



SCALE
IDEAS &
IMPACT

Leadership Principles to Scale Collaborative Practices as a Strategic Differentiator



CASE CONTEXT

The head of a global business unit scales collaboration through her personal leadership practices. With clarity and openness, she builds both trust and efficiency into interactions. She sees the company gaining momentum as a result.

Carolyn leads the fastest-growing business unit of a global consumer products company. She joined the company in

2000, after gaining experience in sales, marketing and finance with a small, European competitor. She was part of a team to reshape sales and customer service functions, before becoming division director and moving to the U.S. six years ago. Through multiple role transitions, Carolyn emphasized collaboration as a lever for efficiency and growth.

As a senior leader, Carolyn is transparent about her principles and decision-making process. “I am clear about my thinking. There are four lenses through which I make a decision: One, how does this help with driving sales of our products and services? Two, how does this impact customers? Three, how does this impact employee satisfaction? Four, does it help us grow at a lower cost? ... And, I don’t ask just a division or functional question; always, how does this help the company?” These guiding factors prevent narrow thinking about priorities and success. With these clear principles, Carolyn gives people throughout her organization a North Star they can hold her and themselves accountable to. This builds trust that allows collaboration to flourish.

To scale a culture of collaboration, Carolyn relies on other leaders to consistently and explicitly operate from the same principles. “You can’t be in every meeting. You’ve got to make sure this becomes part of the DNA of the team. When I took on this role, I talked though what I expect of you and what you can expect of me. It took my team through how I think ... I bring that presentation out again every year, and I refer back to it in conversations. It grounds people.” Carolyn’s consistency gives her team confidence to make decisions, operate across silos and cascade that message of collaboration through the business.

Alongside the big-picture expectations, Carolyn has instituted specific tactics for efficient collaboration. She keeps meetings to 30 or 45 minutes. “That eliminated a lot of the waffle. It forces a lot of conversation to take place outside of the room, between each other, and not bringing everything to me.” Other tactics include limiting the number of people in meetings (“We don’t need two people from the same team in the room”), starting meetings on time, being prepared, providing people with information ahead of time and being diligent about doing pre-work and pre-reading. These efforts minimize overload, prevent bottlenecks and save time—leading to more rapid execution and delivery. “It is accelerating our momentum.” Collaborative efficiencies are also about respect: respecting each others’ time and respecting employees to make wise decisions on how to allocate their time.



FEMALE

Level: SENIOR 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.





Another key to scaling collaboration is hiring the right people. Carolyn’s team looks for collaborative skill and a track record of shared decision making during candidate interviews. She also hires “marathon runners, not sprinters.” She wants people who can sustain collaboration and manage pressure over time. She looks to have a mix of people who can cope and are steady, and “those who over-cope, the people who love urgency, who love a crisis.” This allows the company to balance time spent on front-end attention to detail with taking action. Too many of either personality in a team or on a project is a problem. Without the right balance, teams lose the momentum and energy of an idea. Conversely, if they don’t spend enough time early on, implementation goes wrong and the fire fighters need to take action. “You can’t view success as fixing problems, as celebrating only the fire fighters, the heroes ... You have to celebrate the people who work in a way that keep the fire fighting from being needed. If you only recognize people who saved the day, you feed that energy and negate the value of the effort and collaboration of a lot of others.”

Carolyn also knows that keeping good people and being successful as a business requires getting new people quickly connected to others in the network. “I tell people to network into the company by tenure, not by hierarchy—that’s how collaboration happens, how projects move. It’s how you know who to call to get things done ... You can get isolated quickly, or your ideas shot down, if you don’t ... You will feel it quickly, and then it is hard to recover ... So, find those influential people. If you can plug into that, you can plug into their entire network.” As people effectively use their network, processes and ideas move across projects, geographies and functions, fostering innovation and scaling work.

Vulnerability and humility are personal traits Carolyn has increasingly come to value. “Through your vulnerabilities you make yourself stronger. Don’t try to be perfect or bulletproof before you bring others in ... And, humility is critical. If you lose humility, arrogance can take over. That’s when you lose sight of the external world and start competing internally ... That’s what will bring collaboration to a halt and slows us down.”

Network Insights

- **Have clear principles and communicate them crisply.** This creates trust in you and your processes and allows collaboration to flourish.
- **Put decisions in the wider context.** Ask others: *How will your decision impact sales, customers, employees and growth? How does this help the company?* Decisions should go beyond a narrow benefit.
- **Treat time like gold.** For collaboration to be done well, teams need to use efficient meeting practices (i.e., shorter duration, well-planned, right people) and respect others’ abilities to proceed outside of meetings. This prevents collaborative overload and speeds progress.
- **Hire for collaboration and balance.** Look for a track record of working effectively with others, but also different styles to bring into the mix. Hire people who are steady and diligent as well as those who will rush in or thrive in crisis-mode—both are needed.
- **Show vulnerability and humility.** When you aren’t demanding perfection, people will take risks. They will stop competing with each other and get to better solutions.

Building Purpose by Giving Back

Creating personal connections and having a shared sense of purpose help trust form at work. One way Carolyn’s company fosters this is through community involvement.

1. *Each location chooses how they give back locally.* Holding food drives or serving meals, volunteering for charity runs, tutoring in schools and participating in nature conservation efforts are a few examples. Employees are given time off to volunteer together.
2. *Community champions report on their activities through internal social media.* Employees post photos and stories.
3. *Participation is measured and rewarded.* The company tracks hours and publicly recognizes people who are making a difference—just as they would recognize excellence in sales or other area of performance.

“It creates parallel purpose and stronger internal community for us. Everybody participates. It’s a great way to get to know each other ... People see their impact apart from the company, but it is happening with their co-workers ... Giving back, volunteering with each other, gives you perspective and gratitude. Employees rank it as one of the most important things for engagement and pride in their company.”

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.