



PRODUCE
INNOVATIVE
SOLUTIONS

New Project Manager Learns the Ropes by Leveraging Networks & Creating Pull

CASE CONTEXT

An early-career project manager learns how to navigate across the company to get needed input and engages people in multiple functions to get a product from concept to launch. He generates enthusiasm for the work, which engages the team and establishes a strong internal network.



MALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR

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.



Leo is two years into his post-college career. Hired by a top technology company on a fast-growth track, he is

learning how to bring his personal strengths to his work and to build and leverage networks for success. After going through a rotational program to learn about the organization's various product lines, Leo was placed on an analytics team and assigned to a project extending an existing product to generate more revenue for the business. The new product would help customers save time and provide easy access to data that would drive efficiencies and help them hit key financial goals.

As Leo stepped into the project leader role he was well aware that he had a lot to learn. He was given broad objectives and background information. "I needed to take it from there and figure out what needed to be done ... But I wasn't sure how to start ... I thought I knew how business worked; I studied it and worked at several start ups. Then I started here, and I thought, *I have no idea what's going on!*" Rather than trying to prove that he had all the answers or that he could figure things out on his own, Leo reached out to others in the company. To get up to speed quickly, he turned to the other project manager on the team, who had the content expertise needed to complement his technical expertise. "The first step was to learn as much as I could from her: *What is the problem? What types of companies face it? Who in the company faces it? What do they do now? What do they want to do?*"

From there, Leo bought the problem to a team of data scientists and engineers. The team would hold brainstorming sessions, considering ways to approach the customer need using their knowledge and data science techniques. "My job was to bring together the people who have a really deep understanding of the tools and the science with the information I had about the problem and the customer." Still feeling his way through the process, he talked with his manager—partly to keep her informed, partly for guidance. His roommate, too, was a good sounding board: he had a similar job in a different company and helped him think through the processes and the relationships.

Soon, Leo concluded that he really needed more customer information. "It was a gut thing, but I just thought I wasn't getting all the information I needed. I think the subject-matter expert was biased to her way of thinking and assumptions about the customer. I wanted to learn from actual people doing this job day in and day out." He spoke with his manager, not knowing the right way to get access to customers. The

manager agreed to ask a colleague to call some customers and pave the way for Leo to talk to people who potentially would use the product. By being proactive, he was able to interview people in a handful of companies to gain a richer knowledge of their work and challenges.

With a range of customer perspectives in mind, Leo was better equipped to help the technical team prioritize and develop the features that would be most valuable. They created an initial prototype and shared it broadly in the company for feedback. Again, Leo relied on his manager to help him understand who to involve. Though small meetings and one-on-one demos, he gained ideas and support from sales teams, product marketing, customer service and the product line manager. He continued to work with the engineering and data analytics team members to refine and produce the work.

The experience of working as a leader, with a clear objective and deadline, was new to Leo. Influencing without authority was something he learned. To get engineers who did not work for him committed to the effort, he realized it was helpful to be clear about what he knew and enthusiastic about why their work mattered. “I was always as transparent as I could be about how things were going and how the project was perceived throughout the organization. I kept them informed, *These are next steps, this is how it is going to be released*. I talked to them about how this was playing into our marketing documents and the sales conversations, or let them know how the sales people were excited to have this tool ... It gave the project team a sense of why this matters and motivated them to do what needed to be done.”

Leo’s first big effort at the company was successfully launched as part of a planned product update. The final version was on target implemented with initial customers with no unexpected problems, just a few bugs that were easily and routinely fixed. Customer growth is now steady. More important, the new product extension supported the company’s overall technology story, building its brand narrative and credibility in the market. “It was exciting to be part of that and to see a relatively small project fit into the bigger picture for the business.”

Network Insights

- **Leverage relationship to understand demands of new contexts.** Individual contributors must come up to speed and contribute in new domains quickly—don’t go it alone.
- **Cross boundaries to understand key dimensions of a problem you are trying to solve.** Often, individual contributors worry about proving they have the answers and don’t invest time in seeking other perspectives. This results in less effective and narrower solutions.
- **Engage others to pull you into new projects.** When people are aware of your expertise and you are able to energize them around possibilities, you prime the network to pull you in. “I have gotten feedback that I’m good at seeing the big picture and communicating it clearly and enthusiastically.”
- **Generate enthusiasm for a worthy goal as a way to influence without authority.** You cannot leverage your boss for help every time. One strategy is to help others see how their contributions matter. “People get excited about big things they are contributing to.”

How Leaders Can Energize a Millennial

Managers have the ability to give employees opportunities to learn and be a part of interesting work. Leo had a moment early on in his career that stands out as a time a senior leader energized him and got him excited about a project.

“He called me in and gave me a project to work on ... he said, *We are going to work together to figure this out*. And then he asked questions: *Do you think that’s a good goal to be working on? Do you think we’re in a position to do it? Can you help me?* And then he said, *Let’s talk next week about your ideas of how we can do this ...* I thought this was the coolest thing! He made it sound like it was the most important thing to work on and that I was contributing to a larger effort. And he gave me a level of ownership and trusted that I was capable.”

The leader could have phrased it differently: *This is the problem ... go figure out how to do it*. “That direct approach would have been OK. I would have done it anyways, but the way he talked to me, I was excited to do it.”

By drawing Leo in to the bigger value of the work and showing trust, the leader gained an energized collaborator. Leo gave extra effort: “I worked on it over the weekend. In my spare time I was thinking about it. I iterated about 15 times before I presented to him.”

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.