally, so we don't drop the ball."

Jalen started to feel the strain of so many demands and was becoming a bottleneck for decisions and information. This is a common trap during career transitions, as leaders are unable to adapt in ways that allow them to collaborate and delegate more effectively. Jalen turned to his previous boss and mentor for advice and tried different tactics for reducing the overload. A weekly team meeting—with some members phoning in—was effective for several reasons. Scheduling and resource issues could be addressed as a group and in a single point in time, reducing the back-and-forth that had been consuming much of Jalen's attention. The meetings were also a chance for the larger group to get connected to each other and gain awareness of the range of projects. "They like to come to me for everything, but in the meeting I will connect them and get things going ... I want more interaction and teamwork. If everyone knows what's going on, they can see a problem and say, *Is there any way I can help?*"

The meetings were more direct and productive than ongoing email chains, too. "I like to talk on the phone or talk in person, instead of just exchanging emails, because I want to be clear and make sure my message is correctly received. If I do this over email, I end up writing an email and re-writing it, looking at it from different angles. But, if you can talk, you can hear each other's tone, hear the reaction and respond to clarify. It's much easier."

As he gained better grasp of the role and its challenges, Jalen continued to look for ways to improve. In the coming months, he plans to hire an administrative assistant and investigate technology options for handling coordination and project scheduling. He is also starting to look at his personal tendencies to do the work himself and be the expert. "I definitely need to learn more how to delegate. I always want to be on top of things. Even on vacation, I just keep checking my phone. I know I need to learn how to pass on parts of my work to others, to trust them to get things done."

With this awareness, he is taking a longer-term view of building trust in others and developing his team to be more effective. "It will take more time to know some of the new people and to learn their capacity. Right now, I feel like I have to take the time to look at things, understand them, to pass it along, to work with the team to see if they have the capability … That is one thing I have to learn to manage better."

Jalen continues to work through his learning curve in other ways, too. He is adjusting to a new boss and responding to many requests where he doesn't have an answer. "It is difficult for me, but I have to be frank and let them know when I don't know something. Rather than pretend I do, it is better to say *I don't know and I will look into it*. That is better than being on deadline and suddenly having to break the news."

Even with the many challenges, Jalen is excited about the benefits and opportunities he now has. "With the new responsibilities, I am still learning, but because we now have so many offices, I get to meet more people and learn about the projects they are doing. That is eye opening for me. I have more connections and can reach out to them."

Network Insights

Condense coordination activities to a single place or time. This creates a routine for project updates, scheduling needs and resource demands. It's an opportunity for everyone to get a snapshot of the whole, reducing the number of one-off, isolated questions and requests that incur switching costs on you.

Drive awareness of expertise and work into the network. If people are only aware of your expertise, they will keep coming to you. Do things that help the members of the network know who to reach out to in the group.

Fight the tendency to do everything because you like to help or get a sense of identity by being an expert. As Jalen explains, "Of course, it feels good to help others and be the expert, but I need to get my reports to carry the ball more. They should get credit when they do something good, but be responsible if they make a mistake or something drops."

Handle bad news well. Mistakes will be made as the network takes on new work. Avoid non-constructive feedback or cues that you are disappointed (e.g., slumping shoulders, sighs, frowns). These reactions will drive excessive approval seeking.

Delegate: Move **from** *What* & *How* **to** *Why* & *Who*

New leaders tend to organize team meetings, 1:1s and performance reviews around the *What* (tasks that need to get done) or the *How* (the ways work will be accomplished). Delegating comes easier if you focus on the *Why* (to help create a sense of purpose—seeing the big picture and how their work fits in) and the *Who* (to create awareness of people's roles, projects and expertise).

When you develop your team with the *Why* and the *Who*, along with addressing the particulars of the task, you gain a number of benefits, including:

1. People start to give their best effort—instead of work you have to review or re-do.

2. People reach out to each other to solve problems—instead of requests, large and small, being escalated to you.

3. You gain time to think and focus on immediate priorities—instead of being reactive to small details all day.

4. You and your team build capacity—instead of maintaining the status quo.

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.