



PRODUCE
INNOVATIVE
SOLUTIONS

Missed Opportunity Created Lesson in How Networks are Needed for Innovation & Results

CASE CONTEXT

A high-achiever learns the value of different networks when he struggles to align various stakeholders around a new body of work. The experience has given him a better way to pursue innovation for clients and the business—and important lessons for collaborating in the future.



MALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR

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.



Ted is an achiever, with multiple graduate degrees and a track record of success within just a few years working as a consultant at a global firm. With a background in politics and business, he likes to see how intellectual and academic frameworks play out and have impact in the “real world of clients and projects.” Recently, he gained a new view of the role of networks for innovation and results from a project that didn’t go as well as expected. Ted is reflective about what worked and what didn’t, and ties the misses to use the network effectively.

The project involved two organizational groups: a service line and a government-sector practice, combining knowledge to serve a government client. Ted had previously worked in each group, so was tapped to be project lead after the initial leader unexpectedly had to leave. “I knew more about the service than the government people and I knew more about the government work than the service people—but I wasn’t an expert in either.” Ted was given the issues and the scope of work, which involved bringing the firm’s established frameworks from the service area and applying them within the government context. The idea was to gain valuable, measurable results for the specific client and then have an innovative, new body of work that would be developed and used to grow the firm’s government-sector work.

Ted’s role was essentially that of a broker, trying to connect content expertise and three stakeholders’ needs. “It was a struggle, but I pulled in people from both sides and leaned into the client for perspective. *How do we approach this? What do we do with the problem we’ve been presented with?* ... The problem that I came to see was that the idiosyncrasies of the client made it almost entirely immune to the solution we are accustomed to imposing.” The challenge could have been seen or addressed earlier in the process. But in framing the solution, the three stakeholder expectations were not integrated or aligned.

“There were different perspectives on what kind of question we were answering. When I talked to folks from the industry practice and service practice, both thought there would be a magic bullet coming from the other side of the equation ... One group was focused on the immediate program ... The other was looking ahead to scaling it out and making it a bigger service offering ... And the client had different expectations up-and-down the chain.” The network gap was not so much a lack of expertise—it was a lack of alignment amongst the key stakeholders. Rather than being the go-between and trying to make everyone happy, Ted needed to create mechanisms that would have allowed people to see their lack of alignment.

Ted could have also seen the problems sooner and found alternatives by reaching out to peers in the network—people who were not involved in the project but in similar roles or with similar experience. Keeping the challenge to himself limited his view of how to manage the situation. Rather than using his network to augment his abilities, he stayed within the project network, which kept him in a cycle of confirming the process and compounding the problem. “There are people at my peer level who I should have reached out to ... Getting their perspective would have been helpful ... I had too much confidence in my own understanding.” This is a common behavior that high-performers overcome by leveraging relationships to spot what’s missing or fill a gap in skill or perspective.

In retrospect, he would have built a network around him to get two types of feedback or advice. First, he would have sought guidance on how to communicate effectively and raise concerns in an appropriate way. Second, he would have sought a “sanity check” on how he was thinking about things. “I know people who deal with the government side all the time. I should have talked about my inklings or run things by them to see if was totally crazy.” This was a network Ted could have used. The relationships were there, but he just did not think to use them at the time since the people were not a formal part of the team. “I have learned to lean on my peers and think of my whole network as an asset to get work done.”

For Ted, the project-level outcomes were solid, but “not ground breaking ... We clearly helped the client with two of their three issues; the third just didn’t come through as strongly.” Even so, the outputs were further developed and adapted into assets that could be used for other projects. In the debriefing process, the larger team also determined what they would have done differently in the initial framing of the problem, including airing assumptions and setting mechanisms for ongoing collaboration.

Personally, Ted interpreted the project as an important developmental experience rather than a setback. “I learned a lot ... My big takeaways were: 1) to look more critically at the process and problem at the outset, 2) to pick up cues in terms of expectations of the client and of management, and 3) to be willing to raise concerns earlier.”

Network Insights

- **Managing network stakeholders requires creating transparency of interests and demands.** Give visibility to expectations, create social pressure for people to do work and use technology or other systems to reveal where misalignment might exist.
- **Minimize network gaps early in projects—both by covering content domains and process aspects of work.** High performers typically draw on peers at a similar level. They are likely doing different kinds of work from a content standpoint, but are addressing similar issues (e.g, team dynamics, project management, client communication). They make invaluable thought partners.
- **Being willing to air issues early and in a constructive format is critical.** Bad news does not get better with more data and time. Often misalignment can be addressed when handled early in a project lifecycle. Systematic calls or meetings with all relevant stakeholders ensure alignment of key players in the network and provides a forum to resolve problems.

Diversity of Experience & Network Yields Project & Life Success

Ted struggled in an unfamiliar context. He has since learned and focuses on adding value in a network in different ways:

1. Insist on creating value by offering different ways of seeing and solving problems. A range of experience creates a nuanced approach and possible innovation. Supplement that approach with the existing capability in the network.
2. Use a diverse network to get a broader framing of the need. Draw on rich, bridging ties to those with unique expertise (often in different sub-networks of an organization) to more effectively understand and solve a problem.
3. Maintain ties to people who value the same things in the work. This anchors you on what you care about instead of succumbing to a definition of success determined by the organization or industry.
4. Engage with others at the level of *Why* versus *What*. This keeps people from simply going through the motions. It delivers great value and helps you maintain a sense of purpose in the work.

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.