EXECUTE WORK EFFICIENTLY

Talent Management Practices that Create Agile Networks in a Global Professional Services Organization

CASE CONTEXT

An HR leader fosters a collaborative culture and builds a needed talent pool. Talent management practices and strategies to avoid collaborative overload combine for more energized and effective teams.

FEMALE

Level: SENIOR 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.

INNOVATE

EXECUTE

SCALE

THRIVE

ADAPT

Olive is a senior HR leader who worked in education, manufacturing and research environments before joining
a global professional services company twelve years ago. "I brought structure to the HR function and then the company went through a difficult time in the industry and the world economy … Business was down and we were downsizing; it was a really painful time. We had to do a lot to rebuild trust … We are now approaching the business differently … We're looking at it from the dual bottom line: looking for growth for people and for the business. My focus is creating and building a culture around a vision of unleashing human potential."

Olive is seeing progress on that organizational journey. "We are at our best when people are taking an idea and it is really exploding, creating a new experience or strategy for a client or growing and creating new business." For example, about a year ago, one sales person had a chance to work on a small project with a potentially great client. "At first, we were not sure what the opportunity was, what direction the work would take … A few more people got involved, learning about the client's needs over time. This grew in a few months to a huge opportunity for us." As the project evolved, the group got more excited about the work, pulled more people in and soon they were designing a whole new operational service. "Innovation was happening, the teams were so excited about this client, they just exploded … They created new solutions and a new team and adapted the work so it could be replicated with other clients." This energy was infectious and led to different thinking about teams and how to acquire talent and staff projects across the organization.

Olive saw that to provide the company the talent needed to be agile and collaborative, her team needed to refine its recruiting. Everything in the hiring process began to revolve around identifying candidates who could be responsive to customers by solving problems collaboratively and in the moment. "Whether a leader or employee is answering the phone or managing an event, collaboration is what we need most." The interview process is a team effort, with HR leaders and team members doing the interviews. They assess skills by asking behavioral questions: *Tell us about an experience where you've had to solve a problem for a client on site or in the moment.* They'll seek referrals from prior managers or clients, asking for stories of collaboration. "We are looking for someone who will be less an individual contributor and able to work as part of a team."

When new hires come in the door, the priority is to steep them in the culture of connection, collaboration and client relationships. "We want them to orient to the dual bottom line and taking care of each other. We connect people to communities, deep in the organization. So, when you take care of your client, you also take care of your community." All newcomers have ongoing support from the HR teams and are paired with a buddy within their group or team. "It's important they have someone as their go-to person besides their manager." As they learn the company and their role, employees are measured by their ability to develop trusted, long-term relationships; clients need to know they are making decisions that are in their best interest. "We have hired skilled experts who fail to build trust … The behavior has a higher value than results; if you're not collaborating with the client or team members you will not survive."

Recognizing and rewarding collaborative behaviors further strengthens the talent network. Olive instituted a recognition program focused on key values, including collaboration. People nominate colleagues or teams for quarterly awards and regularly send on-the-spot praise and recognition through the company's internal communications hub. "We ask people to send us their stories of how someone connected with team members or worked across teams for our clients. We publicize those stories and compliments from clients or leaders or co-workers, which keeps our priorities front-and-center and very strong in the culture."

Performance management also underscores the demand for collaborative behaviors. Rather than formal performance reviews, managers take a coaching, conversation-based approach. "Conversations are behavior based, with a Start/Stop/Continue model and tend to highlight the impact of individual behavior on others, what kinds of interactions you are having with others, creating enterprise leaders … If people get narrow in their thinking, they fall down on collaborative behaviors— regular conversations, rather than once-a-year reviews, catch those problems early."

The new system for recruiting, on-boarding and developing talent has taken root in the company. The collaboration needed for responsiveness to clients, flexible staffing and future growth is now the norm.

Network Insights

An agile organization can rapidly sense and respond to new opportunities and move innovation across the company. Agility is influenced by core talent management practices:

- **Recruiting**. Ensure that talent identification and screening processes use multiple observations and formats to assess collaborative values and behaviors.

- **On-Boarding**. Help new hires use their first six months to connect with people in key networks. Assign a buddy to help them navigate the organization. Teach them how to build relationships and be energizers.

- **Rewards & Recognition**. Extrinsic reward processes may be tied to collaborative behavior but informal recognition is also powerful. Communicate collaborative successes broadly. People feel good and a cultural signal is sent.

- **Performance Evaluation**. Steer collaborative behaviors through regular conversations and give weight to behavior, not just results.

Creating Space Instead of Overload

The downside of collaborative work is the potential for collaborative overload. "The biggest cost is no definitive break between work and play; it's impossible to get any space."

Olive's company is taking steps to help employees reclaim their lives away from work. They use the term "white space" to indicate the needed non-work time. They've held company-wide training on creating and respecting white space. People are more efficient, and if meetings end early they are advised to "use your white space well." Everyone agrees to rules to buffer each other from the always-on demands of email: not sending emails on weekend unless it's a real emergency and using subject-line cues such as *FYI No Action Needed*. The company president sends the message, too. A recent out-of-office reply said, "I am trying to respect the space of employees and my own space. You will likely not get a response from me while I am out."

This commitment validates the other activities and people in employees' lives, too. "We are open about talking about our white space and sharing what we do: vacations, dinner with the kids, taking the dog for a walk, going to the gym." The company even uses an app that allows employees to post pictures or notes to colleagues about what they do with their white space. By having a shared language and support for life beyond work, employees are able to rejuvenate and return re-energized and better able to focus on the demands of the day.

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.