



EXECUTE
WORK
EFFICIENTLY

Senior Leader Expands International Presence Via Collaborative Practices

CASE CONTEXT

A leader with global responsibility works strategically through relationships and networks to drive growth. He factors in cultural and individual differences as his team learns to be more effective in a matrixed, headquarters-driven context.



MALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: CONSUMER
PRODUCTS

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.



Rudy grew up in consumer marketing, but expanded his scope when he joined a global consumer products company

twelve years ago. Today, he runs a business unit that operates production sites in Europe but distributes its products globally. Rudy has been focused on expanding international sales, requiring collaboration and influence across the company's diverse businesses and cultures.

When looking to launch into a new country, Rudy and his team rely heavily on colleagues who already operate in the market. In one case, they were able to launch in just six months because of these relationships. They got up to speed on legal, regulatory, logistics and customer issues. They heard stories and advice about tax and trade structures, corruption and hiring. "A number of sister companies have made our work possible. Without their collaboration, we wouldn't have been able to do it; I would have blundered into mistakes ... They were tremendously helpful and generous ... I have never had to work less hard to get a good result!"

In contrast, Rudy's push to expand into a different country stalled. The relationships were difficult to establish. The in-country team had no desire to collaborate or share resources. While Rudy personally had a good network and cultural understanding, the rapport did not extend broadly. "The way we set up initially, we put in layers and structures to satisfy them, but we just couldn't get anywhere in the market in spite of the obvious benefits to both sides." Eventually, Rudy renegotiated the contract structure and solved the turf problem by "taking all the headquarters people out of the room. The new team was all local ... Then it was a huge success. Business is growing but it was surprisingly difficult."

Rudy sees an insular mindset as a challenge for his company's international growth. "There is a strong tendency not to look outside. *Not invented here* is a strong force, and we have to find ways of counteracting it." *He has placed a greater emphasis on hiring for collaboration, curiosity and willingness to reach out.* "People have to take ownership of getting what they need from headquarters and from each other." They also need to be self-confident, willing to ask questions and OK to use or adapt an idea from someone else. Rudy is building the context to reward being proactive, curious and collaborative. *"You have to acknowledge and celebrate the fast-follow, the stealing of ideas ... You have to reassure them that they don't need to come up with all the answers themselves."* He encourages international rotations to "open people's eyes to possibilities" and to build needed networks. Short-term exchanges and cross-country meetings are also forums for making connections that may deepen over time.

Another challenge for international growth is people getting “stuck” in the collaborative overload of the matrixed organization. Layers and processes slow things down. “People stop using their judgment; quite simple things don’t get done, because it’s rotating in the network ... You can be in a process but that doesn’t mean anything is happening. Nobody has the ability to make a decision, it’s all stakeholder management.” Without direct authority, people spend enormous amounts of time to coordinate, align and influence others. *“People underestimate the level of leadership skill to run a matrix. It’s unbelievably higher than what it takes to run a command model ... Organizations want the benefits of collaboration but the cost is greater than anybody thinks.”* To break through some of the over-collaboration and gridlock, Rudy develops the “human side” of collaboration, not the “hardware.” He rewards and celebrates positive behaviors, not just a great outcome. He encourages people to use their judgment, take action and “move ahead with partially thought out ideas rather than trying to perfect them ... If you get 80% there, share it with someone else ... It can save a lot of time.”

Rudy also looks to reduce the impact of collaborative overload on individuals. Often, the most connected, valuable contributors are at risk of burnout or leaving the company—even if they are not noticed by top leadership. “I bet out of 100 people, you might have 10 great people who are making things happen, who are saving us every time ... So, who are those unsung heroes? We try to recognize and support them.” In one case, Rudy’s business brought in an employee who was let go during a sister company’s downsizing. “This guy has done amazing stuff, but he’s incredibly quiet and behind the scenes ... The other company found out that nothing worked without him! The director told me, *We really messed that up; we didn’t know how much we needed him until it was too late.*”

Rudy and his leadership team give a lot of flexibility to how, where and when people do their work to keep them engaged and avoid burnout. They want them to find their personal ways of managing the work. “We all have our patterns. I won’t schedule meetings or go on email for the first two hours of the day, for example. We try to encourage people to find their rhythm of work ... If you don’t, you can work very hard at achieving absolutely nothing!”

Network Insights

- **Don’t manage through the hierarchy for global execution.** When connecting across global silos, employ active listening and influence approaches to get engagement.
- **Move people around.** Long-term assignments (two years) and short-term programs (two weeks or even two days) help people get to know potential colleagues in different countries and cultures. Personal connections build trust and networks that smooth work at key points.
- **Ask for ideas, insight and warnings when moving into unfamiliar places.** For international growth, the flow of information cannot get trapped in the matrix or blocked by established perspectives and ways of working.
- **Emphasize thought over process and effort over outcomes.** This builds confidence and appropriate risk taking and reduces over-collaboration.
- **Identify and recognize key contributors.** Unsung heroes and overwhelmed top talent are at risk for burnout and may disengage or leave.

5 Ways to Engage a Global Workforce

Rudy has learned to gain buy-in and contribution from teams across various countries. “We have to be able to convince people ... Anything you force by hierarchy is going to fail ... If you are using enforcement, or authority, you are in trouble.” Here are 5 tactics that work for Rudy:

1. **Lead with questions to gain understanding of others’ motives, aspirations, norms and needs.** Ensure you are applying active listening and not imposing your solutions.
2. **Express appreciation for what others think and, importantly, how they feel.** The more you can get to a solution that they’ve created or collaboratively created the greater the chance of success.
3. **Spend time learning other cultures.** Understand who you are talking to; some cultures will require more relationship-building than others.
4. **Understand others’ political context.** Does your contact or team have a mandate to act? Are there constraints they might not be able to express?
5. **Use richer and more personal means of communication, especially early on.** Email exchanges are inadequate. Face-to-face meetings and spending time in the other culture help you understand the human and cultural components of what you are trying to do.

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.