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HR Leader Turns to Diffuse Network for Project Success



CASE CONTEXT

As an HR leader’s role expands, he relies on a diffuse network throughout the organization for key projects—driving better execution and adoption of change. Plus, he takes steps to avoid burnout and collaborative overload.

Wesley had taken on the role of HR leader for a business that had been acquired a few years before by a national healthcare company. With an enterprise perspective, he saw that HR was struggling to navigate two mindsets: the dominant, corporate view of “self-serve HR” and the full-service provider expectation, which was held within the acquired division. This cultural distinction created conflict within HR, but more important, Wesley saw missed opportunities for managers to strengthen their leadership skills. “Managers relied on HR people to do a lot of the work that I believe managers need to do themselves to become stronger and more effective as leaders.”



MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

Industry: HEALTHCARE

The on-boarding process was one way Wesley thought he could address a business challenge and shift accountability to line managers. The existing process was superficial and included only enterprise-wide information. It offered no opportunity to go deep into specific divisions or strategies, much less connect new hires with their manager or get them energized about their role. It wasn’t uncommon to hear comments like, *I started here three months ago, and I’ve only talked to my manager once*. The company was losing too many new hires, creating a drain on existing teams and undermining heavy investments in recruiting. Wesley began to ask: how can we change our on-boarding process to “reduce first-year turnover, be compliant with the model of self-service, and influence leadership and managers in a way that they get there on their own?”

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.

First, Wesley and the HR team clarified the problem they were trying to solve. They measured first-year turnover, examined to what extent the hire was a good match initially, and dug into exit interviews, new employee interviews and employee surveys. With data in hand, Wesley presented the problem to the managers. “On the front end, I would build support, making sure I was at the table with leadership, clearly articulating the problem, showing them the real data, and how that ties in to business results ... We had to build really strong awareness around what the problem was and to build the appetite, the desire, to change it, so people would get behind it.”

Once he made the case for change, Wesley was able to recruit from HR, IT, communications, learning and development, and within the business to create the project team. The idea was to create something sustainable and useful so managers would be much more active with the new hires. “Could we train the managers and give them tools to do it? ... How would we deliver and design something that is useful and easy to follow?”



With no funding and no extra resources, the solution had to be developed and implemented as a side project. The team proposed using an existing internal tool, to create a Facebook-like system that would be loaded with the high-level new hire communication, as well as manager-specific or job-specific information that new employees would need to get started in their role. The tool would also spur connection and conversation between managers and their new employees.

The network of interested managers—the leaders Wesley brought in early on—were essential for adoption and execution of the idea. “We had to engage a lot of people from different departments within the business. Who is going to manage the content? How would we get the information in there and keep it up-to-date? What is our business model? Our strategy? How does this align with the enterprise? How is that translated to a specific role and how does an employee help move it forward every day? All these things had to be packaged on the site the way managers and employees would have access to and use ... We needed the people in the business to be the ambassadors of it.”

One year later, outcomes and impact include:

- Managers are using the system. “They see this as a tool that gives them a new way to connect and have quality conversation and influence with their new employees ... Some have it to the level of Week 1, do this; Week 2, do this, Week 3, do that ... And it is even used with employees transferring coming from a different part of the business.”
- Interest and participation has not fallen off or defaulted back to HR.
- Business leaders are showing increased interest and skill in managing and engaging employees.
- First-year employee turnover was notably reduced by 8 percent—attributed, in part, to the new on-boarding process.

Due to the early-on ownership by a broad network of managers, the new on-boarding process was implemented with minimal resistance. “This was not a *build it and they will come* project. If we had just put it out there, people would not have adopted it.”

Network Insights

- **Boundary-spanning ties are critical for innovation and problem solving.** Drawing on people across functions and perspectives helps inform content and processes, expanding the breadth and impact of the solution.
- **Engaging the network early on encourages adoption and improves execution.** Presenting the problem to a broad network in the initial stages will diffuse a sense of ownership. People who are invested will give greater effort and will not become a source of friction when it is time to execute. Wesley told his HR team, “We need to be the people to push it but can’t be an HR initiative. It has to be driven within the business, to resonate with them, so they can pick up and go with it. Let them feel comfortable in the concept and in the thought that it is their idea and they made it happen. That’s OK!”
- **Revisiting collaborative practices improves how you handle surges in workload.** When you take on a new role or more responsibility, make changes in how you communicate, delegate and manage your time. If you don’t take actions and just try to fight through, you will burnout, fail and derail.

How to Counter Collaborative Overload When the Workload Ramps Up

When Wesley took on a major initiative in addition to his primary role, he began to collaborate in new ways:

- Giving half the amount of time people are asking for and being efficient in interactions.
- Knowing when the email churn has to stop. Shift to a phone call when discussion and dialogue is needed.
- Being more selective about attending meetings. Sending team members both freed time and built bench strength.
- Trusting more in delegating and fighting the tendency to want to control too much.

“The overall volume of collaboration has gone up, but proportionately my workload has gone down. If I didn’t start operating a little differently ... there’s no way I could have managed through that surge in 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.