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# Helping Team Members Leverage Each Other By Creating Context of Learning & Trust

## CASE CONTEXT

A call center manager has learned to invest in her team to foster performance. She interacts with them in ways that build trust in her and in each other, which helps them be effective and motivated working in often-frustrating customer service roles.



FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL  
LEADER

Industry:  
COMMUNICATION

## 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.



A manager in a call center for 15 years, Robin has worked with teams who place and receive customer service calls—

often with people who are unhappy with the conversation. To excel in the work repeatedly, she invests in her team in ways that build trust and foster learning. With an average of 20 direct reports, Robin has learned to manage her time and the team interactions to improve the speed and effectiveness of the group.

With so many direct reports doing transactional work, Robin's time can quickly disappear by providing answers or solving problems. "If they see I'm here, I get questions all day long. So, how can I get them to depend on themselves rather than depending on me?" She pushes back: "*Did you look it up? Did you ask a peer?* ... I will help them find the resource, see where the information is, so they know how to do it on their own in the future."

The most effective way Robin has found to develop employees' skills and responsibility also builds trust within the team: she pairs high-performers and low-performers for peer coaching. They are challenged to work together for three months, giving feedback to each other and keeping each other motivated. They listen to each other's calls, keep up with metrics and figure out how they can help the team reach their goals. Robin buys lunch for the winners of the challenge: the top-performing pair and the pair with the most improvement.

When she first had the idea, Robin talked to a high-performer and to a team member who wasn't getting great results. She wanted to gauge interest and get their ideas of how it would work best. "I put it out there. I said, *Hey, this is an idea I came up with. What do you think? Do you think you're going to like it? What do you think the outcome is going to be? Are you willing to do it?* I got their buy-in and then pushed it out to the rest of the team." The team agreed, with Robin noting that their goal was to improve for themselves, but also connecting it to the bigger goal. "This is an effort to increase our team's results, but also it mattered overall—to help our department, help our company ... At first, there were a few people that grumbled, but then they all got into it; it got them motivated. They were actually cheering each other on. *Hey, you didn't do so well today. What's going on? Can I help you?*"

The process freed up Robin's time, as the team turned to each other and got directly involved in tracking metrics. "It kind of pulled me out of the equation where I didn't have to do all the work."

Importantly, the team learned in ways they didn't when Robin was at the center. "With the peer coaching, they picked their own calls. I wasn't involved in it. There were a lot of a-ha moments: *This is what my manager was telling me the whole time and now I finally get it.* Coming from your peers, hearing it from someone else, the light bulb goes off ... They gave one another great feedback: *I wouldn't have done it this way. Maybe try doing it this way* ... And, they asked each other for help: *I struggle in this area. Can you give me some tips?* ... They just feed off one another." At the end of the three months, the most improved pair advanced their call success rate from 32% to 44% and Robin's team saw a 9% overall improvement in this period.

Robin builds trust and fosters learning through team meetings as well, which allows the group to feel more comfortable to ask peers for help or use the online chat tool when they need assistance. The team has gotten comfortable listening to and debriefing calls that were done well and calls where the employee struggled. "I'll ask the person, *Do you mind if we take this call into our team meeting?* ... At first, they were worried about criticism, but I've never had a problem ... It actually builds confidence and trust ... Sometimes we're a tougher critic on ourselves than someone else. A team member will say, *I don't think that was so good.* And another might say, *You actually sounded really good. I'm going to incorporate what you said* ... Now, when I ask for volunteers for the next one, it's no problem."

For Robin, building that trust and creating an environment of positivity is essential—it's what allows her to try new things or push the team in new ways to hit their goals. Her team is committed and willing to strive, even when doing work that is repetitive and often frustrating. She takes time to really know her team members, talk about their lives and their families, and encourage their career goals. She'll mentor people to learn new skills or help them with a resume or job application. "I always tell my team that I want them to think about their career ... Utilize opportunities that you've been given ... I was a non-management employee at one point, and I had a good manager that was very supportive and encouraging and did those types of things. I want to do the same for people ... It's rewarding."

## Network Insights

- **Teach people to solve problems themselves.** When questions come up, point out the various resources that may be available—existing tools or guides, IM with a peer, chat rooms—and be sure they know how to use them. This builds their skills and confidence while offloading some work from you onto the network.
- **Pair up high- and low-performers.** Identify a focused project or area for improvement and have team members work in pairs to share expertise and figure out how to do better. The ideas and feedback will be coming from someone who knows the work and suggestions will be specific and trusted.
- **Promote learning as a group.** Use team meetings to talk through examples of work product (customer interactions, presentations, etc.) and talk about what was new or effective that others could do—as well as what could be improved. Have high-performers present or give mini-training sessions to peers.
- **Support team members beyond performance.** Give time and space for recovery from negative interactions. Get to know team members on a personal level with genuine care. Encourage and offer help when people want to pursue another job or show ambition.

## 5 Ways to Fight the "Time Suckers"

For Robin, "time suckers" are people who manage processes and interactions inefficiently. Here are a few things she does to protect her time and manage collaborative demands:

1. Engage newcomers into the network so they rapidly become functioning members of the team. Teach them to rely on resources and peers.
2. Support high performers and people who are central to the network. You don't want them to get so overloaded, frustrated or disinterested that they burn out and leave.
3. Be firm when you need to focus on other things. When you are seen as a helper—or simply readily available—learn to say, *Let me get back with you. I have a project that I'm working on, or Just give me a few moments.*
4. Block time during "off-hours" for non-collaborative work. Even coming in 30 minutes earlier than the team can make a difference.
5. Plan your work weeks around similar types of work. For example, schedule time for working on reports one week, employee training or feedback the second week, projects or planning the third and catch-up work the fourth.

## 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](http://www.connectedcommons.com) or email Rob at [rlcrossjr@gmail.com](mailto:rlcrossjr@gmail.com).