



EXECUTE
WORK
EFFICIENTLY

Delivering Revenue & Capability Development through Collaborative Networks

CASE CONTEXT

A manager grows and strengthens her consulting team by boosting collaboration. She has used practices that facilitate collaboration, openness and feedback as critical elements to deliver quality work on tight-deadline, high-impact client work.



FEMALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGER

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.



Marcela is a project manager in a regional office of a global consulting firm. After a few years in process management

roles in a manufacturing company, she returned to graduate school and earned her MBA. She then joined the firm as an analyst and has progressed up the ranks. She now leads a team of 20 consultants working on fast-paced, specialize projects. She has played a key role in growing the regional practice from a small group of four to a successful team.

When she first joined the firm, she was struck by the collaborative environment and the focus on sharing expertise. “Even as an intern, I was part of the collaboration. I did not expect partners to talk to anyone else in the firm, but it’s not like that. Even though there is a pyramid, or strict hierarchy, in terms of formal leadership, the organization is quite flat in terms of how it works. Anyone can ask for feedback, or information or ideas for how to solve an issue.” Marcela learned the importance of effective collaboration in delivering client results over the years, drawing on consultants from different practices or work streams. More recently, she has seen collaboration, openness and feedback as critical components to building the practice and developing the skills of consultants at every level.

A collaborative nature is so important to the effectiveness of the practice that it is screened for in recruiting new talent. Candidates are asked behavioral questions around teamwork. They are asked to describe times they had to influence a teammate or had problems working with someone and resolved it. Increasingly, leaders and teams meet with candidates informally, for lunch or a networking event, to gauge how they interact. “If we see in the recruiting process a person who’s very smart but we don’t see that person working with a team, it’s very unlikely that he or she continues and gets an offer. It’s not always perfect but I think it helps.”

Collaborative, open behaviors are also modeled by project leaders, who hold sessions with teams every week or two to discuss what is working and what needs to change or where they need help. “When new employees or junior consultants see this openness and working together in their real life, doing the work, they realize that is really what we want, and they incorporate those things themselves.”

Senior leaders add to this culture of openness through feedback mechanisms built into performance management. At the end of each project, the leader evaluates team members, which helps the more junior people focus on collaborative skills they need to develop in next cycle of experience. But just as important is the upward feedback process.



“At the end of every project, the team members are asked to evaluate everybody above them who has been involved. We are rated anonymously on different dimensions, for example, how we structured the project, how we guided it, our team management skills, how we support work-life balance.” *The feedback is bundled from all the projects every six months for the leader to review and discuss with their manager.* They identify areas to improve and create an action plan. “*We always evaluate those goals in the following cycle, so we are always trying to improve.*”

While the majority of collaboration stays within Marcela’s team, she does have access to the company’s global expertise. Her practice area holds weekly calls to create awareness of expertise and projects, share new intellectual capital and offer support or help solve a specific problem. This has helped Marcela and her team to broaden their knowledge and their network. However, Marcela has found that she relies more heavily on people she has met face-to-face. Having met at a meeting or conference and connected on a personal level makes people more willing to help. “That chance to get to know each other in a different setting helps create a closeness that motivates us to help each other.”

When the team has a specific need or question, they can also ask a question to people working in any practice, in any location, through an internal website. But, Marcela has found that *technology alone does not boost collaboration across the network. Often she’ll send an email to her practice leader for a referral, and then she uses his authority to support her request for help.* “If I don’t copy him on my email request, there are really no other incentives for the people outside my region to help ... I usually get help quickly from the people I have met before.”

Marcela sees collaboration becoming more routine and common among the junior partners. Within her team, there has been rapid growth and the pace of work is intense. “*There is no time to say, Oh, I want to check on this myself. We are forced to reach out to people who know so we can learn faster.* The collaboration helps us focus on what matters and not waste time on things that might not add value ... It helps us deliver in terms of timing and the quality of work. If we don’t have collaboration, I don’t think we can meet the objectives.”

Network Insights

- **Hire for collaboration.** Look for an interest in collaboration and demonstrated collaborative behaviors.
- **Reinforce for collaboration.** Set up performance management practices (e.g., post-project evaluations and upward feedback) that define important collaborative behaviors and hold people accountable for them.
- **Support learning.** Provide feedback in a cycle time that allows people to understand how to improve, work on collaboration with intention and then re-evaluate.
- **Bring in collaborative tools.** Use periodic calls and skill-locator technologies to build awareness of activities and expertise within the network.
- **Recognize the human element.** People often respond to and help people they have met face-to-face. Create these opportunities as often as possible.

4 Practices for Recruiting Collaborative People

Marcela’s practice group must be highly collaborative to deliver projects quickly and with high quality. Smart people with experience and expertise were needed, but candidates were also screened for collaboration. Here are four steps used in her region:

1. Employ behavioral interview questions to assess collaborative skills and tendencies (e.g., *How did you convince team of a certain approach or plan? Describe a project that was successful—who else was involved in making it a success?*)
2. Engage recruits in collaborative, team-based problem solving. Activities with other recruits or actual team members can be facilitated to see how they contribute and engage.
3. Host informal events, lunches or networking sessions to allow recruits to engage in a less structured way. Observe connecting and conversational behaviors.
4. Track collaborative behaviors across interviews and make collaboration an explicit part of the decision process. Be sure the hiring team is collaborating, too.

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.