



EXECUTE
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Driving Impact through Global Talent Networks

CASE CONTEXT

A senior leader has made collaboration and cross-boundary networks central to the way he works. He extends this approach to his global teams through both formal and informal mechanisms, resulting in streamlined execution of projects and innovation across teams.



MALE

Level: SENIOR 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.



Over a 30-year career at a global institution, Felipe has sustained his energy, interest and motivation largely

because of his curiosity and eagerness to make connections. He's held radically different roles, across functions and levels. He brings history and an ever-evolving network to his current thinking. "In a way, I am the sum total of all of the relationships I have formed over the years." Today, he is one of several executives who lead a division of 500 people across multiple locations and with a vast reach. His teams work in a highly competitive space and are developing a business model that is new and growing. When they are collaborating effectively, they are building trust and executing well.

"When I started out, it was largely about my technical expertise. I grew in my role and scope, and now at least 80 percent of my work is relationships ... I chaperone or choreograph some pieces, but essentially people look to me for my judgment and my connecting ability. My own performance assessment is tied to how non-insular and how connected can I be. How can I use that to the maximum effect both at the local level and globally?" For example, a team was implementing a novel project in an African country. As a result of Felipe's non-insular network, they had connected with someone who was doing similar work in a region in Latin America. In just a few months, the team made concrete and significant progress as a result of that connection. Similarly, Felipe was personally running a "high-risk operation" in a very difficult environment. His constant outreach allowed him to advise an outside group working in a different context, with similar economic issues. "I was able to share what we are doing here and suggest areas they could look at and people to connect with."

Felipe routinely has such stories, as collaboration and networks have become central to the way his division works. Building on lessons learned from an Organizational Network Analysis, Felipe and his leadership team have emphasized cross-boundary work and relationships—in fact, talent mobility is part of their weekly strategy meetings. Working and sharing outside one's core domain is expected and factored into evaluations and routine feedback—and is required for advancement. Teams within the function "buy and sell" their talent, so expertise is shared and innovation is fostered. "Collaboration is baked into every manager's budget. And work outside of your core region and core task is absolutely integral to your career advancement ... There is a lot of local innovation and adaptation going on, and we know from experience this only happens if you rotate people. If you want to accelerate innovation, you need to create more juice in the system and more fluidity in how you connect."

Felipe gives great attention to learning about talent in the network and seeing where skills can be deployed in different ways. He routinely talks to employees at all levels and roles about their career path, which helps him know their interests and expertise. He is also actively involved in the recruiting process—not as a decision maker, but as a way to understand what potential employees bring. “Anyone who is going to be hired, internally or externally, will be interviewed by me ... I want to know how they fit in and explore other ways they can be deployed or how they can contribute ... I can’t imagine doing my job well without knowing our talent.” He works closely with his co-directors to align the work and talent throughout the organization. “This is not something just for managers or high-potentials. Talent mobility is for everyone ... My executive assistant just came to me, and said she would like to change her job to be exposed to another type of work. I’m trying to find out how I can make this work, in a way that is the right fit for her.”

Bridging the teams and programs within the group isn’t the exclusive role of Felipe and his senior-level colleagues. Regular “brown bag lunches” share lessons learned and team members are exposed to people and ideas across the organization. Onboarding is addressed at the unit level, with Felipe making sure his managers are evaluated on their ability to create cohesion as new members join or new teams are brought together. Managers must be empathetic to the change process, working to build relationships and forging shared identity. “If we bring in new people or connect new teams, managers need to make the conditions right for success.”

While teams and leaders have been pushed to extend their networks and the use of virtual teams has expanded greatly, it has had limitations. “The unfortunate side of a relationship-intensive culture is that people rarely go outside of what they know and who they know. They travel within their existing network to solve problems.” A new, searchable database has given a powerful boost to talent mobility and is mitigating the insular networks. The system merges corporate data with HR data, anyone can run a query on specific skills or experience and find—immediately—people who have done that kind of work, regardless of their current role or location.

Network Insights

- **Global scale is only attained when talent is truly mobile.** The right expertise—from anywhere in the network—must be accessible regardless of function or geography.
- **Organizations with high-relational cultures struggle with insularity.** People rarely go outside of trusted networks to solve problems, hurting innovation and efforts to scale. Division-level leaders’ performance metrics must be in place to ensure that talent is shared and sought across units.
- **Modeling of cross-boundary leadership is essential.** Felipe constantly invests in and draws on his network and relentlessly pushes his organization to do the same.
- **Creating transparency of expertise helps groups understand who to turn to for help and support.** Valid designation of expertise that is searchable through a technology eases and speeds collaboration.
- **Leaders must be held accountable (incentives, performance management processes, etc.) for effective collaboration and talent sharing.** Employees, too, must believe that their career mobility requires contribution to other units.

Gaining Organizational Agility via Talent Mobility

Rather than relying on self-advocacy or leader nomination, both of which can inflate claims of expertise, Felipe’s firm has a tool to facilitate talent mobility. A searchable database pooled years of project data. Time-tracking systems from past projects linked to employee profiles. Managers are now able to search for expertise on multiple dimensions. Having this infrastructure added transparency—and weight—to the importance of the “talent marketplace.” Other elements that reinforce a network approach to talent include:

1. **Clear leadership imperative.** Leaders’ objectives include demonstrating both buying and selling expertise. This requirement ensures leader commitment to helping the organization get best expertise to programs and projects.
2. **Clear individual benefit.** “We don’t want to make it a threat for people; the visibility in the system helps them get the information they need when it matters and it helps their own career path.”
3. **Flexibility of approach.** Systems need to accommodate both short-term requests for time and longer-term assignments that build skills and capability. Talent conversations need to consider what the need will be two years out—for both individuals and the organization.

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.