Connected Commons

LEARN & ADAPT

A Seasoned Manager Builds Awareness of Expertise & Drives Engagement in New Role

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced manager takes on a role that merges various back-office functions to serve a globally dispersed operation. She invests in her team and in her extended network in ways that drive engagement and efficiency.

FEMALE

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.

INNOVATE   EXECUTE   SCALE   THRIVE   ADAPT

With three decades of experience in finance and consulting, Sienna has managed teams, owned companies

and worked internationally. She's got an entrepreneurial mindset and is always looking to connect people and ideas. In her current role with a global services firm, she manages a team of teams to support a group of more than 500 employees in multiple locations. Her group of 26 handles eight, back-office functions including budgeting, knowledge management and communication for the regional offices.

Sienna had worked in various roles at the firm before being recruited by the director of a practice area to pull several functions into one group. "He knows me well, and it was time for a change for me." The job involved two things that she really likes in a role: networking and multi-tasking. "I like to connect people. I like to create ideas with people. That energy keeps me going and, at its core, this job is relationship management … I also like to be busy—this job is like doing eight jobs, knowing the details and context and what teams are doing for each task."

When she first took the job, Sienna had to come up to speed quickly. Initially, she sat with each of the teams, to understand their work, their processes, who they engaged with and how. It was obvious to Sienna that the teams had no line of sight to the work the others were doing. "They were all doing well, but we needed to up our game … They could operate better if they worked together, so what could that look like?" In one instance, Sienna was able to help a technical expert who had the ability to do much more for his internal customers if he had access to the right information. "What was astounding to me was that most of that knowledge was within the team that I now manage!" She was able to bring the right people into the conversation, resulting in the automation of a key process, which was eventually scaled up throughout the organization.

Beyond knowing the work of each team, Sienna got to know each person individually. In her first one-on-ones, she asked: 1) What do you do? 2) What would you *like* to do? and 3) How do we get you from where you are to where you want to be? This process helped her become aware of people's tasks and networks, as well as aspirations and expertise. It fostered engagement. "That conversation opens up so many avenues. It unlocks things in people's minds. That's where I get my energy, too." Sienna applies that same knowledge and energy in routine meetings as well.

"I like to enable people to connect dots and see potential … First, I have to understand … Then, we think together, and invariably, I will pick up the phone and call someone else to join the conversation. Soon, the room has six people in it."

While getting to know her team, Sienna also began to understand the internal clients—the regional offices that consumed the work of her group. She met with three directors and 18 managers to help clarify what they needed, how they are being served by the team and how they would like to be served. "I needed to understand from both ends—what my team did, but also the need, the demand out there … Those conversations opened up other opportunities for how my team can leverage one another, stay motivated and serve the clients better."

Beyond the efforts she made in the first few months on the job, Sienna persisted in creating the connections and collaborations needed to make group successful. Routine one-on-ones ensure engagement, progress and removal of roadblocks. She builds a personal level of connectivity, too. "Sometimes it's just, *What's up?* or a personal conversation about something I know is going on in their lives—I want them to know I care and am interested in them and what they are doing." She holds full team meetings not to report out but to build awareness of what each other is working on. "I want everyone to understand that while each of us is doing our unique thing, it's all connected … They need to share what they are doing because there will be something someone else is doing that can make their work even better." She extends the network, too, by inviting the internal clients to join meetings to engage in conversation with the team.

Sienna has also engaged a robust group of "champions," people who are working in roles in other locations but have assignments related to her team's functions [*see sidebar*]. With this extended group, her team of 26 is magnified to nearly 100.

By gaining an accurate perception of both the formal and informal networks—and their interests and needs—Sienna avoided the pitfalls of many leaders transitioning into a new role. By always thinking outside a specific role or function and making connections, Sienna now sees her team thriving and effectively meeting a diverse set of needs.

Network Insights

- **Build knowledge of employee expertise and networks.** Meet with each employee to establish what they are working on. Ask, *What work would you like to be doing? How do we close the gap between what you are doing now and what you would like to do?* This cultivates engagement and a sense of purpose, builds trust and helps you make assignments and craft roles to bring out employees' best.

- **Make connections where others don't see them.** Bring people into conversations so they can build on synergies and interact with others who value similar aspects of work. Hold periodic all-team meetings to share what they are doing. Consider bringing in people from outside the team (clients, internal customers) to add another perspective.

- **Clarify expectations and accountabilities and step back.** People need ownership of progress and moving plans ahead. Purpose comes from accomplishment.

- **Hold one-on-one meetings to stay connected.** Every two weeks or so check in on progress and help clear obstacles. Connect off-task to focus on personal needs and interests.

Scaling a Small (But Critical) Function to Enable Work of Group 20 Times Larger

Sienna's team of 26 supports more than 500 people across multiple locations. Sienna needed to extend capacity. First, she worked within her team to understand who they interacted with and in what ways. Then, she mapped out a "champion" system across units and geographies, relying on a designated local resource to contribute to various work streams and activities. This created stronger ties between headquarters and regions, while extending the capabilities of Sienna's team. Here's what she did:

1. Built leadership commitment. She made it clear how providing a local champion would help them efficiently and effectively support the work in their unit.

2. Reinforced the role. She ensured that activities and responsibilities were articulated (part of performance goals) and champions were held accountable.

3. Made it formal. Supervisors or coordinators of the work provided feedback to champions' managers to factor in to performance reviews.

4. Showed the career benefit. She set short-term incentives to gain engagement and give recognition for the work. She also made it clear how the work would broaden the champion's experience and contribute to career mobility.

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.