



EXECUTE
WORK
EFFICIENTLY

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced professional develops a broad and effective network to provide quality work to a cross-section of internal clients. By being attentive to both relationships and outputs, he contributes in ways that benefit the company and his career.



MALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: HEALTHCARE

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.



Balancing Investments in Quality Work & Network Development to Build a Successful Career

Mateo is a specialist in packaging design and development for a global healthcare products company. With nearly a

decade in the role, he has worked on numerous programs and products, across a variety of teams. “One thing I like about this role is the breadth of responsibility and the interaction with a large number of groups and functions. It’s inherent in our function that we have a broad network and use it effectively to do what we need to do.”

The company has a strong relationship-driven culture. “You need a lot of experience to know who to talk to and how to operate ... We try as a group and a company to make a checklist and define a playbook, but it still doesn’t work.” Working without a clear prescription for how to do the job is common in many organizations. People shape or develop roles around the person, the network and the pace of change. For Mateo, the work and the network vary greatly based on the expectations, inputs and outputs of a given project or situation. “Here, there are so many things we are responsible to test or execute, strategies we need to know about, subject-matter experts we need to involve ... In my role, I need a lot of breadth and a little depth ... Creating something as simple as a carton or box, you have to involve paper manufacturing, design, testing, regulation, supply chain and distribution.”

Mateo has learned to pay attention to the big picture, understand who is contributing and build relationships. When coming in to a new project, he takes times to see who is involved, understand the network dynamics and learn what he needs to accomplish. “I stay under the radar at the beginning and listen, listen, listen.” He introduces himself to project leads, managers and specialists and sets up one-on-ones. “I consciously think about that; I onboard myself. I learn about them and let them know what I do and my background, regardless of where the project is at the moment and what my role in it seems to be.” He prefers to have some level of personal conversation as well, connecting off-task about interests or family. “We are always asking people for something; I try to avoid making a request from someone I’ve never met. People tend to respond better and want to help if we have some previous connection and a sense of who the other person is.”

Mateo’s projects often involve multiple sites and global teams, and he cannot rely on face-to-face interactions. Even so, he makes a concerted effort to build relationships and get to know other’s personalities and interests. “Different sites will push harder on one thing or another, or have different preferences for how they work ... Connecting earlier and more often smoothes implementation ... It’s about reaching out; just talking, sharing information, giving a heads-up when you see stuff coming.”

In Mateo's job, like so many other relationship-driven roles, the time spent in meetings, on calls and responding to emails and messages can take over a day. "You can get to the end of the week and think, *What did I do? What did I accomplish?*" He has learned to block time for focused work—"literally shutting myself off from IM and email to execute, to deliver, to show my teams I am producing something ... As obvious as it sounds, you have to demonstrate your value by doing your job." Relationship building *and* doing good work create a positive reputation, which results in Mateo being pulled into projects and work he wants to be doing. "You show the team you can execute and that you are doing what you say you are going to do. The end result is that you build trust, forge connections with people who also get stuff done, who appreciate the work ... Those people will reach out to me and I'll reach out to them in the future."

In addition to building reputation and executing work through the network, Mateo is involved in several groups that fuel his creative, innovative side. He is part of a design forum to keep up with innovation and practices in other industries. He also leads the company's *design for the environment* initiative, which draws on talent from across the organization to spur thinking and practices around minimizing impact on the environment across the product life cycle. These cross-boundary networks are personally interesting to Mateo and give him a broader perspective on his work and the company.

Mateo is in a role he finds interesting, working with people across groups and functions in the company and producing good work. His network helps him succeed and thrive. "Positive connections build other positive connections ... If you treat people well, do a good job and stay in contact, the next time they need something or you need something, you know you have a friendly personality on the other side of the line." After a decade at the company, Mateo enjoys the personal side of relationships he has built, too. "I enjoy talking to people about stuff that's not work. They help me learn new things and do new things. They improve your life at work and outside of work, too."

Network Insights

- **Develop a broad network to shape your role and execute effectively.** In a project-based job or a role that is not clearly defined, build connections with people in your field or function, in related or adjacent roles and across silos and boundaries.
- **Invest in relationships before you need them.** Listen closely to know who is important in the network and who you will interact with to accomplish the work. Introduce yourself, have 1:1 meetings and/or talk to people on a personal level. People are more likely to respond to requests if you already have some connection.
- **Be attentive to the work *and* to the network.** They feed off each other to build relationships and trust needed for project success. Plus, you establish a reputation that will pull you into desirable projects in the future.
- **Cultivate project networks early for implementation success.** Reach out informally to get to know the personalities and local or functional interests and perspectives. Don't wait to engage, even if people aren't needed until later stages of execution.

Purpose: It's Personal & Professional

Mateo keeps the pressures and complications of work and career in check by keeping clear on his purpose and values. As a young man, he suffered injury and loss, including the deaths of a close friend and a relative. "These life experiences have kept things in perspective for me ... Life is short. There's a lot of negativity in the world and I'm trying not to be part of that." Preventing work from being consuming, treating other people well and having a sense of appreciation is something we've seen in others who have experienced loss or come from humble backgrounds—and it helps them thrive personally and professionally.

Mateo also genuinely believes in his company, the products they are making and the good intent of management and the people he works with. "For the most part, I do see positive intent, doing things for the right reasons and people aligning on what is best for the program or the greater good."

Finally, he finds purpose in accomplishment. He is driven to work hard and is surrounded by many other smart and driven people. "I respond well with leaders who are making sure projects are moving forward, when execution is happening, when we are delivering."

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.