PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Network Influencers Shape & Support New Initiative

CASE CONTEXT

Given a directive by the company president, a savvy manager draws on an influential network to help her develop and launch a new approach to hiring. By creating a process to bring together respected experts, she receives valuable ideas early on and gains credibility for implementation.

FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL LEADER

Industry: 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.

INNOVATE   EXECUTE   SCALE   THRIVE   ADAPT

Carrie was on point as a HR business partner during a quarterly review meeting. The topic turned to the need to

refine the way the company identifies the right talent needed to meet ambitious growth projections. "The president of the company started whiteboarding ideas. Then he looked at me and said, *I want you to think about this and put something in place*. That started a six-month project that was high-profile, high-impact and completely unscripted."

Carrie partnered with a colleague in training and development to create an innovative approach to hiring and on-boarding. They decided the best way to hire for success was to understand what their best people do and hire to those skills and behaviors. "We put together a list of 12 of our best people in a large, key function. They were also people who had been here for awhile and knew our culture, our style, our way of working. They would be passionate about what we were trying to do. It was important to choose people who would have the credibility and power to carry the message through from beginning of project through to implementation."

The group was invited to a day-long workshop. Each person was asked think about the attributes, skills and behaviors that make them successful and write them down on sticky notes. The hundreds of notes were posted to the wall; then everyone grouped them into themes. As people told stories and gave examples, the facilitators captured very clear, specific behaviors that added up to six different competencies. "We created the forum and the process, but the competencies really came from the experts, the people who are respected by their peers."

Carrie, along with one of the workshop participants, presented the framework to the senior leadership. They asked and answered questions. They refined and made changes, including condensing the competencies to five and listing key behaviors for each. Keeping the original team in the loop and contributing along the way, Carrie gained agreement on the talent profile for new hires in the function.

The next step was execution. "We couldn't just say, *here's the profile, go do it*. For this to take hold, we had to teach people how to interview properly, with specificity to be sure candidates are assessed on all the competencies." They created a one-day course, with input from the core team as well as the recruiting group and leadership. They gained feedback

from the target audience through a pilot run of the course. Confident in the content, Carrie and her colleague hit the road, certifying 180 people in the new approach in just three months.

Even with the clear charge from top leadership, hiring managers and directors did not immediately commit to the new competencies and hiring approach. Again, the influential experts were key. "We used them as ambassadors. We were very open and clear in our training sessions that we used a dozen of your peers to design this program … Many times, one of them was in the room, and we would have them stand up and talk about their experience with the process."

A creative approach and the network of influencers resulted in enthusiasm and wide adoption of the new interviewing and selection process. "The wild success of this program had everything to do with word of mouth. After people experienced the training, the buzz began—glowing feedback, positive emails, talk in the field. And then when people actually used it in the hiring process, they would tell their stories—*Let me tell you what happened in my interview! Prior to this I would have never picked up on that. I would have absolutely hired the wrong person*."

Early results of the effort include:

- The interview process is more efficient, both in terms of how much time is spent interviewing candidates and the ability to narrow down the candidate pool more quickly and confidently.

- Retention improved by 14% overall and with most change among hires less than a year with the company, indicating a better selection process.

- Recently hired candidates have been effective. The company has seen a 40% increase in revenue, which is partially attributed to stronger talent in key client development roles.

The rest of the company is now replicating the process for talent selection. Profile workshops with trusted experts, ongoing input from opinion leaders and a substantive training class are now the accepted and expected way to prepare hiring teams to identify the right talent for the right job.

Network Insights

- **Don't develop in isolation.** Engage experts and key opinion leaders in networks in the idea development phase. They bring needed information and insight to the project.

- **Factor in respect and credibility.** The development and ideation network also becomes the implementation network. As ambassadors for a new program, process or strategy, they provide legitimacy and substance to what could be viewed as a pet project or a waste of time.

- **Expand the network during development.** Seek feedback from different audiences—leadership groups, end users, stakeholders—at multiple points in development. Respond and refine accordingly. Don't wait until deployment to hear concerns and perspectives.

- **Leverage stories and testimonials to build momentum and uptake for the initiative.** Give visibility to the influencers who were involved at the beginning and those who become enthused along the way. Invite them to speak in person at meetings, training and events; use routine communication tools; encourage them to spread the word.

Utilize Formal Influence Sparingly

The successful creation and adoption of Carrie's project hinged on knowing the network influencers and then engaging them for both expertise in development and legitimacy during implementation.

Formal influence was used sparingly. The formal leadership structure added support in two ways:

1. **The leadership edict was critical in setting the tone and communicating the importance of the initiative**. There was "no wishy-washy, it's your choice or not" messaging, which made it clear that it was worth taking a day away for training. Once in the training, the content and the informal network took over.

2. **A well-placed word from a formal leader was needed to nudge pockets of the organization (or select individuals).** "In a few locations, there was hesitation and people would make comments like, *Do we really have to do this? Do I really need to take a day out of the field?* I would ask a local leader (in one case, a senior leader) to explain how important this is and why this person needs to be on board."

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.