LEARN & ADAPT

A Marketing Expert Builds a New Network to Fill Gaps in Expertise, Cultural Awareness & Political Insight

CASE CONTEXT

A well-respected brand manager has been successful in multiple roles by building a network of people with complementary skills. He relies on their insight and expertise as he moves into new roles, including assignments that take him into new countries and businesses.

MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

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.

INNOVATE · EXECUTE · SCALE · THRIVE · ADAPT

Samuel started his career as a chemist before earning his MBA in marketing. He was hired by a brand manager in a global pharmaceutical company and has thrived in numerous marketing teams and roles ever since. His career progression has been largely due to networks and relationships he built along the way. "I end up working with the same people in multiple and different lives." His current role as a product director came about when a director in another division went on leave and his boss asked Samuel to step in. The two had worked together on a product launch before, and he knew it would be a good fit. "Our styles are very different, and we did a nice job of collaborating and complementing each other's skills."

Samuel has honed his ability to tell stories, use emotion to influence and push for creative ideas."My colleague is very analytical, but I had the ability to sell or get people super enthusiastic. My personality allowed us to align leadership and stakeholders … I really respected her and thought she was smart. She could do things that I was not good at myself. It made sense for me to learn from her and take the strengths she had to shore up places where I was not strong." This experience showed him the value in diverse and complementary approaches and the need to balance strengths and perspectives through networks.

The lesson to rely on others to fill gaps in term of approach or expertise was especially valuable when he took a short-term assignment in the U.K. a couple years ago. Part of his role was to recommend a digital strategy for the regional market. He was required to quickly understand what expertise was needed and who he could rely on. "I didn't have an established network in that group. And, I couldn't just show up and say, *America's here now. I'm going to run the show!* I had to quickly start to build relationships and trust, or I wasn't going to get anything done."

Samuel's approach was guided by feedback he'd gotten from two colleagues in the U.K. about the negative reactions many U.S. leaders invoke. "I didn't want to show up day one, unprepared. Or to come off as, *Everything here is broken. You don't know how to do this. Let the corporate office come in and fix your problems* … I tried to learn what I needed to know so people would collaborate with me and not think I'm just this dumbass American." In the weeks between knowing he had the assignment and starting the job, Samuel talked extensively with his new boss. He asked questions, learned some background and got names of people on his team and others he would need to know. "I spent time just to get my head around the work and to talk to people and learn."

Then, he worked out a framework for how his new team could approach the task, adapted from a project he had led the year before. "When I got there, I presented my approach with the team: *assess where they are today, identify gaps and write the story of where they need to go*." By putting in upfront work, he showed he took the job seriously but wasn't going to come in as a know-it-all. He built credibility and was given benefit of the doubt. Having a framework, prototype or other tangible work product is an effective way to build trust early in a transition or when introducing something new.

Samuel also began to engage the team around shared expectations. "I talked about the things that were really important to me, here's what my expectations are for a brand manager on my team … For example, it is really important for them to have a tight handle on the budget and be skilled at writing creative briefs … If you tell them what is needed to be successful, they will know where they stand, and you don't have ambiguity." He also told them what they should expect from him and his commitments: to be a coach; to give timely, relevant feedback; to be honest, candid and create a place of caring and trust. He shared with them his skills and experience, as well as things he knows he is not good at. "*If you believe that the basis of every successful relationship is trust, you have to come in as somebody who is showing vulnerability* … I can't succeed if my team doesn't really trust me." By presenting himself in this way, Samuel built credibility and trust better than if he positioned himself as the expert or the hero.

Samuel relied on his team to help him know who was influential and who would be key decision makers. Two people emerged as essential. One was a leader known for negativity: "I needed to get his buy-in early otherwise it would be an uphill battle." The other was the general manager of the business: "The people on the team told me, at the end of your time here if you haven't put this in front of him, it will die on the vine, there will be no buy-in."

In the end, the plan Samuel and the team created was innovative; it was prioritized and successful; the marketing team gained new skill and a stronger reputation. Through his short-term assignment, he gained confidence to lead a new team and in an unknown context. He has since taken on multiple global assignments and was recently promoted.

Network Insights

- **Leverage existing relationships to prepare for new role.** Ask your new boss and other people who have insight into the context, the people and the culture. Be mindful of cultural perceptions and aware of your own skill gaps, rather than coming into a situation with all the answers.
- **Create an on-entry game plan.** A framework or prototype is helpful for others and helps you build credibility and trust.
- **Clarify expectations of yourself and others.** Be transparent about what you know, what you don't and how you will rely on the skills and commitments of the team.
- **Use the network to understand who has expertise, influence and decision-making power.** Identify and bring in negative opinion leaders along the way rather than avoiding them. Be sure support is solid with decision-makers or good ideas will not get funded or prioritized.

Collaborative Practices that Support Strong Role Transitions

Samuel has experienced a wide range of domestic and international assignments, including a recent promotion to the manager-of-managers level. Here's his advice on paving the way for successful role transitions.

1. *Ask your new manager for a list of people you need to build relationships with.* Do this quickly—even before you start the job. Include immediate team members and "anybody who you need to rely on to get work done … Start introducing yourself and getting to know them."

2. *Your first interaction should not be when you need something.* If you haven't established a connection yet, use your network. "Ask for help from somebody who does know the person. It will speed up and simplify things, and you come across as humble and genuine, not demanding."

3. *Build a lateral network based on similarity of work.* This builds your network and helps you learn. It makes you more efficient and improves the quality of the work. "Don't feel like you need to have all the answers. Nobody is expecting you to and you will build relationships faster if you seek out people who have done this in the past."

4. *Clarify expectations early.* Ask questions about what people want as outcomes, what they expect to see, how they want to be involved, who else should be involved. "I've seen it many times—we could have gone a different way or saved a lot of time just by checking expectations."

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