



PRODUCE  
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# Connecting Leadership Networks on Principles of Trust & Transparency

## CASE CONTEXT

An HR professional brokered innovation by adapting what one leader had done with a small team to a broad group of 300. By taking a risk and engaging her network for ideas and support, she made a powerful contribution to the firm's leadership culture.



FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL  
CONTRIBUTOR

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.



Denise has held a series of HR support and project roles, ranging from compensation and benefits to recruiting and

performance management. Currently, she is part of the learning and development group for a consulting and services company. A few years ago, she was asked to plan the company's annual meeting of 300 top leaders from across the country. Rather than replicating the standard series of formal presentations that had been the norm, Denise wanted to find a way to use the meeting to create and strengthen the leadership network.

The group of senior leaders operated within their own regions or segments and most did not know each other. During these large meetings, people typically gravitated to the people they already knew. Collectively, these executive vice presidents, vice presidents and directors were responsible for meeting business goals, and yet had little transparency into each other's work and processes. Top leadership had been talking about building greater trust and transparency in the culture, and Denise knew she had support from her boss to bring new ideas to table. She began to explore how to change the annual meeting in a way that was innovative, practical and would promote more collaboration and openness among the leaders.

Her work resulted in an activity that changed and challenged the expectations of what could be accomplished—both in a single meeting and through the top 300 over time. The session focused on performance—literally posting each person's objectives on walls and boards in a giant conference center. They were grouped by process or specialty, not by region, to provide focus and shared understanding among people doing related work. Everyone was given stickers when they entered the room—green, yellow and red dots with their names on them. They were asked to walk around the display of objectives; when they had insight or interest in one, they were to attach a sticker. Green was affirmation that the project or work tied to the objective was going well; yellow was caution: *I have a question for you or information that may affect you*. Red indicated trouble or conflict; leaders should have a meeting with the person whose name was on it: *Why do you think it is red, what do you know?* There was a lot of interaction—and insights gained by both giver and receiver of feedback.

Looking back, Denise sees that the idea for the session emerged from her place as a broker in the network. She was comfortable asking questions and engaging different people when she had a project or problem. "We had the goal to understand our performance objectives and to be more transparent. I wanted to do something different to make that happen."

Denise learned of an activity one leader had done with a small group to partner people to get feedback on objectives. Denise wondered, *“What if we did it on a bigger scale?”* Like many brokers, she saw new uses for ideas or new combinations of things that had been done in the past. She pitched the outlines of the idea to her boss and to the vice president of HR. She worked with an in-house instructional designer to build on it.

As the idea was developing, Denise also relied on her network to bring in ideas and support from administrative, IT and facilities staff. In addition to the usual planning needs for a meeting of 300 people, Denise needed creativity and buy-in from these teams to help her think it through and make it happen. *“I wasn’t afraid to say, I don’t know how to do this. I was comfortable with them being the experts. I was OK to say, I may be in over my head ... How can I make this work? Give me some ideas.”*

Denise also began to prepare the leaders for a different kind of meeting. She worked closely with her manager, who understood the value of taking the innovative approach but knew that not everyone would be comfortable with the change. *“Once we decided this was the way to go, we began to let people know what to expect. They were not blindsided.”* The head of HR sent out a high-level message about the process, that there was going to be transparency and conversation about the work, not personal judgments. *“He acknowledged this would be out of their comfort zone, but that it was an exercise that will help all of us be successful this year—and he reiterated that the day of the meeting.”* Denise had gained full support from several top leaders in advance, who were willing to set the tone, go first and model the process and behavior for the rest of the group.

The meeting was a tangible shift for how leadership group engaged each other—that day and moving forward. It was a visible and high-risk endeavor to create transparency, awareness and trust in the top layers of the organizations leadership network—something that would not have happened if Denise had not taken a risk, explored possibilities and relied on her network for ideas, implementation and support. The same process continues to be used to review performance objectives on a large scale.

## Network Insights

- **Innovation can come as a product of re-imagining new uses for past solutions or ideas.**
- **Leverage informal networks in the design phase of a high-risk endeavor by asking a lot of questions and offering status to others.**
- **Getting formal leaders and network influencers to take first steps creates a contagion effect that brings others along.**
- **Focus on building awareness of expertise, authentic communication and trust—once the majority experience the positive aspects of taking a risk, it will trickle down and extend to others.**
- **Be prepared for 2% to 4% of people to feel threatened and resist—but keep steady with the larger purpose rather than changing important parameters.**

## Creating Purpose in Work Via Networks

Denise found creativity, energy and a sense of purpose when she spearheaded the company’s first internship and development program for black and Hispanic college students. *“I felt like I had a purpose. I valued the work we tried to do; we saw it as a way to contribute something to them and bring in people who could contribute to us with different backgrounds and different ideas ... It was exciting. The whole team and all the mentors felt it was meaningful.”*

When the students came to the company, Denise chose to be *“their mom away from home.”* Whether she helped them navigate the company and their project or work through the logistics of living in a new place, Denise loved the everyday interactions with the interns. *“I felt like I was helping them branch out and take advantage of an opportunity.”*

As part of your day job—or alongside it—you can create relationships and shape interactions that yield purpose, too. People who thrive create networks that allow them to:

1. Interact with people who share similar values and care about the same things in work that they do.
2. Interact in ways that help them do the right thing and be a part of something bigger than themselves.
3. Interact by giving to others and showing interest at a personal level.
4. Interact with positivity and energy, even if there are challenges or constraints.

## 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).