



LEARN &
ADAPT

A Leader Fast-Tracks Creation of His Network to Extend His Team's Influence & Build New Capability

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced leader takes over a role with a large scope and ambitious goals. He successfully builds a broad network to support his long-term work while executing on a few high-profile events to establish an early reputation for accomplishment.



MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

Industry: PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

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.

Just four months into his new role as director of learning and organization development, Rick has the network and visibility of someone who has been in the position much longer. The scope of the role includes 12 direct reports and a team of 50 responsible for the on-boarding of 5,000 people each year, leadership development and all training. His broad goal—to transform development to a model of self-enabled learning—and core priorities are ambitious. Plus, he is rebuilding his group, which had undergone significant turnover and challenges. “I went into this knowing I would be building relationships, one at a time, within the team and with others in the business.”

Typically, successful people who take on a bigger or more visible position build their networks via the formal organization structure: Who are the other senior leaders or superiors who hold formal (and often political) influence? These ties have value, but it is just as important to build relationships with a diverse range of people who have influence and information. Without an accurate perception of the informal network—and how work gets done—leaders miss opportunities or see their progress stall at key times. Rick avoided this trap by getting to know both formal and informal influencers as he transitioned into his new role.

Rick’s boss set him up for success from the beginning: he had clarity around his priorities and a clear path to build his network. She identified a few visible, early wins to pursue: Rick jumped in to run two events for partner groups, a tangible deliverable tied to one of his top priorities. His boss also had prepared a list of 47 people for him to meet within the first weeks on the job. Some people were business leaders and formal influencers, but many were internal clients and functional managers whose teams he would rely on over time. By initiating this network on entry—rather than when he needed help—he would be better informed and more successful at getting things done later. Building the network *and* creating a reputation for execution simultaneously resulted in a very intense ramp-up time for Rick, but it is an approach that is proven to be important for high performance and long-term success.

Rick reached out to different people in different ways. With the heads of the firm’s practices and regions, he sought to understand the business environment and how his team could be an asset. He also knew these people were key for political support and to set his reputation. “These are the people who can really make or break anybody in a corporate function. The narrative I want to hear is, *Rick’s team supports my business; they are helping to drive my growth strategy.*”



INNOVATE



EXECUTE



SCALE



THRIVE



ADAPT

As a practical matter, Rick's reputation would be tied to results, so he took some of his meeting time to figure out who else he should work with to get things done. "My question for each of those people was, *Who's your trusted deputy for all matters of human capital? Who do you want me to work with?* ... This saves their time. And, it boosts my credibility when I deliver something—they know I didn't just come up with it alone in a closet somewhere."

He gave equal attention to people managing corporate functions, such as finance, legal, IT, marketing and security, even though there was no immediate need for collaboration or resources. "These teams are the arms and legs for getting our work done ... They can either be tremendously helpful or they can be blockers." Knowing he would be in a position of influencing without authority in the future, he wanted to establish a relationship before he had to ask for anything. "When I met with these people, the conversation was, *Help me know what you do and how you operate. When people need something from you, what approach works best?*" When approached in a way that acknowledges their time and preferences, people are more open to helping and collaborating.

With his peers, Rick is "just focused on the human connection ... It's informal and a really good, noncompetitive team ... People come to me when they hear noise in the system; we give each other a heads-up when something needs attention."

As for the relationships within his team, Rick is focused on the "how" of work. He let people know that building relationships within the group and externally is how they would get results. He flattened his team, creating 12 direct reports and "sending the signal that rank doesn't matter to me." Based on a pulse survey of the team, he held small, group discussions. Team meetings, monthly social events and encouragement to collaborate on projects are creating greater trust and engagement. "We have to be intentional about how we work together and strengthen the social connections within the team."

Thinking about his first months on the job, Rick is clear: "You can be much more successful if you can build relationships designed to create pull for you and your team. It takes a little bit longer, but there is less re-work and it dramatically speeds execution."

Network Insights

- **Balance rapid network development with execution of high-profile efforts.** Investing in the network builds personal ties and a few visible wins helps set reputation—both essential for getting results over time.
- **Connect with formal influencers to get up to speed and build political support.** Identify their trusted deputies and work with them. This helps frame the work and establish a reputable and efficient path to do it.
- **Build relationships with support functions before you need them.** Ask managers how they like to work and how best to engage them and their teams when their help is needed.
- **Develop peer networks for support.** They can be sounding boards as well as your sensors broadly in the organization.
- **Engage your teams in work that builds relationships and is meaningful.** Help them find the *why* in their work and create forums or practices that help them connect to each other.

Network Practices in Recruiting & On-Boarding that Promote Senior Leader Success

Highly effective recruiting processes are needed to find the right talent—and to set the new leader up for success.

1. Don't short-change the interview process. Screen candidates for knowledge, skills and experience, but also for collaborative behaviors and cultural fit. Hold interviews with 8-12 people who have an understanding of the role and interest in it being filled successfully.
2. When a top candidate emerges, go back to the internal interview team to get final feedback, as well as agreement on performance objectives and development goals. Taking the time for additional due diligence and consensus ensures that neither the sponsor, nor the new hire, is going it alone. The commitment from established players helps pull the newcomer in and creates a shared interest in his or her success.
3. Bring it to top leadership. Review the candidate, the package and the goals of the role. All senior leaders should agree, which creates internal momentum for the candidate immediately.
4. Tee up the network. Have a senior mentor and a peer mentor lined up to meet with the new hire. Provide a detailed list of people to connect with across the organization to gain business context, build relationships and pave the way for future interactions.

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.