EXECUTE WORK EFFICIENTLY

Driving Financial & Strategic Results through Organizational Networks

CASE CONTEXT

A senior executive generates business through trusted relationships and delivers results by engaging an extended network. He has learned to manage his team and client relationships in ways that scale his impact and ability to generate revenue through networks and talent.

MALE

Level: SENIOR 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.

INNOVATE EXECUTE SCALE THRIVE ADAPT

Heath runs a major practice within a global consulting firm. Building on two decades of international experience, he works with global clients, typically taking the lead with CEOs and top executives while directing various consulting teams to implement complex deals and initiatives. Heath's personal relationships and the larger organizational network have consistently generated new and repeat business. Just as important has been his ability to shape and leverage the network of talent charged with getting results for clients.

A recent project with a new client is an example. Heath and his team arranged a purchase deal involving multiple partners. The opportunity came about through an existing relationship, and then other colleagues connected Heath to the right network to orchestrate and implement the work. "Those relationships opened up conversations and helped build trust in us and, later, among the various parties."

Internally, the project involved three practice areas and several partners and principals. A senior principal knew the CFO of the client company and had worked with Heath previously; they had a solid relationship and knew they could collaborate well on complex project. Heath pulled in another partner and, together, they built the team around the skill sets and demands of the work. "The teaming came quite naturally; it was based on prior experiences with colleagues."

The project and initial plan were generated solely as a result of existing and trusted relationships, a process that sometimes blocks new expertise or new insights. While trusted ties can increase the efficiency of responses, the downside can be insularity in thinking or difficulty framing and solving problems in new ways. In this case, once the outline of the work emerged and specific client challenges were identified, additional partners and experts were brought onto the team to adapt and expand the work.

Over the years, this combination of trusted colleagues and new talent has worked for Heath. "There are two mindsets when you bring new people in to a project. You can think: *I'm suspicious so you need to prove yourself. And I will go cautiously and give you incremental opportunities. As you prove yourself, you'll become more effective and be given more opportunity*. Or, you can think: *I trust that you are going to do a stellar job, and I'm going to give you the right platform to be successful from day one*. I tend to go with the optimistic view because I think the client will get the best out of people if you give them the opportunity to shine. Plus, we have to lean on each other, so trusting from the start integrates the team."

Integrating the team early on and managing the project through execution involved a number of network-management skills. Heath has learned to establish clear roles on the team. "Roles get mapped out early on. When we get feedback from teams that are struggling, we essentially hear*: I did not fully understand my role. It wasn't clear enough*." Just as important was to be clear who is responsible for which client stakeholders—both during the immediate engagement and for follow-up. "It is vital to not leave the stakeholder interaction to chance."

Setting up clear expectations and a cadence of calls or meetings allows Heath to both manage the work and build the network. "We set a regular meeting with the CEO and members of our team had a similar meeting cycle with the CFO and heads of the businesses … When you're on a project, it's the ideal time to have multiple one-to-ones over a short period of time. You might meet that CEO ten times during the course of six months—in normal business it might take you three years to have that many interactions … It's an opportunity to deepen the relationship, to know them, create the right level of collaboration and give them understanding our firm."

Heath credits two other actions for keeping the project team on track: 1) Provide feedback in the moment, and 2) Prevent collaborative overload. Don't wait to learn what didn't work or who was struggling until late in the game or during a project debrief. "Give the feedback at the point when it's really required and in a way that is direct." *Senior leaders also need to be judicious about their involvement, choosing where they should contribute deeply and when to take a light approach. This prevents overload or bottlenecks at the top—but also leverages experience and learning through the network.* Similarly, leaders need to monitor overload or burnout within their teams. Setting clear priorities also helps people know how to invest their time and avoid collaborative overload.

Heath and his internal and external collaborators were successful in the deal. It was seen as a novel way to create and benefit from client value that was shaped through client conversation and a network of internal and external collaborators. The framework is now replicated throughout the firm as an ideal way to create mutually beneficial client projects.

Network Insights

How are you managing the center of the network? People who are most in demand are most susceptible to burnout. Monitor potential overload and help people prioritize and shift lower-value work to ensure you do not lose key talent.

How are new ideas, expertise or people brought into the network? Trust helps networks respond to opportunities and threats but it also creates blind spots when people over-rely on the same people. Be thoughtful to define the problem space, identify skill gaps and integrate new expertise.

Does innovation emerge across silos? Often, ideas do not move from concept to broader impact due to lack of time and incentives that push against collaboration. Create space for emerging ideas in a network by decreasing workload and setting both short-term (e.g., bonuses) and long-term (e.g., career path) incentives to support innovation and risk-taking.

How is the boundary between the team and the external context managed? Ensure there are structures and clear expectations for interacting with clients, customers, vendors or other stakeholders so opportunities to strengthen the network are not missed.

Are You Nice to Know? Or Useful to Know?

Senior leaders create more value to their network if they are more than just "nice to know." Heath says being *useful* to know is the more challenging bit, so he pays attention to interactions with clients or contacts in several different ways.

1. Know how to add value in conversation without being overly prepared or presenting a slide deck. This means being clear on the client's business *and* having a couple of adjacent ideas that are provocative. "There are always one or two topics that you can engage that are not purely project-related. Or, there may be a broader context in the project they are happy to have a debate around."
2. Organically adapt what you know and your ideas into the flow of the conversation and the other person's needs or interests. "Opportunity comes from a quality conversation that doesn't need anything more than being agile in thinking … You've got to be able to shape your idea or solution to the audience."
3. Adjust to the mindset and style of the other person. Fit what you know and how you operate to the individuals' style, communication preferences and orientation to risk/reward. "There is something valuable about really understanding the style, trigger points, what makes someone tick and how they make decisions."

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.