



EXECUTE
WORK
EFFICIENTLY

Executing through Networks for High Performance & Career Success

CASE CONTEXT

A technical specialist creates and leverages networks that appreciate his expertise. This grows the demand for his work and pulls him into projects in which he can add value, execute well and continually learn.



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.



Herb is an analyst, with a degree in applied mathematics, whose work involves using data science to understand financial markets and patterns in a variety of sectors. He is skilled in the technical side of the work, but he has also become known for his ability to communicate complex information to different audiences. Herb learned early on to create and leverage networks in ways that enabled him to build his reputation around skills and interests.

With one client, he had been working on a small project when he saw an opportunity. “They were interested in doing more with analytics, but were not really focused on tackling any particular problem. I spent time talking with folks in different parts and different levels throughout the organization to better understand what they did. What kind of data did they capture and what were they doing with it?” Herb ended up talking with an auditor who had been tracking information to evaluate potential compliance concerns in a rudimentary and slow format. “Something clicked ... If we could see and enhance this data, combine it with data someone else in the organization had, we could make the dots connect and provide great value with minimal upfront cost.” By interacting with various stakeholders, Herb became a broker in the network—integrating ideas across weak links or hidden pockets of the organization. He could see how his expertise could pair with what others were doing and create an innovative, effective solution.

Herb mapped out the idea, created a prototype and then began to engage others in the network by drawing on both his technical skills and his communication skills. He pursued other data sources and talked with different stakeholders who would benefit from the next step of development. They began to see the power of having a broad set of data at their fingertips. Eventually, the tool was fully developed and deployed, and ultimately, yielded millions of dollars of revenue.

As word got out, Herb was pulled into other groups or projects where a similar approach could be applied. “The biggest driver of success was the story. A couple people collaborated to build the first prototype, establishing proof of concept. I could show them the tool and the tangible outcomes that came from it.” *Having something to show spurred brokering discussions—people saw the application of the ideas to their domains—and having a working prototype created trust and confidence in Herb’s abilities.*

Herb's approach to engaging and co-creating with the first group of client stakeholders was crucial to successful execution and, later, wider adoption. His ability to ask questions and bring in ideas to improve on the initial approach resulted in a technically better solution, but also created interest in and ownership of the outcomes. "During development, we would have stakeholders from various parts of the organization sit in on our meetings, show them our thinking, our prototype. They informed us about their processes, gave us context, answered our questions. It helped us build something that mattered to them and worked for them. The process also helped them see it as their creation too, not just something we created and are showing off. They were proud of it and were more willing to evangelize that through the organization—which generated additional work with the client."

Herb found a similar approach has worked well to establish his reputation within his firm. Not surprisingly, he hates the ideas propagated in most books about how to network. He is not good at self-promotion and feels disingenuous when he does it. Instead, he focuses on showing others how they can learn or apply what he does to their own needs or projects. "I try to be reliable and informative. I try to explain difficult concepts and how they apply to their situation and a particular client's problem."

"One thing that has been helpful is to build something. I like to build more than just talking about something." Herb will show someone an existing product or even build a simple prototype to facilitate conversations and understanding with new people and in new contexts. "When people have challenges or ask, *How does this apply to me?* I can show them something, tell them a story around it, ask them some questions, then translate it back to what they are working on or trying to accomplish ... Having good stories and things to show help build enthusiasm and understanding."

Having ideas to share in communities of practice within the firm and in training programs has enabled him to build reputation based on expertise and proven outcomes. This continues to grow the demand for his work and keeps pulling him toward projects in which he can be most effective and that he enjoys.

Network Insights

- **Network brokers prompt innovation.** New ideas often come from weaker, cross-boundary connections.
- **Co-creating with others leads to a better product and better uptake.** When an idea is positioned and developed with involvement of key stakeholders, it will be appreciated and adopted more quickly and with less resistance.
- **Tangible products and examples extend awareness and interest.** Prototypes and stories help people understand and see how they can adapt complex ideas to their own needs.
- **Translating expertise builds trust and adds credibility.** A trusted reputation comes from sharing expertise in a way that addresses other's problems—morphing what you know to their needs, not simply showing how smart you are.

Craft Personal Networks & Shape Interactions to Build Purpose at Work

Interactions with others generate purpose in work, often more so than the specifics of the work. Herb develops the networks and interactions to help him thrive in several ways:

1. Establishing the *why* in the work with others. "What gives me purpose is the shared end goal."
2. Being clear on values. "I look for some social good in what we are doing." Seek out others who have the same sense of what is important.
3. Keeping a sense of purpose alive. "We share the sense of purpose, but we communicate it and talk about it. It's out in the open, not just in the back of our minds."
4. Maintaining space for creative processes around these values and work. "It can be hard to share enthusiasm when everybody is separated. Keep part of every call focused on where we are going, reiterating goals." Or use the time for creative thinking about new ways to bring purpose into the work you are doing.
5. Investing time in and out of work to build depth in domains you find engaging. "If I have periods where I am not as enthused with work, I put more energy into my personal hobbies and continuing to learn in areas I'm interested in."
6. Guarding against work that loses purposes. All work has mundane elements, but avoid being overly consumed by work that feels disconnected from what matters to you. "Take the time to talk about vision or generate enthusiasm so work is meaningful and interesting."

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.