



PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Networks Enable Success in a Career-Defining Project

CASE CONTEXT

A data analyst pitches a project that becomes a high-profile effort in a highly specialized consulting firm. Reporting to an internal client and collaborating with an external partner, she builds a team and drives an effort that would lead to an innovative solution to a healthcare challenge.



FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL
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.



When she applied for internal funds to conduct research, Sylvia had no idea she would open the door to a

career-defining effort. The Ph.D. data analyst had taken a job with a consulting firm that worked at the intersection of healthcare, data and business. She had an interest in looking at raw clinical data in a new way to improve medical decision making. She pitched her idea and not only was it funded, it also became a high-profile project that resulted in innovative solutions and insights. “This is the project that made my career ... it was innovative in the way we looked at data from our hospital system partner and in the outcomes, or solutions, that came from the analysis.”

From idea to execution, Sylvia was working in new territory. As a junior person leading an important project, she was faced with both excitement and challenge. A large U.S. hospital system, which was not a client of the firm, provided years of data and insight by working with Sylvia and her team. The team itself was a diverse, energetic, passionate group. “No one had tried to do what we were doing. But my team, we took a crack at it.”

To assemble a team, Sylvia started with her network. “I reached out to a bunch of people, saying, *These are the skills that I need—do you have any recommendations?* We ended up with such a diverse team. One guy was already retired in his second career. Another I considered my kid brother. We were diverse in terms of culture and gender. And from diverse backgrounds: data scientists, applied mathematicians, nurses, biomedical engineers. It was just a very cool network of people.”

While various people in the firm or in the hospital system rotated in and out of the team based on specific need, a core team of six drove the work. “It was highly collaborative. We hashed things out. We sat in the same room and talked about all the ways we could innovate ... We all came at this with a love for what math can do for the world and a deep passion to do something important. Because we were all connected by a deep sense of purpose, we were able to work harder. We all motivated each other.”

The team’s ability to stay motivated was due, in part, to understanding that they could challenge each other and disagree. These norms allowed a diverse and high-achieving team to collaborate, innovate and push the boundaries of what could be done. “We were able to hold space for each other to disagree. When we challenged each other, it was never to put people down ... I remember being the first to put something out there and then say, *Challenge me. Somebody please tell me something different. Even if it’s just to play devil’s advocate.* And that would get the ball rolling.”

“I remember distinctly a time of just not agreeing on things. And saying, *no, this is the algorithm we should use*. And saying *no, that’s a better technique*. We would hash it out, get very excited. And we’d go off and try and we’d come back together and figure out the best approach. There was a lot of humility and a lot of ego as well!”

Sylvia also learned how to best use the team members, delegating even when she had the expertise. “I saw that to make this work I needed everyone on board, working at their maximum capacity. I learned what worked for the team was for me to be hands-off on the code ... I had to step back and trust that others were going to do it. That was very hard for me, but liberating and important for the team.”

While the core team quickly found their operating rhythm, managing the partners and the internal stakeholders required a different effort. It was essential to hold recurring meetings with stakeholders (one-on-one and with the team) to get input, share results and manage expectations. The internal funders needed reassurance that the work would be useful for the firm down the road and would ask for more from the team. The hospital was eager for results that could inform their clinical protocol and their research. Sylvia struggled at times to push back on extra requests, spending significant extra time with the hospital to be a resource. “I did stuff that was a little bit out of the scope of the project but ultimately built a stronger relationship with them. And, some of the internal requests resulted in good work, too.”

Across the board, the work was successful. The team’s approach to the data revealed a series of predictive risks and positive outcomes in the specific clinical setting that was being examined. The data allowed the hospital to modify key protocols and improve outcomes. The work was written up in scientific and healthcare journals. Sylvia, her team and hospital partners presented at conferences and shared their work with other organizations and clients of the firm. “In the eyes of the firm, this was big. It is still talked about to this day ... The results shaped my career here, but I learned so much. I’m a different leader today because of that experience.”

Network Insights

- **Identify and form a team with rich networks, relevant expertise and (most importantly) common values.** What are core aspects of the work that create sense of purpose?
- **Set norms early on to support taking risks with ideas and engaging in creative conflict.** How can team members be hard on ideas but not hard on people? This practice is especially important to convert high-end experts from very diverse backgrounds into a cohesive unit.
- **Diffuse ownership of portions of the project.** Know when to engage in the specifics of the work and when to stay at a higher level. Trusting teammates will deepen their sense of purpose and ownership.
- **Manage external stakeholders through structured and routine meetings.** Regular conversation sets alignment around expectations and minimizes project expansion.

How Newcomers Become High Performers by Creating Pull into Networks

Sylvia found projects and purpose early in her new firm by reaching out to others, in spite of no on-boarding or formal opportunities to build networks. Like Sylvia, newcomers can get drawn into valuable networks in several ways, including:

1. Put yourself out there. With no one to meet her on first day, Sylvia emailed the team saying: “I am the new person and will be going to lunch soon. Does anyone want to come?”
2. Use “new” status to your advantage. Being new is a great excuse to meet other people and learn about their work and projects—even if the conversation is uncomfortable or you don’t understand. Allow conversations to reveal your background and expertise, too. For Sylvia, many of these first conversations led to *Oh, we could use someone like you on our project*.
3. Morph your expertise to what others are doing. Don’t expect your knowledge to be used “as is.” Transferring expertise to different contexts is a key step to getting drawn into other projects and developing a reputation in the network. Sylvia would tailor her message to the need—“often it was a change in terminology not a change of skill set.”

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.