



EXECUTE
WORK
EFFICIENTLY

CASE CONTEXT

A technical expert and project manager facilitates complex client work by defining and executing work through agile processes. His personal network gives him access, insight and professional development.



MALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL
LEADER

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.



Employing Agile Principles to Promote Team Success through Effective & Efficient Networks

With multiple computer science and business degrees, Lucas has been a consultant, lead developer and project manager

for a professional services firm for the past eight years. Currently, he manages a team of 18 involved in delivering a long-term, complex set of projects for a public sector client. He also engages with the broader organization through involvement in the R&D program and his work leading a center of excellence in his technical specialty. “The center of excellence is a virtual group; we share battle stories and collaborate to cross-pollinate our capabilities inside the organization and with our clients.”

Lucas’ client work involves coordinating among multiple individual contributors from several areas of expertise. Using agile software development methods, he brings teams together to iterate on his project, often with frequent interaction with the client. “One key tenet is we don’t expect to know the exact thing we are trying to build down to the n^{th} degree prior to starting work ... The crucial component is the attendance at those project meetings. I want representation from all sub-teams—requirements, development, quality/testing, deployment—in the group. That’s really important because they each bring a slightly different perspective on how you define the work and what the success criteria is.” By drawing on a wide range of perspectives and expertise, Lucas and the team are able to play out options and tradeoff early on in the process, rather than stumbling into problems at later stages of the project. “If you only have the front-end people, they’ll say, we’ve got product X and we want it do to thing A, and they sketch up a beautiful mock-up ... Then, you get to the developer who has to make it work, to build it, whether or not that mock-up was feasible ... It is difficult to assess the best option without all the players involved ... *When we do it right, we can adjust easier and earlier, and we remove some of the uncertainty for us and for the client.*”

Over time, Lucas has learned to facilitate those meetings to drive collaboration, not competition, and an integrated solution. “Sometimes one of them will push on one goal or put a stake in the ground on what matters to them ... *Now that I’ve done this for awhile, I’ve learned when it makes sense to bite my tongue, let the conversation play out. Or when I need to step in and do some negotiating ...* Occasionally, the different personalities may just not work great together, but the expectation has been set that this is how we work.” Lucas also returns to the vision or purpose of the work with each team. “When everybody in a meeting has a shared understanding of the vision we are driving to, of the importance or value, it makes it easier when you get into the specifics of the work.”

The implementation process includes daily *scrums*, stand-up meetings with the full team. Each person gives a quick update on what they worked on the previous day, what they plan to do today and anything they are blocked on or where they need help. *In addition to being an efficient way of monitoring progress and shifting resources, the meetings have created a context for openness and collaboration.* Team members are clear on who is good at what and are willing to ask questions or admit when they need help. “We commit to the work requirements as a team and then work as a team to eliminate blockers and get it done.”

Within this type of project network, Lucas occasionally must adjust to two extremes: the person who throws his hands up too early, and says, *I don’t know how to do this*, and the person who won’t ask for help soon enough. Ideally, one or more people on the team will mentor and communicate directly to address the problem. They will guide or coach the person who is under-performing and shift workload off the over-committed team member. “When it goes best, the problems are addressed organically.”

When a newcomer joins Lucas’s team, he gets them up to speed quickly on the processes and expectations through written documentation and by partnering them with a senior member of the team. They are immediately involved in the daily meetings to meet the group and observe the processes. Lucas also encourages new hires to integrate into the larger organization by quickly joining one or more communities of excellence and attending organization-wide events to meet people outside their current team and project. It has been Lucas’s experience that having a personal network and a broader view of the organization leads to job satisfaction and success. “The people who have been the most successful here have the desire and the initiative to participate in various things outside their small circle ... *If you are insular, it’s not going to lead to the results we are striving for* ... You need an open attitude and know you can’t do it all yourself.”

Network Insights

- **Get the right experts in the room at the beginning.** A range of perspectives, expertise and responsibilities are needed to define the scope of work, see conflicts and make tradeoffs that lead to optimal solutions and streamline execution.
- **Promote purpose to get to effective integration of views.** Agree on the vision and value of the work. Return to that focus when making decisions about specifics, especially if stakeholders are defending turf or taking a narrow view.
- **Use regular team meetings to create awareness of expertise and progress of work.** It sets a context for people to turn to each other for help, take risks with ideas and solve problems as a team. It also facilitates shifting of resources to be responsive to clients and distribute workload effectively.
- **Invest in ties outside the group or team.** Encourage your teams to take advantage of virtual or in-person events or professional communities. Do this yourself to gain access to expertise and political or organizational perspective.

4 Network Ties to Enable High Performance



Emergence/Creativity Ties

Lucas connects people with adjacent expertise to build teams & solve problems. “It’s good to know what you know & what you don’t & seek out complementary skills & resources ... I don’t have many original ideas or many original problems. There’s always somebody else who has more experience or is a lot smarter.”



Professional Growth Ties

Lucas seeks out leaders to help him navigate the political landscape & identify influencers. “Find the best people managers; they understand how we operate & plan to evolve. They are generally connected to other influential, connected people ... Ask, *Who do I need to connect to; Where are the landmines?*”



Depth/Best Practice Ties

Lucas relies on people with similar expertise for best practice transfer, efficiency & deepening expertise. “Centers of excellence, going to brown bag lunches or getting involved in professional groups add depth to your knowledge & provide support or resources when you need them.”



Sensemaking/Landscape Ties

Lucas leans on a few trusted allies to give him feedback & help him adjust. “There are 4 or 5 folks I reach out to get feedback to make sure I’m not over the top, or pushing too hard. They help me look at a situation, take the temperature of the environment & reevaluate.”

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.