



EXECUTE  
WORK  
EFFICIENTLY

# Leadership & Collaborative Practices

## Create an Adaptive Network to Support Global Operations

### CASE CONTEXT

An experienced leader runs a global support function by building a network of engaged employees and stakeholders. He develops individual and collective capacity through thoughtful leadership—and removing himself from the center of the network.



MALE

Level: MANAGER OF  
MANAGERS

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.



Fifteen years ago, Geoffrey was hired as a systems manager within a niche global financial services company. Over time,

his responsibility grew into broader operations, including taking a job at company headquarters. Now, he leads a team of 60 people to support the global operations of the firm's largest division. "Our job is to enable the consulting side of the business and the services we deliver to clients across all our regions." The work requires managing processes and systems across more than a dozen offices and interfacing with diverse stakeholders.

As part this role, Geoffrey led a team to re-think operational processes. He set an hour-long meeting every other week, open to the core team and any stakeholders. He focused on creating an environment in which people felt comfortable sharing their ideas and dealing with tough questions. "I encouraged open and direct conversation about the issues we were facing ... When people didn't like something, if an issue came up, they had a channel to engage." Geoffrey and the team made a focused effort to understand others and not brush off concerns. "We would discuss facts and why we had a different perspective. Often, we did change course or integrate feedback from others, and people really appreciated our effort to genuinely engage and do better." This forum, as well as Geoffrey's open, non-combative style, was critical to engaging the diverse groups and instituting practices that transformed operations worldwide.

Geoffrey set the tone as a leader, but he removed himself from the center of the network. "I am not the one the network goes around. Early on I said, *Meetings go on without me, I'm not in charge of them.*" He intentionally held back his opinion at times, a practice that forced ownership within the team and among stakeholders. He expected people to collaborate and solve problems without him. "I would say, *Before you come to me, share with several members of the team*, so that I am not the one who is in the middle of every conversation or that the connections only happened when I am around ... That helped to create a much better environment where they don't just think about their individual territory and roles."

Geoffrey takes a similar approach within his larger operations team. It's a group with many specialists in areas such as finance, communication, IT, regulation and governance. "I wanted people to understand how their area fit into the bigger picture and increase collaboration." Through consistent team meetings and one-on-ones, he modeled openness and a commitment to learning and improving as a whole. "When we have conversations and discussions, I insist on having diversity of views ... Different people have different expertise, but there is nothing one individual can solve alone."

Geoffrey also brings other people in on his work. *“I never work alone. If I go for a meeting, I always take another member of my team with me ... As the activity gets more defined, I slowly move to the back seat and the other person gets in the driver’s seat. I give as much or little support as the person needs.”*

The ability to remove himself from the center requires Geoffrey to simultaneously understand problems or opportunities *and* the people he might involve. He has invested carefully to know this network, in terms of skills, interests and aspirations in order to distribute work and rely on others. *“Now, if I put them in charge of something, it is up to them to figure out how much review or input they need from me ... They are not obliged to bring me in. They can focus on what is really needed to make a decision, not layers of consultation or approvals.”*

Geoffrey seeks to keep his group engaged and learning. *“I want every person on the team to do something every year that they haven’t done before and to have some aspect of work that they are crazy about.”* He spends a significant amount of time coaching as well as orchestrating rotations or assignments. *“Sometimes it takes a huge amount of effort, but I don’t easily give up! ... And when people have these experiences, they are always more engaged.”*

When he brings in new hires, Geoffrey gets them connected to the work and the network quickly. In addition to a list of on-boarding activities that should be done each week for the first three months, Geoffrey personally sends an introductory email to the full group, invites the newcomer to join team meetings and introduces them to clients. He allocates time for one-on-one lunches and coffees, until they are comfortable and oriented. Plus, every new person gets a buddy on the team as a resource. *“I want to put people at ease and make sure the person is set into the team.”*

Through his leadership and network behaviors, Geoffrey has built a support function that has had a major impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the entire organization. In addition, the group’s engagement scores are some of the highest in the company, despite the work itself being “behind-the-scenes” and not outwardly viewed as exciting.

## Network Insights

- **Address internal client or stakeholder communication via routine and transparent meetings.** Be open and welcoming of ideas and conflicting viewpoints and genuinely address concerns.
- **Run meetings to pull all perspectives into discussions.** Help people see possibilities that exist by integrating their expertise and working across silos.
- **Remove hierarchy from interactions.** Let the network solve problems without you. Have a light touch in meetings. Don’t work alone: take someone with you to meetings so you are immediately able to begin moving them into ownership and help them learn.
- **Systematically bring newcomers into the network.** Build in checkpoints on network development at end of the first week, first month and first quarter. Assign a buddy and introduce clients. Make time to know their expertise and ensure they are getting connected.
- **Invest your time to engage your people.** Every year, assess to be sure they have new work so they are growing in their role as well as work that energizes and excites them. This pays off enormously by keeping people from disengaging and drifting to the edge of the network.

## Building a Sustainable Lateral Network

Geoffrey’s group supports operations for regional offices around the world. To gain consistency and efficiency, they engage the stakeholder network in several key ways:

1. **Create a systematic forum for communication.** Be transparent about issues and decisions. Seek input and respond so people know they were heard, whether or not the outcome changed.
2. **Diffuse ownership for network effectiveness.** Intentionally hold back your involvement and voice to let others make connections, solve problems and build a capability for future efforts.
3. **Connect to the larger purpose and common objectives.** In Geoffrey’s case, it was improving and aligning work practices across countries and regions.
4. **Help people gain a sense of belonging.** Bring dispersed teams together in person yearly if possible. Allow space for fun and off-task conversation or activities in team interactions.

## 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).