## EXECUTE WORK EFFICIENTLY

# Leader Earns Trust, Builds Energy Needed for Big Changes

## CASE CONTEXT

A senior leader takes a position outside of his area of expertise. He invests his time and personal energy into creating an environment of trust, and builds on previous connections to develop and implement a new strategic initiative.

## MALE

Level: SENIOR EXECUTIVE
Industry: HEALTHCARE

## HIGH-PERFORMERING 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

### When Marco was tapped to head compensation and lead a major change of the company's performance management

process, he didn't think he was the right person for the job. He had grown up in the business, holding various domestic and international roles, but his experience in compensation was limited. "I'm not a subject-matter expert, and this is a strategically critical area facing a lot of significant change," he pointed out to the President and CHRO. He was told, "We're looking for someone who can help us lead through change, with an eye and ear in the organization, someone who has good networks and is viewed as trusted."

Marco would draw on those trusting relationships and strong networks to develop and implement the new strategy in performance management. But, he also needed to quickly build trust within his new team, starting with acknowledging his limits and his strengths. "I don't have comp expertise. They know they are the subject-matter experts, and I'm learning from them every day … I'm in the role because people see my aptitude and skill sets as complementing the team … leadership , execution, bringing new thoughts and ideas to the table."

Previously, the team had faced a lot of turnover, and Marco saw anxiety and fear in the group. Through his natural style and consistent behaviors, that began to change. "My style is very open, transparent, supportive. We do this together. We have weekly staff meetings. I have monthly one-on-ones with direct reports. I do quarterly town halls. I am very open with my team. If I know something's going on, I'm going to share that with them. With that knowledge, they are able to make better decisions."

Small actions—celebrating birthdays, chatting about the weekend, saying thank-you, respecting time zone differences, having lunch together—allowed Marco and the team connect in a personal way. Even in the monthly one-on-one direct report meetings, half of the time was devoted to the personal side of things: goals and aspirations, what's going on and how they are affected. Team members also learned that Marco wants everyone's opinion. "I want to know what you have to say. I may tell you we can't do that, but the idea might trigger another idea … and produce that next thought and more conversation. That's the kind of thing that just makes us stronger." Even if he disagreed, he focused on the idea or the process, rather than critiquing the person. Instead of saying no, he would say: *Let's just pause and think it through* or *I like the concept … how can we twist that around and get a good outcome?*

Marco has seen the tone and energy of the group change. "They are collaborating, helping each other out, seeking opportunity, raising their hand. If they see something that doesn't work or something bad going on, they're speaking up … bringing a lot of innovation and new ideas to the table … people aren't fearful if they make a mistake … it's day and night from how they operated in the past."

Marco's trusted external network had been built in similar ways, over time—which paid off when he needed broad input and support for changing performance management. "I went to my former client groups, the people had worked with in different businesses, functions, regions. I tapped them to help me figure this out."

He pulled in people who were fans of the change but he also sought out vocal critics. "You want to hear from those people. When you are trying to leverage a new idea and need those people to talk about it, they are either going to embrace it or they are not … If you can include them in the process early on, you've won half the battle."

His team held focus groups (in-person and via conference call) and one-on-one phone calls to present the direction, get ideas and reveal challenges. Then, models and options were considered and processes drafted. A few close confidantes weighed in. The network was called back for a second round of input, to build on or poke holes in the prototype plan. Engagement and interest grew through discussion, and changes were made. "We saw a lot of evolution based on what we gave them to react to. Most importantly, everyone felt engaged and committed to making it work."

After one cycle using the new approach, the results are headed in the right direction, including:

- 63% of employees said the process is more effective than the previous approach.

- 70% said there is opportunity for growth and development in the company.

- 62% felt the standards they are evaluated against are fair.

- 73% of managers felt they could deliver reward consistent with feedback.

## Network Insights

- **Create expertise expectations early.** Be sure your constituents are clear on your capabilities. This prevents the need for posturing and creating an image of expertise that keeps you from learning in key areas you need to build depth on. It also creates trust in you.

- **Build trust with team through many small acts.** Make sure you spend time connecting off task. This is a first step to building trust and people's engagement with you.

- **Energize the network.** Encourage ideas, value everyone's contribution, critique the work not the person, extend ideas and pose alternatives.

- **Include far-flung stakeholders.** Reach out to different regions, functions and roles for expertise. Engage negative opinion leaders early so they don't derail things later.

- **Use the network at multiple points.** Bring in the network early for ideas, but go back for a second or third round of feedback as you prototype and refine.

## 5 Ways to Build Rapid Trust

1. Acknowledge what you are not good at. It gives credibility for what you say are your strengths.

2. Go off task to connect at a personal level and in a personalized way. "Not everybody wants a big hoopla for their birthday. A quiet card on their desk is what they appreciate." It's a first step to people believing you care about them.

3. Take status out of the relationship. Go the extra mile to do it. One of Marco's employees was working late on something that was due the next day. Driving by the office on the way home from the airport, Marco went in to help out. "We got it done together, went out and had a quick sandwich … that meant a lot … just to know they weren't by themselves or on their own."

4. Model behaviors you want. Be consistent. "I constantly ask for feedback, ask what can I do differently. Because I give it to them as well."

5. Have people's back. "I tell these guys, if there's a battle you're fighting, flag it, raise it to me, let me help … They know I'll support my team, I won't undermine them."

## 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.