LEARN & ADAPT

Using New Perspectives to Build Function from Scratch

CASE CONTEXT

A seasoned manager starts up an important internal service. Rather than accepting the initial plan, she takes the team in a direction that brings in new perspectives and fast-tracks implementation and acceptance.

FEMALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

Industry: COMMUNICATION

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

With more than 20 years working in the same company, Janelle brought experience and deep knowledge to a start-up assignment. But those same traits also had the potential to undercut her success. Often established leaders fail when they apply old perspectives to a new problem and over-rely on a long-held, insular network when taking on new roles. To be effective—and avoid the network trap of "biased leader"—Janelle found a way to rely on trusted ties *and* draw in new people with fresh views.

The task was to build a quality assurance team for a massive call center operation—a separate function that would evaluate customer service calls. A new team was needed to serve a single, merged call center—with more than 20,000 agents serving millions of customers every year. Beyond the challenge of scale, Janelle had to address the increasing complexity of the products, services and customer needs, as well as security and customer privacy. "How do we make sure all the right things are happening? And how do we do that in a way that doesn't add cost to the company?"

The original idea presented to Janelle was to train every quality team member to be a call center agent, so they knew what was required before they learned to be quality assessors. But this seemed slow and expensive to Janelle. "It takes six months or a year before agents fully know what they need to be doing. So, I wasn't convinced that four or five weeks of training was the best thing … We came up with plan that was innovative in two ways. One, we got really narrow. Instead of looking at 100 things on every call, we look at the three or four most important things. Two, we reinvented the training. We hired four people with no ties to the business, put them in a room and had them tell us how they needed to be trained. It caused a lot of discomfort, because it's not how we've done it before."

Janelle and her group turned to people who knew the business segments, as well as call center agents, supervisors and coaches, to weigh in. "Then, we brought in our four outsiders and said, *Here's what we want you to do. What do you need to know to be able to do that?* Our trainers and our process people took time and listened and engaged with the four. That's how we wrote the training and how we ended up building a new tool from scratch to make this work."

Because they were taking an innovative approach, outside views and established expertise were both essential. "It was high collaboration …"

"For everything, we had to reach out to our networks and ask people to help us answer questions and make suggestions … and we really listened to the people doing the work."

Janelle also paid attention to network influencers—both the advocates and resisters. "If you've been around the business a long time, I think you intuitively reach out and ask people to punch holes in your thinking. In this case, we brought in people we knew would be resistant so we could refine the process. We asked, *What else do you need to accept this and see it as valuable?* And, we talked to people we thought could influence others to see the good. We definitely did both of those things."

"We were also attuned to providing a service to the call center team. We tried to think about how to make it easy for the agents to use the information that we gave them. We talked to them to ask, *How do you want to get this feedback, what makes it helpful?* And we were deliberate in how we staffed the quality assurance supervisory team, so that they had experience with the agents and coaching. Or, they had experience with the specific product lines or services … It helped build a comfort level between the call center and the quality team. It created a feeling of connection—that the people who would be listening to calls and providing feedback are not some alien group telling them what to do."

Working through networks, the new team and the new process were fast-tracked. "Just four weeks after we wrote the training, we were using it on calls. From there, it was an iterative approach: testing, fixing, trying, making another tweak."

The focused training of the quality assurance team allowed agents to receive very specific, high-priority feedback. "In this business, you look at what you want agents to do and how often are they doing it. Then you help them get better. And we have seen improvement in all the key areas."

Janelle's willingness to challenge assumptions, bring in outside perspectives and allow new voices to be influential resulted in a notably stronger call center team. In the process, she reinforced her own leadership style as one capable of adapting and building new connections.

Network Insights

Don't over-rely on current network when entering a new domain or different role. People fail when they have a biased network, always turning to same people because they like them or trust them, even if they do not have the right expertise.

Staff team with outside perspectives to make sure fresh voices are included for ideation. Too often leaders staff ideation teams with top-of-mind experts or their go-to collaborators. These people are often central in networks but might not offer novel ways of looking at a problem.

Lean heavily on bridging ties during development. This makes you more likely to bring in relevant expertise and insights. Always ask who *else* you should be talking to.

Get feedback on prototypes by engaging internal influencers and—importantly—the influential resisters. And when it's time to implement, make staffing decisions in ways that factor in connections as a way that decrease resistance.

Help Others See the "Why" of Work

Like many leaders, Janelle wished to support her team members' sense of purpose. But not all individuals are motivated by the same goals. And some may have yet to discover what truly drives them.

Several network-based solutions can help you connect with others in a way that both clarifies and supports their unique purpose at work and in life:

1. Help people see how their work fits into the organization or team's larger mission or objectives.

2. Provide the latitude people need to feel a sense of ownership in how they do their jobs.

3. Convey your trust in them. They are more likely to give their best effort, with a higher degree of accountability.

4. Set a regular time for meeting one-on-one with your direct reports. Honor the commitment—and the employee—by preserving their time rather than rescheduling. Build trust by spending 50% of that time connecting on professional goals and personal aspirations.

5. Assign work that aligns with an individual's goals, aspirations and interests—if it's more meaningful, the employee will be more committed and more productive.

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.