



EXECUTE
WORK
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Delivering Project Results through Networks

CASE CONTEXT

A data expert uses a tight network to understand and develop his project, drawing on both technical and cultural expertise. As the work progresses, he shares and revises solutions with a broader network. The final product is presented through formal means, but adopted via influencers.



MALE

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.



Cyrus is data scientist armed with a Ph.D. and a background in organizational culture and workforce analytics. Keeping

one foot in the academic world, he ventured into consulting before he was offered a role in a newly formed HR analytics group for a prestigious institution. Just a few months into the role, Cyrus was asked to work on a cultural problem using HR data. “A narrative had taken hold that people can’t have a career here. The story was that we would bring people in for their expertise, but that there was no mobility ... It had become pervasive and very negative. People think they are working their tails off and there is never going to be something for them. It fueled perceived inequities. It affected recruiting, too. The word was out that there wasn’t mobility and people don’t stay long term.”

The CHRO charged Cyrus with digging into that cultural narrative by analyzing HR data around hiring, tenure and internal movement. “We were either going to debunk that myth or find the data to say, yes, that’s totally right.” The timing mattered, too. “We were preparing for our new CEO, and we were making a concerted effort to give him good information about our culture and our HR practices.”

Cyrus would be the point person to pull and interpret the data—but he relied on several key people to figure out what data existed and, importantly, what data would help get at the problem. Initially, he paired with a long-time employee who worked with HR data systems. “Those first conversations were about helping me understand what data was available, what were the things we could even try to do ... He and I crafted that basic data set and an idea of how we would structure the project. But, we needed a bigger perspective on whether our thinking was a legitimate way to look at this.”

The CHRO and the Director of Analytics became sounding boards. “They helped me think through things ... They could see what was relevant within the context and culture and weigh in with an eye to how it would be presented ... 80 to 90 percent of the work was just me digging into the data, being curious, how do we make this happen? I would take a pass at the data and go back to them. They were my BS filter. *Does it even make sense?* It took a number of iterations, but they were great.”

For Cyrus, the challenge was to weigh data availability and accuracy with knowing what would be compelling to the organization, then to present it in a way that would be embraced. That intrinsic network knowledge could only be gleaned by seeking key players out and gaining input. The back-and-forth within his team was crucial to get to the key metric and create the end product: a dashboard that reported employee moves, pulling data from three systems, spanning eight years. The prototype dashboard was shopped with the HR business partners and a few directors before the full results were presented to the CEO. “Our end result hit home, but it wouldn’t have without the back and forth, the collaboration, the iterating.”

From there, the dashboard helped the HR group get the word out more broadly. “We wanted to be sure people knew about the key takeaways and that managers had access to the dashboard and could poke around the data and ask questions. The idea was for them to be able to address complaints about career opportunities with real information, rather than myth. With this information, they could speak to it directly, factually and historically.” People managers and recruiters found the detailed information helpful, allowing them to be proactive and knowledgeable in their conversations.

The learning and development group also presented the findings in a series of career development presentations. Informally, people managers were asked to spread the word. Cyrus, who later brought in organizational network analysis (ONA), said that data to identify influencers (central connectors, brokers, energizers and innovators) would have been “incredibly valuable” to speed up the process. “We are working through these influencers now for other change and communication purposes.”

The outcomes of the project proved the prevailing narrative to be false. “We showed an internal mobility score of 13% which was markedly better than the average of 9% among competitive organizations against which we could benchmark ... We were able to say, *Hey, you can have a career here, here are some great examples ...* It was really impactful ... Having real data changed the thinking. The *you-can’t-have-a-career-here* narrative is something you don’t hear anymore.”

Network Insights

- **Bring in both technical and cultural expertise.** As a project or idea develops, the technical perspectives and information are obviously important. But go a step further to tap into people that bring cultural awareness to the effort. For Cyrus, that cultural lens was needed to know the kinds of data that would be meaningful in engaging others more broadly and how best to present it.
- **Prototype with a broader audience to get ideas, engagement and initial word-of-mouth support.** Each iteration of the analysis and the dashboard variations were shopped out within HR and among key managers. This process improved the end result, but also built interest in the outcomes in advance of the rollout.
- **Communicate formally and informally.** Information was shared through routine HR communications and workshops, but the informal communication began to change the culture. Messages are understood and trusted when delivered by four kinds of influencers in networks: 1) Central Connectors; 2) Brokers; 3) Innovators; and 4) Energizers.

Using Organizational Network Analysis to Identify 4 Core Influencers in Networks

When a new initiative or process is in the works, take time to understand the informal influencers in your group or organization. Conduct a brief network analysis and then use network metrics to identify and engage four kinds of influencers:

1. **Central connectors:** People who are sought out for information and expertise.
2. **Brokers:** People with more informal ties that bridge locations, functions or expertise groups.
3. **Innovators:** People who are heavily sought out for creativity or innovative insight.
4. **Energizers:** People who engage in ways that create enthusiasm throughout the network.

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.