



PRODUCE
INNOVATIVE
SOLUTIONS

Collaborative Practices Promote Innovation in a Demanding Industry

CASE CONTEXT

A high-energy innovator joins a global company in a fast-paced, competitive industry. She quickly builds an internal network across businesses and geographies to gain support and uptake of new ideas.



FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: HIGH-
TECHNOLOGY

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.



Anja is just over two years into a job that is all about change and innovation. A native of the Netherlands, she moved to the U.S. when she sold the start-up she co-founded. She was hired into the innovation unit of a global company and is part of a team focused on how people collaborate and the implications for technology.

Early in her transition to a new job, new company and new country, Anja realized she needed to build her internal network quickly. The innovation team came up with a “cool idea” that would use artificial intelligence to help people be more efficient at work, but the project would go nowhere in isolation. “We are not tied to any business units, so it’s difficult to build and leverage an internal network ... *You can’t be your own island if you want to drive innovation forward. That’s why a lot of stuff fails, because we fail to socialize it with the broader organization.*”

Anja insisted that she needed to go to an internal company conference, making the case that it was essential for the work even though there was no travel budget. “It would give me valuable chances to socialize with people who would be able to help with this project.” She was able to give a talk about the idea, present a prototype and get to know people. “The best way to make a personal connection was to have a drink or go to dinner ... With some people, I was able to put the prototype in their hands; it was something tangible and they could test it out.” The social connections opened the door for Anja to help with other projects and teams and created context for them to help her in return. “The only reason that we’ve been able to pull this product off is that I went to that conference ... I have learned I am not able to bring my projects forward if I don’t take time to have face-to-face interactions and get to know people.”

Through these interactions, Anja established a baseline of trust with an influential network. *The genuine socializing built “benevolence-based trust” (trust that you have others’ interests in mind, not just your own), while showcasing the prototype built “competence-based trust” (trust that you know what you are talking about).* “It created a sense of trust in what we can do ... I am not just talk.” Our research over decades shows both of these forms of trust are very important.

Just as important was Anja’s authenticity. She believes in being “transparent, open and genuine and not wearing a fake, corporate mask.” She is not afraid to laugh at herself or say silly things. She will easily share something personal or be vulnerable with others. “It’s a big productivity killer to not feel authentic ... People who can’t bring their whole person to work don’t reach out; they don’t feel safe; they hold back.”

Effective collaboration—especially for innovation—builds on that openness and authenticity on Anja’s team. The team culture is one where people are comfortable working together, being vulnerable and willing to take risks. She never hesitates to ask for help or give someone feedback on their project. *“If we all keep to ourselves or don’t want to show what we are working on until it is 100% done, then we are never creating great innovation ... If you feel like you are stupid or it is not safe to speak your mind, it creates a culture where people don’t ask for help or offer help.”*

Anja also knows when to pull back from interactions and collaboration to create time and space to think. “When I have a week of back-to-back meetings, you can be sure there is not one creative thought that flows through my head!” She sets aside large blocks of time that aren’t dedicated to any specific work, knowing she’s in an environment where “it is OK to take two hours to have coffee and sit on the rooftop terrace to think.”

From Anja’s view, her approach has been effective. The new technology has launched internally, with mechanisms in place to “seek feedback to refine it and explore the ways it can be used. We have been working with teams and showing people how to use it and get them to try different things.” The project is expected to launch to customers next year.

Network Insights

- **Don’t develop in isolation.** Engage key opinion leaders and experts in the idea development phase. They bring needed information and insight to the project. Later, as ambassadors for a new program or strategy, they provide legitimacy and boost adoption.
- **Iterate with stakeholders in the prototyping phase to refine content—and build trust.** Seek feedback from different audiences—leadership groups, stakeholders, end users—at multiple points in development. Respond and refine accordingly.
- **Be authentic—avoid putting on a corporate mask.** When you show who you really are, others open up, too. Don’t be afraid to laugh, be silly or self-deprecating or show vulnerability.
- **Create a safe context for the team to freely explore the problem space and suggest alternatives.** Have the courage to put yourself and your ideas out there, ask for and give help—but also give yourself space to think and work alone.

Thrive in Demanding Roles with Purposeful Collaborative Practices

Anja, a high-performer who holds a demanding, multinational role, has learned how to build internal and external networks to help her thrive.

1. **Build ties with people who help you feel like you matter.** Pursue projects and interactions with leaders who recognize and appreciate the work of their teams. Create habits so everyone can be heard, such as giving each team member two minutes during weekly meetings to share what they are doing and what they are excited about. Help each other seek the connection between individual work and the larger purpose. “When I feel like my ideas are valued and welcomed, that is when I am the most productive ... As soon as we don’t feel connected to the goal or purpose of the larger business unit, the team becomes unproductive.”
2. **Learn and understand each other’s values.** You may have commonalities and differences of work-related values—such as learning something new or working well with others—as well as life values. When values are not shared, strive to understand why people hold the values they do. “I worked with a team where we shared almost no life values, but I knew where they were coming from ... We worked really effectively together ... If I know *who* you are, we can work effectively.”
3. **Laugh together.** Being able to laugh at yourself and be self-deprecating can put others at ease, remove status and open the door for people to engage and contribute. In teams, finding fun in what makes the group unique can also go a long way. “Building a team culture is so crucial. Teams need to feel like they are different. What makes them great? ... Our team likes things that are fun and challenging. We try crazy things that fail and taking those risks is OK ... Humor is really important to us. We make fun of ourselves.”
4. **Join activities and build relationships outside of work.** This gives you different perspectives and helps you avoid being uni-dimensional. “I purposefully meet people who are nurses or educators or who work in restaurants—non-technical people ... Listening to people who are completely different from yourself is important to build great things and have great thoughts ... Those activities give me room to breathe and new perspectives, then I go back and focus on my work. If I didn’t have people in my life outside of work, I wouldn’t be effective in my job.”

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.