



EXECUTE
WORK
EFFICIENTLY

Investing in Relationships Now for Project Success Later

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced engineer knows project success requires more than technical know-how. He builds relationships with clients, regulators and colleagues to find solutions, deliver results and—at times—avert crisis.



MALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: ENGINEERING

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.



Working in a small consulting firm, Randall was hands-on with every phase of client projects. When the firm earned

the business of a regional company with both long-term challenges and short-term needs, Randall used a collaborative approach and his political savvy to develop a plan and implement a significant project.

The client had invested significantly in expanding the capacity of their facility, but the projected pipeline of materials was insufficient. “This is an industry where supply is mapped out years, sometimes decades in advance. So, they were behind in solving a problem that would show up in two or three years ... Our job was to help them develop 5, 10 and 15-year expansion plans and expedite key elements.”

The project started with creating a framework to evaluate properties, based on their strategic value; the numerous geological, regulatory and financial issues; and timing considerations. “We needed to help them strategically identify properties to investigate—to create a way to establish value based on all the data we would be gathering.” With the initial data, Randall and his project partner took a first pass at the framework, brainstorming different ways to set value. They ended up with a grid to summarize the most important factors and grade each property. They took their draft framework back to the client. “We wanted to talk with their technical experts to see if we were on the right track. They gave us input and supporting information to add more depth to what we wanted to do. They helped us with cost estimates, for example, to feed into the model.”

“A lot of this work we were figuring out as we went. There wasn’t just a presentation of a plan—it developed iteratively, back and forth between internally discussing the problem and then running things by their experts or getting more information from the client ... This co-creation was our norm ... It helped us build the relationship.”

An old-school technical expert and an early-career engineer were the two main people Randall worked with, along with the CEO. While the work was important, he quickly learned there was lack of agreement on how to approach the project. “There was a lot of conflict in our client’s organization at the time. So, I had to negotiate and navigate that conflict and competing views while trying to get our work done. I decided to work out of their office for a week to give me a chance to build relationships and some trust. That helped as we developed and implemented the work—we had a basis of experience and conversation to rely on.”



Randall's pattern of establishing respected and trusting relationships served the client in another big way. During a week Randall was working out of the client's facility, they received a notice from an industry regulator citing a problem that threatened to shut down operations. The CEO protested and was ready to go to battle. Randall, however, had worked with the regulator for years and knew the process and the people. "This was an emergency for my client and because I was out there, I was able to bring the parties together into a meeting that day. We discussed the problem, calmed down the CEO and created a path forward ... The problem wasn't directly tied to the work I was doing, but I was definitely able to build a lot of respect and trust from the client because I could respond and help them with that emergency."

Randall's relationship with the regulator allowed for a quick, acceptable resolution. "It was absolutely because of that investment in the relationship in the past. I had more direct contact with the regulator. I often found it to be helpful to go ahead and build a relationship with the regulators instead of having an adversarial one if something goes wrong ... With previous clients, we would run things by the regulator or give them what they asked for in a negotiation, so it helped establish some trust that we weren't always trying to push for as much as we could get for the client. There are only so many chips you have, so if you push for as for as much as you can get on every part of a negotiation, then when you really need some understanding or flexibility on something, you already spent all your chips."

Over time, Randall's project was complete. The quality work and the solid relationship resulted in additional work with the client for his firm—and the experience opened the door to providing similar solutions to other companies. Personally, Randall's expanded knowledge made him more competitive in his field. He was recruited by a much larger firm, where he now has access to many more interesting people and bigger opportunities.

Network Insights

- **Bring in diverse perspectives at the beginning of a project.** The initial framing of a problem and creation of a solution will be more robust if you engage relevant experts in brainstorming sessions and early development.
- **Co-create solutions with clients and stakeholders, rather than presenting a full solution.** Through dialogue and iteration, they will gain ownership and the solution will improve through suggestions from different experts and people with different perspectives. This also strengthens trust and buy-in, so work is executed more efficiently.
- **Invest in relationships with influential stakeholders by giving early.** Share information, make referrals, pitch in to help out. Don't wait until you have a need or a problem. You may not see direct or immediate results of giving, but it invokes a sense of reciprocity and desire to help that often yield surprising benefits at a later point.

High Performers Leverage Boundary Spanning Ties for Impact

When Randall took a job at a global firm, he instantly had access to a bigger, more diverse network. But his function was fairly isolated, so he worked to build relationships across boundaries within the context of specific projects. Here's how:

1. Think of gaps or problems as opportunities to reach into different groups, levels or locations for insight. Randall identified an opportunity to use new software to improve certain types of projects.
2. Don't limit your access. Randall's personal network was small at the new firm, so he asked his boss who might have with relevant expertise within the organization.
3. Reach out to learn more. Randall met with a subject-matter expert and learned about current capabilities. He left with a standard PowerPoint presentation and a list of names of people who were already using the software.
4. Translate the benefits through stories. Randall's project teams were not inclined to change their process and adopt the software. An abstract discussion of features and benefits via PowerPoint was not convincing. Instead, he began giving examples, creating narratives to depict how the software would have applied to previous projects and options for used in current work.

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.