LEARN & ADAPT

Personal Relationships, Not Formal Structures, Help New Manager Turn Around a Troubled Team

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced manager helps a struggling team adapt to change and work with renewed skill and pride. She invests in getting to know each person and growing their sense of belonging and unique contribution, which over time increases value they provide to the larger customer service network.

FEMALE

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.

Kathryn is a long-time customer service manager, having moved through the ranks and working in various specialty

groups within one division. Her most recent move took her into another division, where customers, processes and systems were very different. In addition, half of her team of 20 had come from an acquisition and had never really felt as if they belonged in the new company. The whole group was wary of Kathryn, their fifth manager in three years.

Kathryn decided the first thing she needed was to understand her team, personally and professionally. Before her first day in the role, she met several times with the manager who was leaving. In their first meeting, she asked about the work and the challenges, the work ethic and performance of the team members. In the second meeting, she asked the manager, *What do you know about them personally … Is there anything you can tell me from that perspective?* "He was really surprise that I asked, but I had learned a long time ago you have to build the relationships … If I want somebody to be open and honest with me and if I expect things out of them, I need to know what's happening in their life as well."

Kathryn learned to take this personal approach from her own experience with a new manager. "I remember, the first 15 minutes of our first conversation was just about me. And he always asked how I was doing. He learned my husband's name and my children's names. Just that little bit of personalization goes a long way; I would have walked on water for him if I could have." This type of "off-task" or personalized connection with people is shown to build trust and encourage effort and commitment to the work, and it is one way Kathryn was able to work effectively with her team.

Within her first two weeks, Kathryn met with everyone on the team individually. She asked some personal questions, then acknowledged all the changes they had been through. That opened the door to talk about themselves, their experience and their current role. She also tried to understand relationships within the team, asking, *Who do you go to if you have a problem or a question*? Kathryn learned that one person was particularly influential with the people who joined the team via acquisition. She was a quiet and low-key team member, someone Kathryn would not have seen as an opinion leader. "She was more positive than the others … If I could get her on board, she would start pulling others on board." Kathryn asked the quiet influencer to lead a project, and also began drawing her out in team meetings by asking questions or bringing up topics where she had expertise or interest. "It helped me tremendously … People started opening up as she showed interest in the work and a little confidence in me."

Similarly, Kathryn gave extra effort to a person on the team that was very negative. "If I didn't, every bit of good I did would come back to me twofold, in a negative way. I thought if I could bring her barriers down and turn her around, that will turn the rest of them around. That's exactly what's happened." At the initial one-on-one meeting, Kathryn asked her how she would like to start. "She laughed and asked, *Does it really make a difference?* I said, *It's going to make a difference if you allow me* … And, I said, *Look, I can't begin to know what you feel like or where you've been … So, why don't you just talk to me about work, the kids, whatever. No rhyme or reason* … After an hour, I said, *Let's continue this conversation in a couple days. And I want you to come back to me with a few things you do very well or better than anybody else.*" After that, Kathryn used her identified strengths to get her to contribute to team meetings. "I made sure to bring those topics up, and I pulled her into the conversation. People heard her talk positively on the calls, and she started feeling more part of the team."

The changes Kathryn made to engage team members in a positive way made a difference, shifting the tone away from complaints and negativity. Over time, morale and effort increased. Team members became proud of their work. They collaborated with and helped their teammates and gave encouragement and recognition to each other. Problems or gaps that had been routinely flagged by Kathryn's boss and the larger sales and support teams were resolved and the team's skills were updated in many ways.

But it hasn't been a smooth or perfect process. Kathryn relied on a trusted peer to be her personal sounding board, and she often reminded herself of the value of the work to keep the negativity at bay. "In my career, this role has been my biggest challenge, but it gives me a sense of pride to help people. Either you live and breathe service or you don't … It can be frustrating but very rewarding."

"Two years later, I'm still here. They are stuck with me. I have taken time to know people personally and to know their work skills and ethics … That's two different things, but it's only one person. If you only take time to know the one side you're never going to get to their full potential."

Network Insights

- **Gain an accurate perception of the informal network.** A common network traps is that of the "formalist," someone who over-relies on formal leaders rather than understanding how work gets done and how people are influenced through networks.
- **Leverage positive opinion leaders.** Connect with network influencers in an individual way. Use their strengths and interests as a jumping off point to speak up or communicate positively to others.
- **Actively address negative opinion leaders.** Proactively seek out and embrace negative influencers. Take steps to understand underlying causes of negativity. Provide structures for them to interact in positive ways, drawing on their strengths and interests.

How a New Manager Can Identify Positive Opinion Leaders

Kathryn understood she would have to win over skeptics on her new team. First, she sought out opinion leaders who had a positive view and a willingness to change. Here's what she did:

- Within the first two weeks, she held one-on-one interviews with all her direct reports. She kept the conversations very open ended, non-judgmental and aimed at getting a sense of people's professional AND personal aspirations.
- In each conversation, she asked, *Who do people go to when they have a problem that is common to that group?* The people who came up repeatedly were the network influencers she focused time with early.
- In follow-up meetings with the influencers, she tried to learn what they care about and what they believe are strengths. In team meetings, she engaged people on these topics in positive ways. She offered one influencer a project and a chance to shine in front of the team. As influencers spoke more about good experiences or in positive ways the negative energy naturally dissipated.

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.