



PRODUCE
INNOVATIVE
SOLUTIONS

Mobilizing Networks for an Innovative Solution to Strategic Threat

CASE CONTEXT

A product manager searches for a fix when legislation forces a change that will affect nearly half the firm's customers. She relies on her network and seeks customer feedback early on. After initial negative responses, a solution emerges from taking a completely different direction suggested by weak ties within her network.



FEMALE

Level: MANAGER OF
MANAGERS

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.



Stella has a 20-year career in human resources, applying her expertise within companies, as a consultant and now

as a product manager for an HR-related technology. She manages a team of 50 to maintain and continually develop the company's core product. When a pending legislation in one country threatened the ability of nearly half their customer base to fully use the product, Stella was responsible for finding a solution. "This presented a significant problem for us because it essentially legislated against the core idea of how we operate. We had to come up with some solution to help our customer be compliant, but there wasn't an ideal or obvious option."

To begin, Stella had to get smart about the reality of the new legislation. What, exactly, was involved? How could it be interpreted? When would it take effect? She first reached out to a respected peer whose expertise was privacy law and policy. "She was my first gut check. I got the information, yes, this really is going to go into play. Then, she was my first bouncing off point to think about how to create a solution that wouldn't be so painful for our customers." After taking that first pass at understanding the problem and imagining options, Stella took a deeper dive into the legal aspects, consulting the in-house legal department and an outside law firm. With a clear view of the challenge, she turned to her technical network, which offered no easy fix or game-changing perspective. She talked to customers who she knew would be affected and found out they, too, were trying to wrap their arms around the problem and what could be done. "It helped to understand where our customers were on this, their level of risk-aversion and their main concerns."

In hindsight, Stella says she did not talk to everyone she should have. She over-relied on clients she knew well and those she assumed would be most concerned, neglecting to get input from several key clients and from a broader group within her own company. "I probably should have brought more people into the process early on. I could have heard the negatives sooner and begun to get understanding and buy in sooner. But, I was trying to move fast and didn't want to impact too many people until I knew where we were going."

Stella worked closely with one peer, a trusted collaborator with technical expertise and connections. "We brainstormed. We brought in additional technical resources. We explored every option to see if we could come up with an innovative tool to test. And those conversations were not as fruitful as we hoped."

Stella ended up with two options. One narrowly met the requirement and would probably not be accepted by the more risk-averse clients. The other required a tedious, manual process and would probably not satisfy larger customers. Neither solution was ideal, but, Stella wanted to go ahead and put the options out to the customer community before moving forward.

The reaction was bad: *No way. It's just not do-able. You have to go back to the drawing board.* "Frankly at that point, we did not have any other options!" The negative response was tough to hear, but Stella's approach allowed her to pause and re-think, before a decision was made and a lot of investment put into a solution. Her willingness to test ideas and risk a flop reflected her genuine desire to get to the right solution. "I am competitive, a glass-half-full kind of person. I am always looking for a better solution for our customers, especially when they tell me what I'm going to deliver is not going to meet their expectations ... I am never going to give up. I'm going to find a better way."

Stella's tenacious approach kept her thinking and re-thinking options, when a colleague suggested that there might be a vendor based in another country that could be a potential partner. "What if our customers could use the partner's product, which could be connected to ours? Customers would then have the full experience and ease, while still being compliant with the new law."

Again, Stella used her network of customers, this time asking for referrals to potential partners. One vendor emerged as a viable collaborator, through countless phone calls across time zones and language barriers. "Finally, I presented the idea to top leadership. *With the partnership, our customers get all the benefits of our product. It's a good solution.* The contract was signed and the client who gave us our partner referral is moving ahead quickly to test the solution. It's a strong testament that they believe it's going to work."

Stella's solution has given the company continued credibility with clients, and, as the effort unfolds, looks to be a strategic win. Stella gained a greater appreciation of her network and more confidence in her capacity for problem solving and innovation.

Network Insights

- **Leverage boundary spanning connections into groups with unique expertise to help you frame the problem.** Take time on the front end for robust discussion and deep understanding—for Stella this meant reaching out to gain strategic, legal, technical and client perspectives.
- **Don't rely exclusively on your strong ties during this time.** It is common to seek people we trust, but that will bias how we think about problems. In each interaction ask: *Who else should I talk to?* Small investments to get unique perspectives early on will have a big payoff.
- **Create a safe context for your network to freely explore the problem space and suggest alternatives.** Have the courage to put yourself and your ideas out there, even if that means going outside of your comfort zone.
- **Pivot off of potential solutions that don't work.** How will each *no* inform the next step to a viable solution?
- **Seek pilot feedback from customers—especially difficult customers—whether inside or outside the company.** This also requires courage and strong relationships, but saves time and preserves resources.

Engage 4 Ties to Implement Innovative Solutions

Different types of network ties are needed for innovation. The early-stage, problem-defining network is not the same as the network that is needed for execution or wide-spread adoption.

1. Ties across expertise domains, functions, clients, cultures or social groups. This network yields benefit for scoping the problem and seeing solutions or opportunities more broadly than is possible with a more insular network.
2. Ties with others doing similar kinds of work. This network improves, extends or maintains expertise; introduces work practices; and improves efficiency.
3. Ties to help you learn. A mix of new people and people who have known you awhile will help you develop through experience. Ask them for feedback on your performance and deliverables, team effectiveness or leadership capabilities.
4. Ties to help you develop an accurate understanding of the politics and the network landscape. Formal and informal influencers are critical to execution. Determine who they are in the groups you need to implement into or drive results through.

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.