



PRODUCE
INNOVATIVE
SOLUTIONS

Leveraging Internal & External Networks to Generate a Strategic Innovation in a Short Time Frame

CASE CONTEXT

A high-potential leader takes on a short-term, high-profile assignment. She uses her network to build the team, understand the problem space, develop solutions and gain acceptance of her recommendations.



FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL
LEADER

Industry: CONSUMER
PRODUCTS

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.



Naomi has worked for nine intense years at a global consumer products company. The high performer has taken on a range of tactical and strategic roles, with assignments in North America, Africa, Europe and the Middle East. She gained respect as she earned her MBA, got involved in crisis management and sought out high-pressure, fast-paced roles. Currently, she is manager of a brand team in a growing market. A pivotal point in Naomi's career came three years ago when she was tapped to lead one of eight, short-term, high-profile projects. "I got the call: *Hey, here's this opportunity! Next week, you are dropping your role and taking this on.*" The assignment was to make strategy recommendations for the full portfolio of products within the business unit. It involved assessing mature and newer markets, the opportunities and the brand positioning. Naomi was given a \$1 million budget, six summer interns and a four-month deadline. Her boss asked, *What else and who else do you need?*

Naomi knew she was being given a great opportunity. "It was a big honor, but presenting a strategy in four months is a pretty intimidating task." She had been nominated for the project by the sponsor, a division president, who knew her by reputation. "They were looking for someone in the U.S. business who had a global mindset and who had worked on other big projects ... I was seen as someone who would rise to the challenge; I would deliver and go above and beyond." Naomi's boss supported the choice, confident in her ability to manage the team, including the six interns new to the organization and with different levels of marketing skill.

Within days, Naomi mapped out an approach and a rough timetable. Success would be tied to getting the right people lined up quickly, drawing on a broad representation of skills and perspectives. She took her ideas to the president, along with a list of people she wanted to add to the team from finance, customer research and market strategy. "I went in with my recommendations based on people I had worked with in the past or heard through our calibration process were top performers ... I had a good view of the talent pool and who I should fight for."

Naomi also sought team members in each geographic market. "I have learned that being global doesn't make you local. An assumption you make at a global level could be completely wrong at a local level." The president helped her identify potential champions and local talent in each of the markets. He also recommended an external consultant for research, who "ended up being amazing ... She had worked with our senior leaders before and knew their way of thinking, what they would react well to and how to translate research into recommendations."

With her team and network quickly established—and with urgency of the work clear—Naomi pulled everyone together for the first few meetings. Early on, she needed to create shared understanding of the project and factor in ideas, needs and concerns of the full group. Then, the work flow and team size flexed as needed. “Everything moved really quickly. There were certain roles that were more key than we expected. There were others we didn’t need much early on, but did in a big way pushing to the end.”

Naomi also learned to adjust how she managed and engaged the interns, all MBA students hoping for a job offer. With little time to plan the interns’ experience, she made initial assignments, matching an intern with a manager from a functional area or product line, to get them up to speed. “Those guys came into a bit of a swirl. All I could say was, *Here’s your assignment for the first week. Meet this person, look into this area.*” While the task was initially undefined, those managers became mentors to the interns as well as an extension of the team. “They learned the value of those connections and building a strong, open relationship, to say, *Hey, this is what I’m thinking, is this right?*”

Given the timeline, the work was intense. “It was difficult, but looking back, I think being thrown in helped us form as a team ... We were all working weekends, modifying and revising our assumptions and proposals as the final data was coming in. Everybody stepped up because they formed such a bond and couldn’t let each other down.”

The work led to a set of innovative, strategic recommendations. When it came time to present, Naomi already had the support of key stakeholders. “Every single director felt like they were included in the process. They could say, *I don’t think that’s right*, and we would adjust ... They asked questions along the entire journey, so at the end they could say, *Yep, I was involved and I endorse this.*”

The project was fully embraced and implemented. “The biggest thing was that we got full alignment across markets and our recommendations became official strategy.” The interns gained valuable experience (several got job offers with the company) and Naomi’s expanded reputation, skill set and confidence paid off with a sought-after international promotion. “It was a huge win.”

Network Insights

- **Invest in your personal reputation and building trust.** This opens doors to opportunity and gives you the ability to mobilize other people for your projects.
- **Draw on a broad, diverse group to understand the problem space.** Use personal contacts and information from talent review processes to identify experts, stakeholders and influencers to be part of the core or expanded team.
- **Leverage leaders to make additional connections.** They operate in different networks and have awareness of other capabilities in the organization and externally.
- **Facilitate relationships so team members interact directly with each other and across the network.** This is essential for speed and so you do not become a bottleneck.
- **Engage leadership, end users and stakeholders throughout the process.** Initially, this allows you to gain insight, respond to questions and refine work. Later, it brings legitimacy to recommendations and helps ideas gain wide support.

Build a Sense of Purpose in 24/7 Work

In a context of global responsibility and an intense pace of work, Naomi still finds purpose and satisfaction.

- *Appreciate the benefits of success.* Naomi is clear-eyed about what is expected (working nights and weekends, taking on high-visibility assignments) in order to have her desired career. She reminds herself of what she loves about the work, including the chance to experience different cultures. “While I have given up things for my career, it is also nurturing another element. I try to appreciate all the great, crazy experiences I have had because of these roles.”
- *Structure elements of the role around work that gives you a sense of purpose.* Naomi knows her routine work and special projects support corporate social responsibility efforts. “I get excited knowing that by selling our products, we are able to fund those community projects.”
- *Build in more of the collaborations that engage you.* For Naomi, this is largely about working in teams where there is creativity and camaraderie. “I thrive with a strong team environment, where we can easily bounce ideas around, or say, *Oh, this is going to be a tough week.*”
- *Find ways to keep identity outside of work.* When setting firm rules or large blocks of time to “turn off” work is not feasible, fit in time to work out or be with friends. “I feel guilty if I’m not checking emails ... I try to fit in activities that will distract me, but not for long.”

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.