PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

An Individual Contributor Engages a Broad, Diverse Network in Ideation for Innovative Solutions

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced team player knows that collaboration and ability to leverage the network is key to driving innovation. She uses her network to find best practices, get input from diverse people and engage people in implementing innovative solutions at retail locations worldwide.

FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: RETAIL

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

For 17 years, Deandra has worked in customer-focused roles: retail management, online shopping and customer-service

systems and, most recently, customer experience mapping for a leading global company. She's worked on-site in retail stores worldwide to understand the sales and service processes as well as the actions, perceptions and emotions of customers. Her role has placed her at the heart of innovation at the company for years. For Deandra, engaging with a broad, diverse network is part of daily life—and key to her success. "I am rarely at my desk or by myself … 90% of my work is collaborative, across different teams, across regions, across levels of leadership."

Deandra's team looks at every aspect of the customer experience and seeks ways to solve problems, improve the process or delight the customer. Solutions may involve small details or notable changes to processes, technologies or stores. To understand any problem, Deandra's team gathers data from customers and staff, visits locations to observe and looks outside the company for related problems and solutions. "Brainstorming is a combination of going out into stores as a group, to watch and experience and bounce ideas off each other … We'll go to super-crowded stores like in Hong Kong and many smaller places to understand the varying customer experience … In the early stage of understanding a problem and ideation, we talk to our network and look at tangential technologies or solutions from wherever people are having a good customer experience."

An important element to the work involves gathering stories to understand the emotional experience of customers. "Are customers frustrated? Happy? Relaxed? Anxious? What is the emotional journey of people as they shop or interact with us?" Knowing those human details—not just quantitative metrics—is critical to framing the problem and finding a solution. A compelling narrative is also valuable for engaging people in the work and gaining approval and resources from leadership. "We use those stories in selling or pitching the idea later … They help people understand what we are trying to do."

One innovation Deandra and her colleagues worked on emerged from deep understanding of customer frustrations tied to how easily they could access service or assistance. They looked into ways other companies approached the problem: restaurants, hotels, airports, service providers. "We did a fair amount of looking outside … We learned by looking at different industries; what can we take from each?" The major innovation came from the experience of a manager in Deandra's distant network.

"She said, *Oh, I had this great experience!* So, we looked into that … What was a chance interaction for her led to a new idea and resource for us." The idea came from a completely different sector—a government agency. By being open to input and engaging their personal network, Deandra's team got lucky. The odds of having this kind of discovery or idea land in the right place are increased the more teams are transparent about their projects and interests.

The way people frame their interactions and requests also impacts the likelihood of generating novel ideas. Often Deandra is looking for 30 minutes of time, just to run a problem or idea by someone with a different perspective or expertise. "I'll frame the request as, *Here is a problem we are trying to solve. What do you think? Are there different ways you might solve it?* That opens it up a little more than saying, *Hey, I need this.*" When she hopes to bring in someone as a bigger contributor, she knows their time is valuable. She frames her requests in a way that is motivating and shows mutual benefit. "At the very beginning, people are pretty open to ideate. Later, you have to identify who has vested interest and how they can share in the benefits if you ask for a more significant chunk of their time."

When Deandra was ready to proceed, her team agreed on core elements. They created a simple prototype to help explain the idea back into their network. Having a tangible item to show led her to find out about an internal prototyping team. "It was exciting but it was also frustrating, because we had to wait for them to go through same process we did … We let them do their thing … Some of the ideas we really liked, and I was willing to go for and pitch again. Others, I knew we would never get buy-in." Staying open to ideas at this stage, rather than sticking with the first solution resulted in a stronger outcome.

What followed was formal approval for a pilot run, then progressive roll-out of a solution, making small adjustments along the way. The implementation was relatively straightforward, due to the in-depth framing of the problem and drawing on the input of users and stakeholders during ideation. "Right away, people said, *Oh, it makes sense for us to do this, it's the right thing to do.* And, the data was good. At different levels, we saw our work as having a positive impact on the customer experience and employees as well."

Network Insights

- **Use your network to find best practices within your organization and outside to other industries.** Innovation efforts are sub-optimized by not looking to adjacent expertise to define the problem space and generate ideas.
- **Cultivate input from unexpected places.** Increase your chance of serendipitous discoveries by creating transparency around goals and opportunities for co-creation.
- **Get others involved by asking for ideas or suggestions and highlighting mutual benefit.** You will be more successful in getting creative ideas or engagement than if you simply ask for information or resources.
- **Create an early prototype to generate additional options and gain interest**. Talking to something tangible spurs people to see other uses, ideas or people to involve. And, you can make changes before you lock-in to a solution.

Collaborative Practices that Help & Hurt Innovation

Ten years of bringing new solutions to life in a highly demanding and fast-paced industry has given Deandra a good take on **ways collaboration fuels innovation …**

1. *Enroll people who have time, interest and permission to work on a project.* "You don't want people to have a million other things on their plate. When they can't come to meetings or engage in the work, it kills the vibe."

2. *Focus on similarity of values, not similarity of expertise.* "Do people share similar principles of how they work on innovation? What guides the process, what matters?"

3. *Work with people you don't regularly work with.* "Tap into different experience and people who see the work from a different perspective."

… and collaborative practices that doom a project:

1. *Not having a good story of why what you are working on is important.* "If you can't get people bought in—people working on project or people at the leadership level—you lose steam."

2. *Developing idea in isolation.* "For collaboration and contribution, you can't just talk about your idea in a group and want them to say yes. You have to seed it with others first and let them contribute and feel ownership."

3. *Skipping process basics like meeting management, facilitation and accountability.* "Pay attention to how the group works together, housekeeping things. It sounds simple but a lot of groups don't do that well."

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.