



SCALE IDEAS & IMPACT

CASE CONTEXT

A technical leader builds reputation and drives support for a scientific capability following a merger. He grows his team and scales the work, resulting in personal and team success and benefits across the global business.



MALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL
LEADER

Industry: HEALTHCARE

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.



Scaling a Scientific Capability Through Networks Inside & Outside of an Organization

Three decades ago, Curtis began his career in microbiology research. Eight years later, he took a post at a pharmaceutical firm where he held various roles tied to research, product testing and development. He established a new quality process and focused on moving his work from theory to application. Over the years and through various mergers and re-organizations, Curtis scaled the scientific capability, expanding it into a global function. He now manages a group of 12 specialists who fly to sites around the world to help with specific issues; they co-develop new technologies with suppliers and internal groups; they serve as technical consultants and are a knowledge center.

Curtis' specialty was a fragmented and uneven capability in the global company following the most recent merger. "It was not clear across the company who had responsibility or what we should be doing globally. The science was good, but there was not a lot of trust ... At the time, I had a small center of excellence at a local level. Leadership saw my group was special and they thought it would be a good thing to expand and do globally." The uptake of his work did not happen by accident. "I did a lot of lobbying."

In the months after the merger, corporate leaders visited all the sites and Curtis was ready to share his views and showcase his lab. "I showed up to their events; I gave presentations; I volunteered to give tours ... Every visit, I saw as a chance to show what I could do with my group." Having processes and outputs to show opened the door to conversations about other applications and relevance of the science to various groups. "I talked to people about their issues, and I helped them see my group as a solution for their issues. That's how I got sponsorship." *This co-creation and story-telling process differentiated Curtis and his group from other ideas or approaches that could have been adopted.*

Curtis' professional ties outside the company also played a role. For years, he was active in scientific and professional associations, which was valued within the company and served him in key ways. He grew his scientific knowledge and learned what was working well in other life sciences companies. He also gained confidence and legitimacy in selling others on his ideas and what his group could do. "I had confidence that we were on the right track, that this was the way to go for the company." These types of external ties and outlets are excellent for gaining perspective, ideas, legitimacy and confidence that parlays into work, but most people overlook that value in the rush of day-to-day demands and internal networks.

It wasn't long before Curtis had a chance to demonstrate the value of his approach. He was brought in to guide a project at a different site. He transferred, living in another country for two years, while members of his group traveled to provide additional support when needed. "We were successful ... People saw my vision; they saw what was needed; they saw we were really going for it." The early win built reputation and momentum for Curtis and his team. He won over skeptics, had a new story and an expanded network to draw on for the funding and political support needed for next steps and growth.

Curtis has been equally diligent about developing his team of high-end experts. It is challenging enough to find people with the right technical skills, willingness to travel and openness to other cultures. But he also needs his people to morph their expertise to specific challenges, be proactive and collaborate effectively. "It is a continuous process to find the right people; I'm always recruiting." Curtis is clear with his team about what he expects of them and what they should expect of him. "I trust them and give them total freedom to do their work ... I tell them, *I am your facilitator. I am asking you to do things, but it is my job to facilitate so you are able to do the job.*" The team works hard, traveling on short notice and working on complex challenges. "That is only possible if I am taking obstacles out of their work, if they trust me, if they know I am backing them up." Accountability is built into site outcomes and annual reviews. "I tell them at the end of the year, we will have a detailed discussion of what you delivered. That will be a very important day for you."

In the day-to-day work, Curtis focuses on helping the team navigate the politics within and across the various sites and pushing them to collaborate effectively. They have a weekly call, always adjusted to different time zones so no group is always disadvantaged, for people to ask for help and ideas. "We always need to work together, as a team, to do a job. We figure out who they need, how to manage the demand ... It is no good if they act as individuals doing their own thing not connected to each other."

By learning from and leveraging a global network, Curtis has successfully scaled his expertise, providing an innovative and highly valued capability to a multi-billion company.

Network Insights

- **Reach out to leaders and influencers outside your usual sphere and give them something tangible to see.** Tours and demonstrations, prototypes or pilot projects give something tangible to react to. They are excellent starting points for conversation about other applications or problems to solve.
- **Invest in professional relationships and organizations outside of your company.** You learn and grow your expertise and gain legitimacy and confidence you can parlay back into your career and the company.
- **Execute a visible win.** This builds momentum and reputation, as well as happy sponsors and customers, which will pull you toward more and better projects.
- **Be committed to your team.** Hire people who are excited by challenges and possibilities and are eager to co-create and collaborate. Remove obstacles and facilitate their success.

Network Tips for Scaling Center of Excellence

Curtis has scaled a small center of excellence into a global resource. Here's what worked:

1. *Be clear on the problem to solve and gain broad sponsorship to get to real issues.* "It won't work if the technology or problem is the hobby of one senior leader."
2. *Hire for the right profile of expert.* Bring in deep expertise, but also an ability to adapt knowledge to need and a collaborative mindset. Look for enthusiasm around problem solving and a drive for change. "When there is an issue, there are two types of people: Those who say, *Oh, damn, that's a lot of work; what are we going to do?* The other type starts to smile, and says, *Oooh, how are we going to solve this?* The second is what I'm looking for."
3. *Be a facilitator for your team.* Tell them that you are in front and behind them, constantly identifying and removing obstacles to success. Set the vision for them to do their work and mechanisms of accountability. But stay out of the how. "Removing barriers and giving freedom creates energy."
4. *Leverage sponsors to get past obstacles and political dynamics.* "There will always be people pushing you back; you can spend a lot of energy on that ... I try to get away from that, always showing what we are doing and our value ... I will ask a sponsor for help or to get clarity."
5. *Build interactions into your working rhythm that keep you energized—and have something compelling outside of work to pull you away.* "I get energy from customers, energy from my people. And, sometimes, I just go fly fishing! You have to put work in perspective—we can make it bigger than it is."

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.