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# Transactional Leader Drives Results with 15 Direct Reports

## CASE CONTEXT

A specialized customer service team handles hundreds of calls and transactions each day. The team manager balances day-to-day results and team development, as he tries to prevent collaborative overload.



MALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL LEADER

Industry: TECHNOLOGY

## 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.



Damien had been a long-time employee, working in several customer service roles before he was promoted to

manager of a department that handles credit collections. On a daily basis, the well-trained group of 15 agents sets up payment plans and tries to settle late accounts. Team performance is measured both by hitting collections goals and by typical call center standards such as how long each call takes and how many transactions are completed. The work is repetitive and often requires dealing with people who are upset or adversarial.

In this context, Damien is a steadying force. “Most of the work is day-to-day, and it can get overwhelming. I try to develop the team, keep the team motivated.” At the same time, Damien’s work has gotten more complicated. Over the years he has been in the role, the number of people on his team has been held flat, even as the workload and pace increased. “When I first got my promotion, the demands were not so bad. But as the years go by, it seems like there’s more and more. There’s not enough time to get everything done. Every day there’s something new. You try as best you can to get everything done in a timely manner but that’s not easy.”

Damien tackles the demands placed on himself and his team by promoting collaboration within the team, delegating as much as possible and reducing stress in small ways. Weekly team huddles are the forum for sharing news or process updates. Informal interactions—often through Instant Messaging (IM)—help address in-the-moment questions. “I try to delegate as much as I can. If something comes up in our work that’s new, I will assign somebody to be responsible to share with the team. If anybody has questions, I encourage them to involve the team to figure it out and not always come to me for the answers. Sometimes information is more trusted coming from peers, because they have the same experiences.”

Damien has noticed two types of people on this team are best for sharing expertise and teaching others: the high producers and the socially approachable. “Sometimes a person’s influence is based on performance, what they are good at. If someone is a good collector, they stand out. They will voice their opinions or suggestions to help others do better. Sometimes influence is based on good people skills. These people are easy to talk to, easy to ask.”

When a team member does turn directly to Damien with a question, he uses the conversation to help them learn—an approach that build self-sufficiency and helps protect Damien’s time. “If someone comes to me,

I try to talk them through how to solve it, not give the answer ... I try to have them look it up. I'll say, *Let's look at it together*. We'll pull up the job aid, see what our existing resources have to say. That shows them the way and maybe next time if they have a similar question or situation they will go to their resources first ... When I teach and delegate, I have more time for others who are in more need of development or for my other priorities."

Damien also tries to add some energy and motivation to the team through extra assignments and competitions. "Some people are go-getters; they want to do more and it shows ... I might give them a side project. Or sometimes, if a person is getting burned out or overwhelmed, we try to figure out a plan to solve it—maybe an activity or a project to do, rather than taking calls all day, every day. That relieves them a bit, helps them feel less frustrated ... For example, I'll have people take turns creating a contest for the team in an area where they are strong, like who's the top collector each month or which of our sub-teams is #1 based on earning points in some way."

Other team-building activities seem to help build camaraderie and manage stress. "There are always negatives in this business, so I try to get them to support each other, too. We give recognition, and we try to have fun when we can. Sometimes I'll even bring in a game to play in our team huddles or during free time. Taking a short break from the work helps them out and relieves stress."

Damien also works to manage his own pressures. "I try to be clear on what's most important each day ... When it seems like there is something I can do to manage time better or do to be better at my job, I try to learn from my peers in other departments." For example, Damien learned another group was handling a particular type of customer process very well. So, he reached out to the manager to learn what they are doing and apply it to the team. From another manager, he took a suggestion to block time for documentation right after meetings, rather than waiting for later and trying to fit it in.

For Damien, keeping his team productive and energized can be a challenge. But, he appreciates his people and has built a 20-year career on fostering collaboration and ongoing learning within his teams.

## Network Insights

- **In fast-paced, transactional work, a key to success is finding ways to decrease collaborative demands on leaders.** The larger the span of control the more important this becomes.
- **Develop the team and the network.** Teach people to use all resources available before coming to you; pair high and low performers on team competitions to help them share expertise; have high performers share practices that work—as the team is most likely to trust and listen to them.
- **Employ collaboration technology to help people solve problems with each other.** Instant messaging is popular for synchronous needs and for information that requires a quick exchange.
- **Help people re-energize.** Repetitive work and stressful interactions take a toll. Find ways to prevent burnout (such as a temporary assignment) and release stress (games during team meetings, snack breaks, moments to celebrate success and give recognition).

## How to Use Boundary Spanning Ties to Find Best Practices

Working with a dedicated team in a narrow function, most of Damien's time is spent on day-to-day operations. He's not in a high-collaboration role. Even so, he's learned to look to other managers to improve practices or find solutions. Here are tips for cutting across boundaries to find best practices:

1. Identify productive people in similar roles. Find them by looking through metrics within the company (e.g., productivity reports, sales reports, etc.) or by asking people in your network.
2. Be clear about your request. What is your purpose and what you are looking for?
3. Ask who else might help. When bridging into another group always ask the person you speak to who else they recommend you reach out to. Often the second step gets you to an expert who is very prominent in the network.
4. Give back. Offer to help others. Relationships work better when the exchange is reciprocal.
5. Teach your team to do the same. Encourage others to reach out across boundaries. This builds their network and improves group productivity.

### 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).