



PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

CASE CONTEXT

A manager of a growing technical team uses both leadership behaviors and organizational structures to facilitate collaboration and innovation. He knows how to engage where he is most needed, avoiding becoming a bottleneck and preventing collaborative overload.



MALE

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.



A Seasoned Leader Creates a Context for Ongoing Innovation

Luis is a 20-year employee at a technical consulting firm. He joined the company straight out of graduate school as a systems engineer. Today, Luis manages an area of the business that includes 90 people working for multiple clients and faces a strong demand to innovate and adapt. As Luis has gained experience as a manager, he has learned that his leadership beliefs and behaviors affect how people and teams engage in the work and collaborate for innovation [see sidebar].

Luis works to create a participative culture, seeing himself as a “player-coach” rather than a distant manager. He builds trust and rapport in this way, but his leadership style also has pitfalls. “At one point, I was becoming a bottleneck. Everything had to go through me, there were limits to what I could do, and I was slowing things down. I was trying to be involved in too much, so I had to figure out how to get out of the way.” Luis recognized the trap that research shows can derail a rising star or manager taking on greater responsibility. He made some structural changes by delegating more and taking an agile approach to team processes. He brought new people into the teams, both to distribute load on the team and gain valuable, different contributions to the work. “I still had the vision, but I let others who are really better at the details do the work ... *By getting out of the way, I was able to grow the team, bring in other expertise ... As a result, we were able to make things faster, more elegant, more user friendly.*”

As he backed out of some of the project work, Luis focused on new ways to be supportive and appreciative of team members to keep trust and engagement strong. “Part of it was showing them what was possible. A lot of people get excited if they feel like they can contribute to an innovative idea or innovative capability ... I tried to get them see how their work is going to help us develop really cool stuff.” He also helped people navigate through the discomfort of the changes. Some on the team were bothered by having less access to him or felt their roles were less important as newcomers joined the group. Rather than being pushed back into overload, Luis had multiple one-on-one conversations to reassure people. “I let them know I wasn’t going away. It’s going to be more productive, more innovative, and in the end, I will be more available at the right times.”

The team has also gotten disciplined about having the right stakeholders in the room for the right meetings. “We are all clear when it is important to participate and what our role is ... I could be in the first 30 minutes, then step out.” For new projects or big events, they get everyone together early. For ongoing work, they put clear boundaries on meetings, so different objectives or topics don’t spill over into each other (for example, a meeting

to prioritize a backlog of needs is a separate meeting from reviewing progress over the last two weeks). *During meetings, a facilitator prevents rambling or calls out unproductive behavior, and Luis sets the tone for innovation and openness.* “I will back up an idea, ask questions, stay open to discussing options no matter how crazy they seem. It gives other people courage to say things or bring out ideas.”

As the team expanded and relied on input from other teams and functions, it was also critical to build awareness of expertise and establish norms for how and when to reach out to others. Luis started a center of excellence, hosts bi-weekly talks from different experts and encourages people to reach out to other areas or experts for information or referrals. “I see it all the time now—they reach out to their network to find other people who have done similar work and it accelerates to a solution much faster than if they decided to do it on their own ... You can even jumpstart a conversation, an idea, just by being in the right place—over lunch or coffee—when you know who to reach out to and people don’t feel afraid to ask others what they know.”

Collaborative technologies and processes can be valuable, too. Tools like HipChat, Skype or Slack can create serendipity and richness in the interactions with video and other features that support team collaboration. Other platforms fuel idea generation and input from any function, level or perspective. Luis’ team has been active in the company-wide “call-for-ideas” to explore emergent innovation in a way that is engaging and pulls in multiple different perspectives to evolve and refine ideas.

HR and talent processes reinforce Luis’ efforts to foster collaboration and innovation as well. Recruiting, internships and on-boarding programs draw out collaborative behaviors and build cross-boundary networks, and leaders allow and encourage their people to rotate across jobs and functions (which is not often in their short-term interest but research shows is one of the best ways to create trust and engagement). “We see a lot of free-flowing movement, people going from job to job. It’s not frowned upon; it’s encouraged. We want people to expand their capabilities, take on different responsibilities, build their network and bring in new ideas and perspectives.”

Network Insights

- **A leader’s beliefs and behaviors foster innovation and collaboration.** When trust, a sense of purpose, autonomy and engagement are valued by leaders—and acted upon—people will share ideas, ask for input and seek help.
- **Over-collaboration is an unintended consequence of a participative culture and hands-on leadership.** Leaders who delegate and develop their teams effectively can shift demands off themselves, allowing for best use of their (and others’) time.
- **Effective meeting practices—such as clear focus, right people and discipline—preserve efficiency and allow people to feel needed and engaged, rather than overloaded.** A context of openness and safety to share ideas and iterate together also make meetings relevant and opportunities for innovation.
- **Awareness of expertise and norms for reaching out to others can be established through regular team meetings, communities of practice, speaker series, team communication apps and idea-generation platforms.** But without leadership support for learning and sharing, these opportunities can easily fall flat.
- **HR and talent practices—such as hiring for collaborative skill and encouraging talent mobility—help build networks for innovation.** This requires leaders who are willing to share talent and flex teams with a larger purpose in mind.

5 Leadership Practices to Spur Innovation

Luis describes five leadership practices that create a context that allows collaborative innovation to emerge:

1. *Get out of the way.* Remove yourself from the center of the network and shift collaborative demands. For example: present the benefits to others getting more involved, reassure those who are concerned about their value or your support, help newcomers establish legitimacy on the team.
2. *Eat lunch with people to get to know them at a different level.* Connecting off task builds trust and a richer understanding of people’s interests, goals and dreams. Lunchtime conversations also create serendipitous connections and innovation opportunities.
3. *Be a good listener.* Observe to learn what clients or employees need. “If you can’t hear and empathize with what people are dealing with, you can be innovative for the wrong thing.”
4. *Get many opinions and diverse perspectives.* Seek out other people’s thoughts, ideas or concerns before making a decision. “Stay open; don’t rush to judgment.”
5. *Be a player-coach or servant leader.* People will bring ideas and opportunities to you. “People need to know you are part of the solution. You’re not just telling people what to do, but in there working with them. They can trust you more.”

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.