



EXECUTE  
WORK  
EFFICIENTLY

# Managing Successful Project Networks in Professional Services

## CASE CONTEXT

A project manager navigates process and people within her firm and among client teams. She balances the involvement of the core players with a broader network of client and in-house experts to keep a long-term, complex project on track.

Cassie is a technical expert who moved into a project management role several years ago when a major client

project was undergoing a change of process and regulation. A technical manager had been coordinating with the client team and the internal team, but with the pending changes, the account manager wanted to try a new approach. Cassie would be the project manager, driving the schedule and teams, keeping up with the finances and being the point of contact for the client. "We had this great technical team, and my role was to support them, coordinate resources and be our representative to the client ... I have the personality and that driver mentality, so I can organize the technical people on our side and on the client side and herd all the tasks and follow all the requirements."

The project was a significant one that would span about a decade. The work was tied to a large-scale, complex environmental engineering effort, involving a client site, local and national regulators and various agencies. The relationship between the company and its client was long standing, and the client was confident in the technical skill of the team. But, the work was going to become more complex. The client's internal processes had become more stringent and their teams were large and dispersed. Having a dedicated project lead gave the client assurance about the firm's responsiveness, communication and ability to keep the project moving forward safely and successfully.

Cassie quickly got up to speed on the project, building close ties with key, in-house technical experts. "I learned fast and earned their respect early on. I built strong relationships with all those people ... That core network became the people I trusted and relied on because I knew they would deliver. And they relied on me. People would start to say, *Cassie was able to do this for us. Talk to her because she can get things through and get it done.*" The close attention to the core, or center, of the project network was important for Cassie's initial success, but she realized it was important to extend out and build in back-ups when she saw other projects falter when a key person resigned. "I do worry about overwhelming the people who are doing a really good job or always turning to the people I know. So, I try to grow my network." She often asks people she respects who else she should learn from or who could contribute. She is also able to use an in-house tool to search for people with specific expertise to broaden her network and not become too reliant on a small set of contributors.

FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LINE LEADER

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.



Cassie's relationships on the client side also began with the formal project leaders and gradually expanded more broadly. She interacted daily with the client project manager, and then increasingly with his boss and technical and safety teams. Her understanding deepened, and she began to step in more. "I was very personable, so that opened doors. But once they were aware that I knew their program so well and that my approach was effective, my value grew." Eventually, Cassie had a broader perspective and enough targeted relationships that she was able to help the project manager see and navigate the silos within the organization. "I would be working with one client team who needed something. And I had experiences with another team and I could say, *Oh, somebody over there has that expertise*. Literally, sometimes they didn't know the resources within their own group. I was also able to work the informal network, instead of having to always go through the management chain to get something done."

Over the nearly ten years of work on this project, Cassie has been a constant. She's also learned how to integrate newcomers into the team and bring in experts as needed in a way that integrates their contributions into the network. Finding the people with the right skills is essential, but helping them get connected into the network is important for efficiency and accuracy. "Being integrated also prevents people from being overwhelmed by such a large project and team ... We do a project kick off for any new tasks. I get that sub-team together and provide them background and the requirements of the work. We make sure everybody knows who's who on the team. It opens up communication and lets everyone know that I'm there and others are there if they have any questions."

Professionally, Cassie has grown into her role and is seeing the results of significant work. The at-risk client site was closed, implementing the remedy the firm had proposed. The regulatory and environmental components are wrapping up. The company and the client agree it has been a success, completed on time and on budget. And, Cassie managed the work so well, the client now uses the model of a single point-of-contact for all other contracted projects.

## Network Insights

- **Manage client networks in a way that executes the work and creates additional value.** Always ask, *Who else should I be talking to or supporting?* This starts to create direct value for the client through task delivery. More importantly, it puts you in a position to solve client problems across silos or in ways that a client in just one unit might not see.
- **Manage the team network so people are valued and not overloaded.** Leverage and support central network members so they are engaged and do not leave (and take a revenue-producing client) or get overloaded and hurt performance. Engage newcomers into the network so they rapidly become functioning members of the team.
- **Draw on internal high-end expertise to bring new ideas and capabilities to a client.** Continually create opportunities for these people and persistently expand the network of resources that can be brought to bear on client issues.

## Avoid Collaborative Overload with Smart Staffing Decisions

Cassie says not to underestimate the value of getting the right people involved, no matter where they are in the company. "You have to reach out, use the network to find the resources. That's one of the things I take pride in—that's what I do. Not taking that approach can really hinder a project or limit some opportunities that you could have with the client."

When the wrong person is on the team, the project is inefficient. Other team members are hit with collaborative overload as they pick up the pieces. Poor staffing leads to:

1. Extra work caused by helping and explaining. Multiple people may have to get involved, taking up time, adding confusion and layers of collaboration.
2. Consumption of resources (time and money) without impact. The wrong person in the role takes up budget the company may have to write off.
3. Creates re-work for someone else. When someone doesn't do work right or they didn't understand, another team member has to step in, too often having to stay late to get work done.
4. Creates dissatisfied clients to be managed. If the work isn't up to par, someone has to explain the situation to the client.

## 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).