PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Networks Needed for Idea Development & Ongoing Iteration to Gain Best Outcomes

CASE CONTEXT

An individual contributor juggles the need for multiple perspectives and the push for speed. She gains initial ideas from HR staff and business managers and then proceeds quickly to development. In hindsight, she would have continued to engage others during the prototyping phase for stronger results.

FEMALE

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.

INNOVATE EXECUTE SCALE THRIVE ADAPT

When Ruth moved into a newly created position in the HR department, her first priority was to create a

management development initiative—something new for the growing start-up. "We had been hearing loud and clear across the company that we don't develop our people enough … We decided to focus on managers first. Most of them are techies-turned-managers and they needed guidance on handling employee situations and developing their people. Our managers were asking for it, and employees were saying, *Please, help my manager be better.*"

First, Ruth got a general sense of what would be needed. She talked to HR business partners and a number of managers she knew well. Addressing performance issues, managing priorities and giving feedback were some of the topics that rose to the top of her list. Ruth also wanted to be sure any effort would reflect the company's core values and what it means to manage there—not just provide general management and leadership insights. To gain perspective and ensure what they built would be well-received and effective, Ruth and a colleague convened sessions with 10-12 middle managers to brainstorm the high-level topics that mattered to them. "We asked them, *How do you spend the majority of your day? What do you think you should be doing more of? What do you need more help with?* … Most of the answers were not surprising and matched with the themes we had identified."

From there, Ruth and her colleague got to work. The project was now a top-priority, with senior leadership setting the deadline. The two needed to move fast, and it seemed most efficient for them to make decisions and create the content in isolation. "We ended up with an innovative program, one that had some elements managers love and some elements that haven't been used as much or were not as well received." In-person, interactive workshops have been the biggest hit. Managers from different functions are mixed together to provide new interactions and new connections. Ruth and her co-worker kick-off the sessions, and senior leaders facilitate discussions. Content is previewed through videos and simple lessons, so the managers spend most of their time sharing ideas and engaging in dialogue. "We turn it over to the managers in the workshops … They come to the program, do a quick review and then dive into real scenarios. They role play and have time to practice and interact with their peers. Managers love it!"

The pre-program and post-program videos Ruth developed were less popular. Usage rates were lower than expected and the response wasn't enthusiastic. The videos were seen as too complex, when they could have been simpler or more tailored to managers' experiences. Looking back, Ruth sees that they could have been better if she had given managers an opportunity to weigh in on what was needed or how it was presented. "We started to build things in isolation because we had to move fast. What we missed was getting feedback from managers after those initial brainstorming sessions … After that, the next thing they saw was what we rolled out with the program."

"I think we got the content elements mostly right, but if we had gotten more input on prototypes we would have had more buy-in and the stories and examples would have really connected … We could have even asked managers to help us create the videos … At the time, we thought it would slow us down. But, if we had taken time, it would have been easier to create the content and the results would have been better."

For Ruth, the experience was a reminder of the importance of using her network, not only in the ideation stage of a new effort, but during the development and prototyping phase.

Personally, Ruth learned that she works better when she collaborates effectively. She realizes she missed having the energy and creativity of back-and-forth feedback and iterative development with a variety of people. "At one point, I struggled with building the content, I think because I was in this bubble trying to build it mostly on my own … I was so focused on getting things out, but I actually got stuck. I felt disconnected from our managers … I know I work best, I thrive, and we execute better when I'm interacting and bringing in different people and building on their ideas."

Network Insights

- **Bring in diverse views early on for idea development.** Engage key opinion leaders and experts in this phase. They bring needed information and perspective to the project.

- **Iterate with stakeholders in prototyping phase to refine content.** Seek feedback from different audiences—leadership groups, end users, stakeholders—at multiple points in development. Respond and refine accordingly. Don't wait until deployment to hear concerns and perspectives.

- **Tap network influencers/opinion leaders for engagement and adoption.** The ideation and development network also becomes the implementation network. As ambassadors for a new program or strategy, they provide legitimacy and substance and early adoption.

Culture Fuels Collaborative Overload

For Ruth, the energy and benefits of collaboration and network engagement can be undermined by too much or inefficient collaboration. Getting the balance right is a struggle, especially in a culture that values inclusion.

When the company was a start-up, everyone was involved in decisions and included in meetings. Anyone could be contacted 24/7. It was part of the culture of inclusion and openness. As the company grew, the meeting-heavy, high-involvement habits stayed. Plus, texts and calls and emails are constant. "We have way too many meetings, most are unnecessary and inefficient. Often, we could accomplish the same things with email or IM or a Slack group."

Collaborative overload is now the norm in this fast-paced, large company. "I think we assume inclusion means collaboration, with everyone at the same meetings and sharing the same things on email, and that was how we would keep our culture intact."

"Part of me loves it, being needed and helping people … And the excitement of success and being competitive … You can thrive on it for awhile, but after years it's a killer. We need a better balance."

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