PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Driving Innovation by Leveraging Networks across Teams

CASE CONTEXT

A seasoned manager has learned to work across boundaries to define challenges. She patiently builds the right network of experts and teams. She initially orchestrates the connections within the project network, then steps back so she does not block progress.

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

Eve is a long-time program manager with an engineering background and experience working in multiple countries.

Her role is to work with teams of developers to create various software or systems. In the early stages of development work, defining and exploring the problem or opportunity requires input from various specialties and collaboration across teams—a process that Eve has come to rely on to get to innovative outcomes.

A current project is one that has Eve applying her network approach even more broadly. The engineering organization—Eve's group—is partnering with a consulting group to create an innovative product. "We are working together to see how the problem has to be shaped, what questions we are trying to answer, as we create this together." Multiple experts from both groups needed to be brought together or consulted for their perspectives, insights, skills and resources. "For example, we are leveraging the relationships outside our group to process data. And we cannot build the entire infrastructure by ourselves, so what solutions are other teams providing so we can integrate? We are working with a lot of teams to be able to ship."

For Eve, the initial challenge is to identify who to reach out to for expertise. "You talk to your friends. Someone knows someone … Then we start pulling that thread, *Hey, we heard you are working on this*. They point us to another person until you get to someone who says, *Yes, you are working on something that is important and interesting to me and I know something that might help*." She also leverages senior managers for ideas on *Who else?* "I will talk to my manager, or my manager's manager. Higher in the hierarchy they have more exposure to other things that are happening … They will say, *Have you talked to so-and-so? They have done something similar.* Or, they will make an introduction to someone if you need it."

In Eve's view, the tough part of framing the problem and developing the direction or solution is that you might miss key things, or a valuable resource. That is why she insists on taking time and following many threads—not just working through her own network. "To make a solution you have to see which solutions are already there. That is the difficult thing … How can you know what people are building? Lots of people are working on different things … It's a difficult process to find that person or the right group to help you create the solution, get involved or give input."

For every possible contact, Eve follows up. Based on what she knows about the expertise of the person or group, she'll think about how her group or project could also be valuable to them. "We are always potential resources for each other, but it helps if I can figure out how and why helping me will help them, too." In an initial conversation, she'll explore for and establish synergies. At the end of the meeting, she always asks who else the person thinks she should speak to. And whether or not there was immediate value, she always sends an email or text, thanking them for their time. "No matter what, you've made a contact. You don't know if you are going to be doing something with them in the future. Never burn a bridge if you don't need to."

Once she has located relevant expertise, she brings all the contributors into the next conversation to talk though scenarios and options. "I have learned that people want to be part of the decision. If they are part of the decision, they are more invested. They are going to follow through if they think the decision is important." Bringing the various people together early also helps them form relationships apart from her, so she can step back as they move into day-to-day implementation. This reduces the collaborative burden on her and prevents her from unintentionally slowing down the team.

Eve's current project is developing traction. Along the way, she has helped the team navigate through ideation, planning and approvals. Prototyping of their best idea led to cycles of feedback from the broader network and further development and iteration.

She has also learned to be even more patient with the initial exploration process. She had to reach out to many more people in unfamiliar pockets of the company and build similar connections with team members on the consulting side. She realized the language and processes that were so familiar within her development teams were different than those of the consulting colleagues. "When you think about your networks, or how to leverage each other's expertise or opinions, you have to learn how to work with each other … Be sure you are speaking the same language. Think about and state your assumptions. Know there are always other ways to do things. Not better or worse, just different."

Network Insights

- **Don't frame the problem in isolation or too quickly.** Allow time to identify dimensions of problems and people with needed expertise. Consider adjacent expertise domains and reach to these people as well to see if possibilities emerge.
- **Leverage leaders to make additional connections.** They operate in different networks and have broader perspective and awareness of capabilities in organization.
- **Look for overlap and interest during initial conversations.** Let possible contributors know what you are working on, what you have heard about their work or expertise and why you are connecting. Ask them what they think or see.
- **End with more.** Ask who else you should talk to. Follow up with a thank you, even if there was not a fit—their time is valuable and they may be a resource in the future.
- **Build the team and step back.** Involve all contributors in the next conversation so they are part of the discussion and decision-making. Facilitate relationships so they interact directly and you do not become a bottleneck.

5 Practices that Drive Performance through Collaborative Team-level Networks

1. Promote a "One Firm" culture. When the mindset is that everyone works to the greater good of the company, people are willing to talk to and help each other. They recognize they are always building their own network.

2. Include "helping others succeed" in performance evaluations. Expect successful people to contribute to other teams and to help colleagues.

3. Create feedback mechanisms to measure contributions to other teams. Managers need input directly from the teams or other managers that employees have helped. Simple systems can be built to gain those perspectives and reinforce a culture of collaboration.

4. Put in place formal and informal efforts to create interactions, awareness of expertise and emergent innovation possibilities. Training programs, project staffing practices and job rotations help connect people; so do knowledge-sharing events and social activities.

5. Reduce hierarchy. Push day-to-day decision rights to teams so they have control of their work and can collaborate freely to move projects ahead. Avoid micro-management—it robs people of autonomy and creativity needed for innovation and performance.

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.