



PRODUCE  
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# Collaborative Practices Spur Reactive & Proactive Innovation in a Global Manufacturing Organization

## CASE CONTEXT

A senior leader spends his entire career working in various divisions and locations of a global pharmaceutical company. Now, as a leader of a highly technical function, he has built a culture of innovation through collaboration to ensure quality and drive the business.



MALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

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.



Alec leads a technical group of scientists and chemical engineers in locations across APAC, Europe, LATAM and

North America, working within internal manufacturing sites and external suppliers, partners and experts. His global team supports operations that provide \$30 billion in revenue in an industry where problems are costly and potentially dangerous. To do this, Alec has created a context where networked innovation can emerge: both reactively to solve problems quickly and proactively to address problems before they emerge.

The collaboration needed to respond to problems within the manufacturing process must happen quickly, drawing on extensive expertise throughout the global system. For example, if the quality and inspections process detects “extraneous matter” in a product, operations immediately shut down. Alec’s group is charged with identifying the material, tracing it back to its source and determining the fix. “To learn where this comes from, we need collaboration across expertise and at every level. We rely on our technical centers, our labs. We work all the way through the supply chain, from the end product all the way back to the ingredients. We talk to experts who understand the equipment and every process. We talk to suppliers ... Speed is of the essence. We have to bring the right people together very quickly to know what has happened and to solve it.”

For Alec, this level of fast-paced, reactive innovation begins with clear goals. “The goal of this team is very clear: to ensure we have quality products and make sure we can get to that in a timely manner, so we get back up and running.” With that clarity, the team pushes to get to the root cause of a problem. A detailed playbook for tracking and analysis establishes rigor. A “virtual technical network” is the hub to ensure all the expertise in the network is leveraged for knowledge, perspective and innovation. This network, created several years ago, allows experts from every location or specialty to contribute or be tapped for their expertise.

Alec has long held the principle, *Before you solve the problem, ask*—and the virtual network makes that process much easier and more effective. “I tell people and my managers also tell people, *Ask if it has been solved before. Use the network. Reach out.*”

“At first, people were afraid to use it, to ask questions. They thought, *Shouldn’t I know this? Will I look stupid if I ask?* It has been a big culture shift and now people are really comfortable putting themselves out there, going outside of organizational boundaries and leveraging expertise no matter where it exists.”

The “never-solve-a-problem-twice,” collaborative culture was fueled by several factors. Senior sponsorship made it a priority (especially when a top leader put his profile into the virtual network and asked others if they had done so). Success stories were communicated when someone asked for help and a problem was solved quickly, or in a way that wouldn’t have been considered. Learning by doing brought people in a step at a time. “People who felt unsafe initially, saw others taking the risk, then gradually they made it part of how they work.” Now, the collaborative, network approach is embedded in the flow of the work. It’s not a separate initiative. “People used to say, *I don’t have time to go on the network*. I would say, *This is the new way of working. If you are not working this way, you are not going where we are going in the future.*”

The network mindset is also key to addressing issues before they emerge. “It’s hard to find the time for the proactive stuff. Firefighting comes first.” But after a series of problems a few years ago, the energy shifted to getting ahead of challenges. Alec’s group began an effort to make holistic assessments of risk throughout the manufacturing process and supply chain. A major project involved extensive collaboration to gain deep understanding and give end-to-end visibility of the processes tied to each product. Then, the robustness of each process was assessed, issues prioritized and proactive steps taken to address them. The success of the project was tied to designating people to be accountable for proactive improvement and connecting those people to key players for idea sharing and problem-solving. Goals and progress are tracked with a dashboard, so the work remains front-and-center.

Collaboration and contribution to network-wide priorities are now expectations for everyone. Employees are given feedback in formal performance reviews, though regular conversations with a manager and via 360-degree surveys from peers and teams on their collaboration behaviors such as sharing expertise, reaching out to others and working well on a team. Employees set objectives around how they contribute, not just outputs. “It used to be OK for an expert to just do their work. But now they are evaluated on collaboration.” The hiring process, too, looks at collaboration, including asking questions about how a person goes about problem solving: on their own or working through others.

Finally, two practices stand out for Alec to create a shared sense of purpose. One, starting many meetings with a “customer moment” to share a story or letter from a patient about how a treatment changed their life. “It’s extremely motivating. We point out, *This is why we come to work, why we do what we do.*” The second is holding deeper conversations in one-on-one meetings with direct reports every few weeks. Ongoing conversations about key questions [below] help him align tasks with people and get engagement from employees with different capabilities and aspirations.

### Key Questions Leaders Can Use in 1:1s to Build Awareness of Expertise, Capacity & Aspirations

- What is the one thing you need most from me?
- What other things do you need and expect from me?
- What is the best way I can show my support for you?
- As I coach you, what can I realistically expect of you?
- What are your top three motivators?
- What are your three primary triggers or “hot buttons”?
- What do you enjoy most in your current role?
- What other types of assignments or experiences would be of interest to you?
- What about your work motivates you the most?
- When you achieve goals, how do you like to be recognized?
- Tell me about the best recognition you have ever received
- When you are successful, whom do you want to know it? (Both within and outside of the organization.)
- Is there a particular skill you would like to acquire? What is the best way for you to acquire it?
- Are there learning opportunities I could assist you with?
- What talents do you have that you feel we are fully utilizing? Which of your talents are we not fully leveraging?
- How do you feel about your ability to pursue interests outside of work? What could help you better manage the various priorities and interests in your life?
- To what extent does your work environment allow you to bring the best of your abilities to your work? What would help you to perform at your best?
- Are there specific people from whom you would like to learn?
- What would you like me to start doing, avoid doing or continue to do to be a better coach for you?

### 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](http://www.connectedcommons.com) or email Rob at [rlcrossjr@gmail.com](mailto:rlcrossjr@gmail.com).