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# Driving Cultural Transformation Through Networks

## CASE CONTEXT

An influential expert takes on a high-risk, high-reward culture change effort, with the commitment and sponsorship of board members and top executives. She engages colleagues and a broad network to make sense of culture and disperse ownership of transformational outcomes.



FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL  
CONTRIBUTOR

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.



**A specialized professional services firm was founded and expanded by brilliant, opinionated, hard-charging people.**

But over time, the organization had evolved a culture that was getting in the way of success. Perfectionism and internal competition were preventing effective collaboration, innovation and efficiency. Burnout was creating high turnover. Passion and enthusiasm were crowded out by cynicism. All signals pointed to the need to address the culture. The CEO and the board members were all in. The CHRO and his team were tasked to guide the way—and Ava was in charge of making it happen.

To understand and characterize the current organizational culture, Ava and her colleagues conducted employee engagement surveys, focus groups and interviews. Then she conducted a network analysis of the entire organization. Detailed information from all these sources was shared with all employees. “Instead of waiting for someone else to fix the problems, we wanted people to step into it and ask, *How am I showing up in the culture?*” It was a long and painful process. Lots of people said they want to do something different but they don’t know what different is. We decided we needed to find a subset of the organization to grapple with all of this data and decide where we go from here.”

To find that subset, Ava started with the network analysis to identify brokers, connectors and energizers. The network roles didn’t represent the diversity of the firm (gender, race, location, level, business segment, role, tenure), so Ava asked a few people who “had their pulse on the culture” for suggestions. “There was tension between wanting to be really inclusive and knowing we’ve got to be small enough to have really good conversations and get moving ... We also knew we didn’t want all like-minded people. Or people who will just nod their heads. We had to have people who will argue, who are willing to stir things up.”

Ava ended up with 40 people who were invited to a day-long session, where they would be “culture champions.” They were asked to review the culture data beforehand, but were told that the day would not be spent rehashing the past. They also knew the work was important: the firm’s top leaders would join for part of the day, and the group had been given a high-profile shout-out from the CEO. On the day of the event, the room was arranged to spark conversation, rather than reflect formality that was too often the norm in the organization. The walls were filled with posters—visual reminders of the mission, vision and values of the organization.

“Right from the start, it was high energy. But, a lot of the people didn’t know each other and we needed to get them connected quickly ... They broke into groups of three. We asked them to tell stories about a time when they worked on a team that created results that far surpassed anyone’s expectations. One person would ask questions; one person would tell their story; one person would take notes.”

From these stories, Ava helped them draw out themes and shared experiences. They described behaviors (what was going on in the team) and the context (what was it about the culture that enabled the teams’ successes). During the discussions, the firm’s leaders entered. The formal authority was purposefully diffused by the work-in-progress vibe, and they were drawn in to the conversation.

The challenge came later when the group tried to set a direction for the culture. “It wasn’t coming together. People were arguing. Things got heated. They were not willing to capitulate ... We consciously brought together people who wouldn’t rubber stamp things, but I wasn’t fully prepared for the passion.”

In the end, the group’s energy coalesced around three principles. And, rather than creating a slick PowerPoint, the ideas were summarized through story and emotion—even song, in one case. The engagement of the team continued over email, resulting in changes and iterations, before a draft document was posted in public areas of the office. Every employee was asked to give input via edits and sticky notes. “We asked, *What if we committed to treating each other like this? Is there anything we need to change before you can commit to it?*”

With input from across the organization, the team of 40 reconvened. “They had as much passion as before. They knew each other better and were more comfortable with the work.” The principles were refined and, building on their previous stories, they came up with specific behaviors that reflected each one. Plus, other behaviors were called out and labeled, “no longer tolerated.”

For Ava, the process was unwieldy, but also exciting and powerful. And, the work continues. “We haven’t fixed anything, yet. We know the culture we want now and are taking effective and targeted actions to get there.”

## Network Insights

**Use network analysis or interview techniques to identify key influencers in networks.** Central Connectors, Boundary Spanners, Energizers and Resisters all shape culture, so are important to bring into the conversation.

**Engage a group of passionate influencers in dialogue about the current culture and needed change.** When the participants don’t know each other well, help them create awareness of others’ expertise and make off-task connections to help build trust quickly.

**Bring select leaders into conversation in ideation stage and structure interactions to take hierarchy out of the conversation.** This enables them to contribute (rather than be forced into a situation where they are evaluating outcomes) and have a sense of engagement.

**Prepare for messiness if you bring in diverse voices.** Selecting a group that reflects diverse perspectives will stir emotions. Be willing to embrace passion in the room in all the forms that it might take (e.g., anger, conflict, tears, etc.).

**Use storytelling or creative narrative techniques, not just analytical outputs, to capture the thinking and emotions of the culture conversation.** The archetype stories that resonate with the influencers will propagate in their interactions with others.

## Network Analysis Helps Identify Key Influencers in Culture Change

Understanding the ties and types of relationships that create the informal structure of an organization are valuable for understanding culture—and changing it. A network analysis will identify key influencers who can then be intentionally brought into the culture conversation and change efforts. Four types of network roles to identify are:

1. **Central Connectors.** Those that have a lot of informal connections and are influential within a unit or geography.
2. **Boundary Spanners.** Those that have more ties across groups or geographies and can help to integrate perspectives and solve problems.
3. **Energizers.** Those that create passion and enthusiasm in their interactions.
4. **Resisters.** Key opinion leaders that might be pursuing objectives counter to a desired change.

### 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](http://www.connectedcommons.com) or email Rob at [rlcrossjr@gmail.com](mailto:rlcrossjr@gmail.com).