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Leadership & Talent Management Practices that Create a Collaborative, Agile Workforce

CASE CONTEXT

A top HR executive builds the culture and collaborative talent pool needed to succeed in a competitive consulting environment. She works with senior leaders to act in ways that support collaboration and agility, including using talent practices that invest in people for the long term.



FEMALE

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.



Lydia came into her role as the top HR leader of a large research and consulting firm with 30 years of experience.

To execute well in a contract-based, specialized environment, Lydia says that teams and talent need to be highly collaborative and agile. A strong sense of purpose, collaborative leadership behaviors and smart talent practices are all critical to individual career mobility and business success.

“It sounds cliché but we are truly mission driven ... Everyone knows that everything we do is about the excellence of the work. We’re all working towards a common purpose, even though there are a lot of goals. There’s an overarching sense that we’re all working within the same context.” A culture of learning and collaboration is deeply tied to the shared purpose. Employees are not competitive, supporting each other and sharing their knowledge or research. The company also takes a long-term view. A willingness to invest in the business and the talent reinforces the culture of collaboration and sustains a sense of purpose.

Lydia and other senior leaders know that the stories they tell, the decisions they make and the expectations they set are directly tied to collaborative outcomes: sharing, learning and investing in ideas that really make a difference. For example, when the *CEO communicates to employees through quarterly updates or town hall meetings, he is always very focused on the work and its impact, not the revenue.* “He will talk about the financials or our growth, but it’s always at the end ... And we talk about growth, not as a way to make more money or increase profit, but as a way to invest in more research and development of our people.”

The focus on the long term and development of people is especially valuable (and unusual) in an environment where there is little stability in the flow of work. “We work hard to create an environment where people feel safe ... Sometimes, employees don’t know whether there will be funding for their work in two months; there’s constant turnover of projects ... So, we invest a lot in making sure that every employee knows where their next assignment is going to be.” The commitment starts at the top with a weekly meeting with Lydia, the CEO and top-level leaders from each division and practice. They review every project that will be winding down and the possible next steps for each person or the group. “You need that senior-level visibility because a junior manager might not be able to see the bigger picture. A lower-level manager might not feel like they can make that decision, but we can say, *Don’t be shortsighted. Let’s get this person on a job.* We’ve moved people onto projects, knowing we were going to lose money.”

This tangible, top-level behavior encourages transparency and collaborative decision-making at lower levels that would otherwise get lost. It sends the message to be thinking of the whole, rather than being overly focused on individual results or protective of turf. “Retaining our employees is the key to the success of our business. *Collaboration at every level and people’s willingness to share their knowledge with each other comes from assurance that the company is doing everything we can to keep people employed and doing good work.*”

Employees are encouraged to network internally, both as part of their routine work, but also to find their next assignment. “We give them advice and guidance and let them know they need to play a part, too. Our employee relations team reaches out to every employee: *Do you know what to do, where to get started? Is your resume up-to-date? Who have you talked to?*” The personal connections and networking have been the mechanism for job mobility and growth, even as the company has grown. Lydia has resisted creating an internal job board for openings, because of the huge value in using the network and making personal contact. “It’s important to make the phone call to say, *My assignment is winding down; I heard you might have work.* They may not have something but they’ll remember that they talked to you. They’ll know of something else they can refer you to ... I don’t think you can use a technology to replace the value of having a five-minute conversation with somebody when you’re looking for another project.”

Lydia also insists the network is factored into hiring and on-boarding processes. The firm hires people for careers and long-term employment, not for just a single contract or niche role. That includes assessing fit in terms of learning and collaborative behaviors. But once people are hired, Lydia’s team works to get them connected and supported. On-boarding is considered a year-long process. It begins with a first day of meeting peers and learning the culture—no paperwork. HR holds a 30-day check-in with each new employee and a six-month session for the whole group. It provides a touch point to be sure each person is getting to know the company’s people, culture and capabilities so they can do what they are hired to do: deliver excellent work.

Network Insights

Building an agile organization able to sense and respond rapidly to new opportunities and to innovate in is influenced by:

- **Mission clarity and leadership.** Ensure talent and performance management processes are aligned with purpose. Where mis-alignment (e.g., staffing) might lead to parochial decisions ensure leaders are involved (e.g., weekly meetings) to bring enterprise perspective to bear.
- **Leadership practices.** Engage in ways that allow first-line leaders and managers of managers to remember purpose and mission when making decisions.
- **Talent management practices.** Recruiting should screen for collaborative interest and behaviors. On-boarding and training should integrate newcomers into the culture and network.

Finding Balance by Identifying Collaborative Drains

Lydia routinely works 50- or 60-hour weeks and is in a high-demand role, meeting with people all day. She protects herself from the collaborative intensity in several ways.

To begin, she has strategies to buffer herself from over-doing work commitments that stretch outside of her usual work day. “I try to keep a very firm boundary between my job and my home life.” She limits evening work commitments—dinners, networking events, client or professional meetings—to one a week. “In my role, this is important and, once I’m there, I often enjoy it. But, more than once a week is too much. I know that about myself.”

A bigger challenge for Lydia has been to understand the emotional drain of work and how to cope with difficult and emotionally charged interactions. “I had to learn over time to be able to emotionally disconnect in the moment. I have compassion and respect, but when things are tough and people stressed out, I will not let myself lose emotional control. If I do, I become part of the problem; I’ve inserted myself into the situation. By pulling back, I am more fair and balanced for them—but it’s also about self-preservation.”

Creating mental and emotional re-charging time also allows Lydia to re-engage at work day-after-day. She learned that she needs to shut off the work chatter in her brain, and that even talking about her day with her husband is not helpful. “I don’t want to re-live it. It’s exhausting for me ... If I have had a bad day or a complicated day, I am trying to manage my emotions. I want to get it out of my head, be with my family.” After a few days, she may choose to talk about something that happened at work, when she can be more reflective.

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.