



PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Outsider Makes Connections for Innovation

CASE CONTEXT

New to the role, a senior leader brings an outsider's perspective and a new network to an insular group. The goal: find a solution to an expensive, inefficient and painful process. Along the way, he builds network know-how within his group.



MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

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.



When Charles moved to a different division of the company, he was a clear outsider. He was the only senior

leader who had not grown up in the business, working with the same people and product line for years. This group tended to be insular in how they solved problems and always drew on their shared experiences and perspectives. They would talk to the same people about the same problems, solving them in the same ways. "When I came in, it forced a different perspective and new kinds of collaboration to solve problems. I started to connect people inside our group with people on the outside."

One specific process was expensive, inefficient and put too many demands on employees. "I had a business problem, a unit cost problem, and a labor problem. It took too long to do the work and the work was too complicated because of the way that we do it, which created a work-life balance problem for my people. It affected their job satisfaction. I didn't want to wait a year or two years to fix this. To give my team some relief, I needed to do this as quickly as possible."

Charles' natural inclination to reach out, learn and apply old knowledge in new ways was the starting point for a solution. Unlike his current peers and team, Charles purposefully took on different roles and assignments, growing his skills and building his network over many years. "It's just in my DNA. My entire career has been spent trying to learn different perspectives and about different products, in different operations ... I found that there are always past learnings you can apply in a slightly different way to solve a current business problem. Everything is not so specific or unique that it is not transferrable. And, as I bring forward learnings to a new situation, I try to bring with me the connections from one group to the next."

"The approach I took with my team was, *we know what our business challenges are but there are lots of people around this company that have different ways of solving these problems.*"

Because of his relationships—his diverse network—Charles had an image of what could be done. He was aware of a business team that had some specific technology skills. He didn't know anyone in the team directly, but he knew people who could be a bridge into the group. Another group, former colleagues, had valuable process expertise—the ability to visualize how things connect. "Having the automation is one thing, but out of context the process is going to fall apart. I needed both."



“I started calling people and said, *Here’s my problem; here’s where I am trying to go. I don’t know if the outcome will be there, but I’d like to collaborate.*”

Charles’ vision was compelling and several key outsiders joined the insular group to create a new project team. The first meeting was a virtual event, facilitated by Charles to build energy and foster relationships that would allow for idea sharing, risk taking and, hopefully, an innovative solution. Avoiding an emailed statement of work or pre-packaged directive, he talked about his vision and why everyone on the team was needed to contribute their perspective, talent and expertise. He let them know he didn’t have the answers himself. The WebEx meeting was interactive, with screen sharing and back-and-forth. “I wanted people to see, touch, interact and hear... feel the passion and energy and excitement.”

Then, Charles got out of the way. “I turned the relationship over and said *OK, now you guys go. I don’t want you to have to go through me to get to each other.* I wanted them to collaborate, to build those relationships and continue to do that moving forward.”

The outcomes of this cross-boundary network coming together were impressive:

- A solution with a \$13,000 price tag in just a few months—instead of the previous solution that was offered for \$1.3 million and would take a couple of years to implement.
- The simplified process saved time and reduced employee frustration—a significant win in an environment of overload and stress.
- The process and the solution established Charles as an effective leader and one who cares about both the business and the people.
- The experience of collaborating with people who have diverse skills showed the value of being less insular to his team and helped them expand personal and team networks.

Network Insights

- **Create mechanisms to force boundary spanning collaboration.** Insularity in team or individual networks can keep people from seeing novel solutions.
- **Extend personal passion for leveraging connections.** Charles tells his teams: *The more collaboration you have and the more differing viewpoints you have, the more robust conversation you are going to have to come up with a solution and make decisions.*
- **Create an environment that enables people to add their expertise.** Whether virtual or face-to-face, broadly state the problem, create a risk-free context for people to explore ideas (make fun of yourself, be self-deprecating) and give people affirmation along the way.
- **When working across silos, get the group started and then step back.** This prevents you from being a bottleneck. It is also critical for the team to feel ownership and get invested in a solution.
- **Be willing to take a personal risk.** To benefit from boundary spanning ties, you need to be able to say, *I do not know the answer... but I think there might be a solution here if we integrate what we know.*

Regain Purpose with the Right Interactions

People often hit a point in their working lives where they feel little to no sense of purpose in their work. Maybe their bosses micromanage, their colleagues’ values conflict or their company culture grows toxic. Morale suffers and they begin to “mail it in.” This happened to Charles in a previous role when it evolved away from the one he had accepted.

The right interactions—and avoiding the wrong ones—can make a lasting difference:

1. Seek out colleagues who value similar aspects of work (e.g., creativity, helping clients, etc.) and set up interactions with them.
2. Look for opportunities to give to others (e.g., mentoring or other forms of help)—giving in this way often increases sense of purpose.
3. Find people outside your work life who can help you derive purpose and look at your work differently (e.g., volunteer groups, family, etc.).
4. Reduce interactions with people who drain 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 or email Rob at rlcrossjr@gmail.com.