



PRODUCE  
INNOVATIVE  
SOLUTIONS

# Driving Organic Innovation through Network Influencers & External Collaborations

## CASE CONTEXT

Charged with translating research into client solutions, a seasoned manager is a broker of ideas. She engages respected and influential people across various perspectives and functions, which results in ideas that are conceptually sound *and* likely to be adapted broadly within the organization.



FEMALE

Level: MANAGER OF  
MANAGERS

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.



Jaymie has a unique role as director of research, design and innovation for a specialized professional services firm.

She saw that exciting research and insights generated in one pocket of the firm rarely got traction elsewhere in the organization, or failed to get fully translated into business strategies or solutions. As a result, she turned her efforts toward brokering connections and information across functions and with external experts—a role that is often overlooked in organizations seeking to drive innovation or change. “I am like a matchmaker. I find the people whose research and work is in the same space of the burning questions we are asking and then put them together in new ways, so we can distill that into insight and solutions across different businesses.”

Jaymie’s success in this brokering role began several years ago. The firm’s research arm was writing white papers and “doing a terrific job creating a lot of thought leadership and differentiating our business ... I loved the work going on, but we weren’t walking the talk ... We needed education, a better process to apply the science to our solutions.” She wondered if she could create a community of practice to pull the principles and insights into the businesses in a consistent and compelling way—and turned to an existing group in the firm. “We had a ‘book club,’ a group of curious people from across the organization ... They were influential and respected people in the business: solution leaders and designers, sales people, account managers ... People who worked on proposals or client needs.” She introduced her idea to these key stakeholders and influencers, suggesting they read several books to spur thinking about new approaches to applying and translating research into client work. After the group read several books, their energy grew around principles of design thinking. Two people volunteered to co-chair the process of learning more and implementing something that would work across all areas of the organization. “The group had a lot of passion around it.”

The group of 50 people in the book club willingly invested their time for a number of reasons: 1) Members gained stature and reputation—“It was seen as something important to be a part of;” 2) They got connected with other experts, outside their business units, which expanded their internal networks; 3) They gained presentation and leadership skills by rotating facilitation and storytelling roles; 4) The gatherings “took them out of autopilot. Meetings were fun and energizing with like-minded people, emotionally appealing and tied to a real purpose.” While other forms of research or initial engagement could have been effective, Jaymie’s approach meshed with the group’s interests and activities.

The reading group particularly loved one book and felt that the approach it described would fit with their goals. Jaymie and the two co-leads contacted the author to explore whether they could collaborate in some way. “We just reached out via email. We told her we loved her book and why we selected it ... We wanted to know, could we meet her, could we tell her our hopes and dreams for how to use her work?” That simple outreach led to a multi-year, mutually beneficial collaboration. It began with the creation of a “master class” and grew into a series of online and in-person classes with three levels of company-specific certification.

In addition to seeding the idea with a group of influencers and allowing them to define the direction of the effort, Jaymie was an effective broker in a number of ways. The close collaboration with the book author and, later, an academic partner, provided credibility as well as new perspectives. Jaymie and the project team kept the larger group updated, leaning on their continued interest and pride of ownership. When they were ready to pilot the first training, they turned again to the book club—a group that would give constructive feedback *and* wanted the effort to succeed because they knew its value for the firm. “We decided to try it out with our catalysts and believers, just to get it out there. They would be honest with us, too, and tell us if something sucks so we can get better.”

The response to *the pilot was favorable, so the next step was to apply the ideas by engaging a business leader and pioneering client*. “Some of our most excited participants helped us identify potential clients or projects where we could put our new content and new process into action.” *After a few early client wins, the network began to spread the word*. “As we began to show what we were doing and build some case studies, we got attention and momentum ... Our hypothesis and hope was that the influential network would allow the work to grow and gain uptake—and it really did work.” Word spread through the firm to other divisions.

By building new capacity and content, Jaymie and the firm were able to bridge internal silos to create cutting-edge, research-driven solutions for clients, increase revenue and shore up the firm’s reputation for innovation.

## Network Insights

- **Leverage a group of network influencers with various roles and perspectives.** Bring them in early to identify ideas and define direction.
- **Design fun, collaborative forums with this group to build energy, connectivity and shared purpose.** Help members benefit personally (e.g., development, access, status) while contributing to work that has real purpose.
- **Identify and reach out to relevant experts based on influencers’ input.** Broker ties with external parties and internal teams and strengthen them through co-creation.
- **Continue to leverage the influencer network as the innovation evolves and turns to implementation and scale.** Use the original group and new advocates to pilot solutions, bring in early-adopter clients and spread the word.

## Leveraging External Networks for Innovation

Jaymie embeds external expertise into the organization, yielding innovation and impact throughout the business and for clients. Here are 5 steps that have worked well:

1. *Match external trends and emerging needs.* Bring in market trend reports, attend conferences, review academic and industry media within and adjacent to the business or customer industry.
2. *Search for external experts.* Identify academics or others outside the business whose expertise could be tapped to gain insight and expand internal capacity.
3. *Reach out and hold exploratory conversations.* Send an email query to introduce the company and topic or project that may hold shared interest. From there, phone calls determine fit and interest.
4. *Identify mutually beneficial collaborations.* Hold a working session to brainstorm content, current thinking and potential directions. For example, external partners could lead joint research projects or facilitate new processes. Be sure the right people are involved early on, including people who are influential in the network and could play a key role in executing the work.
5. *Facilitate network collaboration—don’t rely on a one-time hand-off.* Ensure that the external and internal networks are established and nurtured, including sharing updates with larger groups so they stay informed and invested. This brokerage function is often skipped, allowing good ideas to fail because they do not have the right people talking about and supporting them.

### 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](http://www.connectedcommons.com) or email Rob at [rlcrossjr@gmail.com](mailto:rlcrossjr@gmail.com).