EXECUTE WORK EFFICIENTLY

Effective Networks Enable Influence & Problem Solving in Front-line Customer Role

CASE CONTEXT

A specialist in a "fix-it" role uses her network for the perspective and support she needs to solve unexpected, high-cost problems and keep customers happy. She has learned to engage people in ways that foster collaboration and create an environment where she thrives.

FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

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.

INNOVATE · EXECUTE · SCALE · THRIVE · ADAPT

Sydney has spent her 13-year career in a range of supply chain roles for a global consumer products company. She's currently a distribution specialist, coordinating among retail customers, sales teams and third-party distribution companies. Her objective is to make sure orders go out on time to customers, which involves problem solving and execution through collaborative networks. When orders go wrong, she is the point person to fix them—often in crisis mode and always by influencing without authority. "It usually starts with a call or email, *Hey, Sydney, we didn't get that order. What's up?* And I go investigate, reaching out to different parties to eliminate possibilities … We are helpless until we can figure out what the problem is." The error can come from anywhere in the supply chain, including the way orders are placed and flow through various IT systems, incorrect forecasting, distribution center processes and even bad weather.

Sydney doesn't have formal authority over any of the groups she interacts with in these situations, so the challenge is to convince others to make her issue a priority. Sometimes, she has built a relationship already; other times, she is reaching out to a new person. She has learned to gain support in several ways. She communicates the importance of the issue in a broad way, not just as her small problem. "Usually, it has direct customer impact and if it doesn't ship, we won't meet some sales goal or it will escalate to a bigger problem." In other instances, she points out what's in it for them, such as the ability to get recognized for the fix or meeting their own goals. If she already has a relationship, reciprocity—knowing we help each other out—is key, but "if I don't know you it's a bit more difficult to do."

Sydney feels a large part of her success comes from building those relationships and by getting to know people personally. Whether over the phone or in person, she likes to connect off-task. "I will know your kid's name and ask how their baseball game went. We'll talk about what we are doing on the weekend." Her demeanor, too, helps her build relationships. "You have to be nice about asking for help or information. *I really need your help on this; you are the expert in this area; let's work through it together*. I'm not going to bark orders at you." She'll use humor—crack a joke, use sarcasm, make fun of herself—to ease the tension and let people know she doesn't take herself too seriously. She also recognizes that she is not the expert and doesn't have all the answers, even though she is responsible for fixing the problem. "I'm perfectly OK to say, *I don't know; I don't understand; I need you to break it down for me*. I ask a lot of questions. I don't like to assume things." In this way, problems—and solutions—get defined collaboratively, and Sydney builds trust needed for ongoing work.

Sydney has seen people do the opposite and undermine collaboration. Rather than using a *pull* approach that creates trust and gives people a desire to contribute, some *push*. "I've seen people come in and they don't take time to meet folks and learn. They may have success but they don't have a good following because people don't want to work for or with them."

Creating a sense of fun at work also boosts the collaboration and engagement Sydney needs to stay motivated and do her job well. "We spend a lot of time at work; for me, it needs to be challenging and fun." She appreciates when her boss and colleagues don't take themselves too seriously and allow each other to be themselves. "It's tiring to act all day long, to be something you are not." Our research shows that people appreciate genuine interaction with each other at work; taking down barriers to authenticity is important to collaborative productivity.

Sydney is currently working with people who are genuine, have each other's back, are willing to take risks and help each other pick up the pieces when things don't go well. She feels supported by her peers and a close friend who works in another part of the business. "He will be honest with me. If I've been thinking about something, I might run it by him and get a little guidance or validation." Given the fix-it nature of her job, she tends to focus on the negatives and put too much pressure on herself. Her support system, including her current boss, helps her see the many things that she does well. "You get really lucky when this person is your boss!"

Sydney also relies on a range of other people who serve different roles for her:

- **Creative ties**. People across functions and groups help her brainstorm new processes or solve problems in innovative ways.

- **Best practice ties**. People in similar roles, both internally and in other companies, help her stay abreast of new ideas and ways to do her work.

- **Career ties**. People who will give her feedback on current performance—peers, her boss, stakeholders—as well as mentors and advocates who help her develop new capabilities required as her role evolves.

- **Political landscape ties**. People who can give her the lay of the land in a group—who is influential; what do people care about; who is friendly?

Network Insights

- **Influence without authority in 3 ways.** Communicate the broad importance of the issue, not just the specific ask. Help people see the benefit to them. Reciprocate willingly when others need help.

- **Connect personally.** Get to know people apart from their work roles: learn about their interests and families. Be genuine and transparent yourself. Create an environment of "we are all in this together."

- **Rely on supporters and truth tellers for feedback.** People who know you well—peers, friends and, if you are lucky, your boss—can give you needed input, validation, pushback, encouragement and reality checks.

- **Build connections that provide four types of support.** Performance over time requires networks that include ties for innovation and creativity, depth and best practices, professional development and political understanding.

Creating a Context to Thrive in a Tough Role

Sydney's work is time sensitive, urgent to the company's success and requires input and actions from people in multiple parts of the business. To thrive, she shapes her context in ways that mesh with her values.

1. When work gets too focused on the day-to-day, Sydney regains energy through big-picture goals or future-focused collaborations. "It's fun to think about what could be, what is possible, to contribute in a bigger way … It keeps my head on straight when things go wrong."

2. Creating a positive environment where people recognize each other for their work is important to Sydney. "We are more likely to want to come to work and do a good job when we are recognized, even in a small way. Just a *thank you* lets you know that somebody noticed and your efforts are not falling by the wayside."

3. Sydney flexes her schedule and personal commitments to manage high-demand work cycles. "I am married with no kids; my husband and I have the understanding that it's sometimes crazy for either of us and we can be flexible."

4. Sydney commits to dinner with extended family one night a week and spends every Saturday helping in a family business. "It uses another part of my brain. I get fully absorbed; I don't think about my job." The commitment is also an emotional one. "It's connected to my family's legacy, so I'm all in … Work can't always be the most important thing."

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.