



PRODUCE  
INNOVATIVE  
SOLUTIONS

# Applying Innovation to New Settings by Prototyping with Trusted Client Partners

## CASE CONTEXT

A regional manager is a key connector of ideas and people, allowing innovation to morph and be applied in new contexts. She relies on her trusted network to determine high-value projects and investments—and to find the best collaborators.



FEMALE

Level: MANAGER OF  
MANAGERS

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.



Ami works in a field where innovation in one space has potential application to other clients, projects or places.

Her core work and teams are based in the Asia/Pacific, but the company's reach—and innovative services and technologies—extends worldwide. Ami's role is often one of connector—identifying the most promising innovations anywhere in the system and finding ways to refine or extend how they are used. “Everyday life for us is about innovation. How do we leverage knowledge or solutions from one place to another? From one client to another? And, how quickly do we do it?”

Ami and her team of managers routinely flag two or three capabilities that have been developed as part of their project reviews. “If we have made a big investment that has been successful, we want to intentionally move that IP as quickly as we can.” Ami then turns to her network and her team's networks to find an ideal client to prototype or test the innovation in another context. “These are things a client has not thought about—they are not asking for—so we rely on our client account managers to introduce it, talk about the benefits and suggest a trial run or an experimental project.”

The key to introducing innovation quickly and gaining broad adoption is trust. Long-term, trusted clients are the first to be offered the new solution or technology, due to the deep understanding of the client's needs and business. For example, one account manager working in North America was told about a new sensor that had been used in a major infrastructure project in Australia. He knew one of his clients so well that he immediately understood how it could be applied in a very different context. “There was such a level of trust in the relationships, the client would be willing to trial just about any innovation that he recommended ... It's not a sales pitch or a superficial level of conversation.”

With that project—and many others—the work is to clearly align the value proposition with the trusted client. “What is the best innovation that we have that could change how the client works? How would it add value?” Once that connection is made, a prototype or demonstration project is established. “We quickly go to proof of concept, this is what we can do for you, these are the benefits if fully scaled and implemented.” As the innovation gets traction in a few places and projects, it becomes folded into the normal course of business. “That's what this is all about. It goes from a new thing to a normal part of business. Then there is a new wave of innovation. We are always creating and innovating and proactively pushing it out into our client network.”

Ami is in a position to know about the ideas and innovations cutting across the business and often plays a deciding role as to which projects and investments her group pursues. She is also influential in persuading other groups and client account managers to take on shared project or bring an innovation to a client. Whether she is the one reaching out or the person on the receiving end of a proposal, Ami factors in three things: the logic or data behind the idea, the credibility of the person or team, and the focus beyond individual self-interest. “Is this a logical concept? Are the people credible? And, I have learned to listen for whether someone is genuinely interested in the work or doing it for the greater good—or just looking to see what they can personally gain from it ... I rely a lot on my network to learn about others, and carry my own reputation as well ... Never underestimate the importance of the network for carrying trust.”

Ami is also attuned to the value of the network to align resources with a possible project that extends beyond an individual’s or a single group’s ability to deliver. People anywhere in the network may see an opportunity. It may be tangential to their work or a project where they need additional expertise or support. People who do this well have an idea of what is possible and then figure out how to leverage others. “It’s like pulling different spools of thread together. They reach in to the organization, toss out the opportunity and say, *Look, we can do this, but we need A, B, C and D.* They delegate fast, because they know it’s not their thing. But if they find a group of people who can move with it, then there’s some energy created and it takes on a life of its own.”

A good collaborator in Ami’s network might not stay involved in the project, or end up with a small part of the work. “There’s definitely a different element about the best collaborators. It’s not about them ... The people with initiative have a passion that people recognize. It may be excitement for the work they do or the way they engage with others ... They have the ability to harness energy from a group of people or get others to pay attention to what they’re saying ... I can think of people with three years’ experience and thirty years’ experience that do collaboration really well. Neither have direct authority, but they both have a passion for life, a passion for what they do and real sense of purpose.”

## Network Insights

- **Cross-boundary networks produce innovative solutions.** Non-insular networks (across client accounts, geography and industry) promote the ability to frame and solve problems broadly and to envision unique opportunities.
- **Trust and reputation within a network fuel engagement of colleagues, clients and partners.** Discretion, consistency, building a shared vision and skillful collaboration are among the important elements for building trust.
- **The ability to generate enthusiasm in the network is one of the most important characteristics of a high performer.** Our research shows that the ability to create energy is four times the predictor of a high performer as any other network dimensions. It is also tightly tied to how innovations emerge and take hold.

## Building Trust to Innovate & Scale Work

In many organizations, informal networks are the primary means for innovation or adoption of larger-scale efforts. Two forms of interpersonal trust enable effective knowledge creation and sharing in network:

1. Competence-based trust is another person believing you can do what you say. They trust that you know what you are capable of and able to live up to that.
2. Benevolence-based trust is another person believing you will not harm them, if given the opportunity. They trust that you have their interests in mind and are invested in things that go beyond your personal self-interest.

Once people are aware of your expertise, trust is what matters most for determining how they will engage with 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).