Building a Collaborative Talent Pool for a Global Professional Services Organization

SCALE IDEAS & IMPACT

CASE CONTEXT

A long-term leader has built a system and culture to bring in new talent and build bench strength for the entire business. Collaborative practices are front-and-center in hiring, on-boarding and development.

FEMALE

Level: SENIOR 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.

INNOVATE EXECUTE SCALE THRIVE ADAPT

Angie leads a customer-service function of a company that caters to corporate clients around the world. She joined the

company right out of college, gaining experience in all facets of the work and moving into increasingly senior roles. "I always come back to a role in customer service, providing an exceptional guest experience." But beyond the function that has become her specialty, Angie's "true passion is people and seeing them develop and grow … I've created a recruiting and training process for my team, and we've become the talent pool for the whole organization." Employees who are recruited and trained by Angie's group quickly gain a line of sight to the rest of the business; they apply critical interpersonal and problem-solving skills that are valued across the company. "We don't expect them to stay in customer service. We are the entry path to the organization, a great way to start a career." Angie's approach is a different way of looking at talent mobility, especially in a service function where retaining skilled employees is typically the priority.

Angie's group holds two recruiting sessions each year to pull in 25 new employees, mostly recent college graduates. The ability to collaborate and work as a team is far more important than specific skills. "We are looking for our bench strength, not just for customer service, but for the whole organization … Do they show up well and want a career in the industry?" Interviewers all take the same approach: describe a situation, the action and the results. Was their action collaborative? They also ask how a manager or teammate would describe them, again looking for answers that reflect solving problems with others, reaching out for help and jumping in to help others. The process has been so effective that Angie's jobs are in high demand. Many people are recommended by current employees, resulting in an increasing number of good-fit candidates.

On-boarding of each new cohort of employees involves six weeks of training. The day they start, Angie and the rest of her leadership team personally greet them, walking with them to receive their employee badge. "We want them to know right away that they are part of something bigger than themselves, that this feels more like a family." Training that morning begins with breakfast and time to start building their connections and identity as a team. One activity to learn about each other involves a spreadsheet of facts about the newcomers, which they had shared beforehand. They talk to each other, finding commonalities and matching up facts with faces: *Oh, are you the skydiver? … You speak two languages? … I have a lot of siblings, too!* This begins their immersive time together, where they have the same experiences, learning and working as a team.

Also on day one, each person is assigned both a manager and a coach. The manager joins in on parts of the training and starts to build a relationship. The coach is a senior leader who gives perspective and creates an instant network inside the company. Over the weeks, both the manager and coach have "stop, start, continue" conversations with the employee to develop skills and guide behavior. Through regular on-on-ones they get to know each other, including the new employee's career goals and aspirations.

During training and the next several months, the cohort is physically located together. "They do everything together. They support each other. They go to lunch together. They hang out … It's a feeling of camaraderie that stays with them." Having a strong cohort network is associated with decreased voluntary turnover, and, for Angie, is the foundation of the collaboration needed across the company to meet the needs of the customer.

While a few people do choose to leave, or are clearly not a strong match and are not retained, most thrive. "If they make it past training and to the 3-4 month mark, then we start figuring out where we think the right fit for them is, what do they think they want to do?" The manager and coach will prep them for a future role, including arranging for a short stint in that area, alerting them to job openings or helping them improve interviewing skills. "Now, they've got a leg up from any outside candidate." Within six to 18 months, the newcomer is well established and moved into their next role in the company.

Developing people has been a way Angie has reinforced and scaled the company's culture as well, which had been hierarchical and fear-based under previous leadership. "We went from *leave your personal stuff at the door* to now *managing the whole person* … It's OK to tell us what's going on because we are going to be here to support you." Angie gives attention employees in small ways— walking through the workspace, being visible, chatting, knowing about people's lives—as well as through aspirational coaching, open dialogue and giving and receiving feedback. "I'm having transformational conversations and experiences I never had before … I've been told, *The type of support you are giving to me I never had, even from my parents and I really want to be part of this organization because of it.*"

Network Insights

- **Hire for collaboration.** Ask for people to describe a problem-solving situation, actions taken and results. Listen for responses that focus on "we" not "I." Also, leverage the current employee network for referrals— they know what is needed and will pre-screen for collaborative behaviors.

- **Design on-boarding to build connections.** Pair new hires with managers and coaches for development and ties into the company. Set up activities and systems to establish a strong cohort of newcomers to reduce turnover.

- **Tailor employee experiences to support mobility.** Coaching toward career goals and personal aspirations has an impact on employee satisfaction, sense of purpose, engagement, productivity and retention.

- **Be intentional about leadership practices, including small actions.** Be a familiar face in the employee's work area, stop to talk about them—not just work. A pattern of openness and conversation builds trust and sets the tone for collaboration.

Transitioning From a Toxic Office to a Purpose-Based Network

Angie recalls when leadership at her company created a fear-based, non-collaborative environment. "I remember the vice-president would stopped by my office, peek her head in and say, *We need flawless execution on this!*—and then walk away … The feeling of intimidation!"

Several years ago, new leaders came in and set a different tone and backed it up with practices that fostered purpose, trust and employee development. Now, nothing is done in a silo. Information is shared across the company. Employees at all levels contribute to special projects or committees. People readily give and ask for help. "Now, you feel like your voice is being heard. Before, you felt silenced and you had to be careful. Now you have freedom. The leadership team wants to hear your thoughts."

Groups are given time off for community involvement. An annual bike ride to raise money for a local charity is a fun and meaningful company event. Often, co-workers get together on evenings; some take vacations together.

"There's a sense of family here now. We are all focused on doing the right thing for our clients and also for each other."

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.