



PRODUCE
INNOVATIVE
SOLUTIONS

Leadership, Talent & Collaborative Practices that Spur Innovation within a Global Multi-Functional Workforce

CASE CONTEXT

A senior leader sees his role as fostering collaboration and engaging the talent across teams, units and functions. He and his fellow executives work diligently to break down silos and to reward collaboration and shared success.



MALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

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.



Roger is an engineer who, early on in his career, realized he liked the people side of the business more than the

technical side. That resulted in roles in management, working with staff and teams and externally working with clients, industry associations and community groups. Today, he is a senior leader at a global engineering firm, leading a group of about 6,000 people and three core practices.

“As consultants, the only product we have is people, so collaboration and having the ability to mobilize expertise is fundamental to our success.” The company is large and diverse, with a network of skill and depth of knowledge that allows it to offer almost any service a client could want. “We typically say, if the client asks if we do something, say *Yes*, and then come back and figure out who does it. No matter what it is, we probably have someone. Just the other day, a client asked if we could help with an endangered animal that had nested near a project site. The project manager said, *Yes, we can*. And he reached out to the network and we found out we have an expert in that very thing in another division.”

Engaging the people isn’t just about matching the right technical expertise to the right project. “Engineering is engineering. Sometimes it’s a technical thing. Sometimes it can be boring and laborious. But it seems to me the *magic happens when you get the people who share that passion for the end product and then just engage*.” For example, Roger’s home office got energized around going after a big project to solve a problem with flooding in their community and surrounding areas. They pulled on all their networks within the company to find the best people to address the technical, environmental and community relations components. “We assembled this team of people who were not only experts in what they did, but were also passionate about wanting to make a difference here. We ended up winning the job, and now we’re delivering it.”

Part of Roger’s job is to identify strategic trends, where the industry is moving and how the world is evolving. He tries to set a vision and goals around those issues to meet clients’ evolving needs in a way that the diverse talent in the firm can become passionate about. Some trends are positive or promising (self-driving vehicles); other are not (climate change or terrorism). “How do we, as the leadership team, get excited? How do we get other people to want to be at the forefront of those things? What we found is that if we find something that is interesting, employees want to be a part of it. They do want to help move it forward, build their network, be knowledgeable and, maybe, help to shape what the future looks like.”

One way Roger helps connect big trends to individual interest is to create networks within networks, to make a 20,000-person firm feel smaller. By engaging smaller groups in targeted innovative pursuits, ideas emerge organically and are able to grow and evolve. “We’ll pull together a small group, for example, on the subject of infrastructure for self-driving cars. In some cases, a person will self-select that they’re interested in that group. Sometimes, I help to identify people I think could contribute or because it would be developmental in some way. And sometimes a person is tapped because of some technical expertise.” Roger also makes sure that valuable network influencers are involved. The firm promotes visibility of these small teams, including support for giving external presentations or writing a paper or journal article. “We want people to push their thinking and their external network for their personal success. But that also reflects on the firm, and turns into our success. “

Various talent development processes also help align people’s interests with work, including options to take different career tracks to find where the work matches their purpose or passion. Annual career development conversations ensure people are receiving developmental feedback and support to take the next career step.

The firm also has built-in processes to reinforce collaboration. Cross-boundary networks are required for innovation and expertise to flow to client needs irrespective of unit or geography. “Most of what we do spans across business lines; we intentionally ripped down the walls of those silos. It’s not perfect, but we spent a lot of time and effort encouraging and rewarding and building the culture so we work well across the different technical specialties.” From a bonus structure that is based on collaboration to talent management processes that support multiple career tracks to cross-boundary sponsorship and experiences, the company pushes people to have a broad view. If people focus on their own results to the exclusion of helping colleagues, their compensation and long-term career prospects with the firm will suffer. “It’s been important to us that the people who rise in our organization are those who are collaborative, who are no-ego types. The *‘I’m really important, look at me personalities just don’t survive here.’*”

8 Network Management Practices Leaders Use to Foster Organic Innovation

20 years of research on networks has identified key leadership practices that yield innovation success. Take a moment to reflect on how you do as a leader on these dimensions, then ask the same of your team.

1. I make sure that people or roles within my group do not become so overloaded with collaborative demands that they are unable to support their colleagues in a timely fashion.
2. I scan for, identify and reward employees who frequently engage in collaborative behaviors—such as offering resources, help, information and contacts—that make their colleagues more effective.
3. I ensure that newcomers—either new hires or those from other parts of the organization—are integrated rapidly into my group and know who to turn to for information, expertise, resources and decision approvals.
4. I make sure that subject-matter experts and high performers in my group are available to help their colleagues in a timely manner on appropriate issues.
5. I facilitate effective collaboration at specific points in my group—across functional lines, physical distance, hierarchical levels, core projects or expertise domains—where informal networks are critical to performance and innovation.
6. I facilitate innovation and organizational change by engaging employees with significant relationships across functional lines, physical distance, expertise domains and demographic populations.
7. I make sure that employees in my group are aware of one another’s expertise, contacts and resources and so know who to turn to for help when opportunities and problems arise.
8. I make sure that my group collaborates effectively with appropriate functions/divisions within the organization and with relevant stakeholders outside of the organization (such as key customers, vendors and associations).

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.