



SCALE
IDEAS &
IMPACT

Creating Networks of Trust to Initiate & Scale a Diversity & Inclusion Strategy

CASE CONTEXT

A skilled and committed leader is invited to be part of a high-value task force. She contributes her skills and perspectives to a company-wide initiative, learning to draw on multiple voices and create a compelling narrative for change.



FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL 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.



As a learning and development manager for a global professional services firm, Dara is immersed in work she believes matters most in her career and to her company. “In the past year, I have been part of a diversity and inclusion task force—a group that has come together to be sure we are providing access to opportunity and a welcoming place, for everyone, across the board.”

Diversity and difference had been widely valued in the organization, but it was not clear what needed to be done to live that value fully. The CEO committed to understanding and improvement, and two senior leaders led the effort. The leaders, who were respected and influential, had expertise in organizational learning, operations and change. “Having a white male and an African American female, both vice presidents, gave it visibility and credibility—this was important.” They both brought a deep commitment to diversity and a strategic view of what was needed. “They had tenacity, and I appreciated how they were thinking about it ... They were clear: *We want to be sure the work that we do will really impact our culture ...* They weren’t looking at this as a metric, not just talking numbers or getting bodies in seats. They cared about how we got there and how we showed commitment.”

The two leaders created the task force, inviting people who were diverse in terms of race, culture, gender and sexual identity as well as people representing different groups, levels and roles. They also wanted people on the team who were opinion leaders, who were passionate about the issue and enthusiastic about new ideas. While many people had been with the organization for a long time, they were open to possibilities and committed to changing culture. Dara was asked to join the group, and she found from the beginning, the leaders created a context of openness, authenticity and trust. “Some of us didn’t know each other at all and for everyone the context for working together was new ... But quickly, there was a synergy, a trust that was developed. Everyone felt they could come to the table and share ... We got it right in that group.” The combination of purpose and passion among the members and leaders who were trusted and open created a context for what became a powerful collaboration.

Early on, the task force looked at both quantitative and qualitative data, “an important starting point, because, as an organization, this is what we do, this is where we live.” They researched the numbers: *Who is in what roles? What are salary ranges? What do we know about promotions, reviews, who is getting what ratings, who is getting projects?* Then, Dara and others held small focus groups and one-on-one meetings, for people to share their experiences and perspectives.

“The most poignant part was looking at the qualitative data ... When we all came back together and started to share the stories, it was very, very powerful ... One person would tell a story, then another person would say, *Oh, there is a similar story in my group* ... It was a coming together and was very emotional to hear what was happening through the organization.” The group gained new energy around their purpose. The task force told the stories, simply and authentically, when they presented what they learned with the CEO and other senior leaders. “The stories showed how people were *experiencing* the quantitative data.”

The task force members then turned their attention from where they were to where they wanted to be. They sought input informally, testing their ideas and interpretations with colleagues outside the group as they developed recommendations. “People were circulating and talking about the stories and the work being done.” This helped the team frame the narrative and next steps in a way that would be compelling throughout the organization.

After nearly a year of working together, exploring the data and hearing stories, the task force presented the CEO with recommendations. Most important was the need to name a chief diversity officer to take responsibility and accountability for the work and keep it going. In addition, the task force was adapted into a permanent council. Dara is leading several actions within her learning and development team, some that can move forward quickly. Others on the team—and top leadership—have begun to factor diversity and inclusion into other aspects of the business. “This is not an initiative in a box ... We all recognize this is something we have to live in order to make a difference.”

The trust and energy that was established within the task force and among leadership has allowed culture change to begin. “I believe the foundation that was laid, the work that has been done and the stories that were shared will have an impact in the years to come ... I want it to continue to be something on the minds of individuals ... I want us to have dialogue and conversation and to know that every voice is important. If we are only listening to the loudest voices, we are not including everyone.”

Network Insights

- **When scaling a value-laden idea or culture change, insist on credible leadership.** Leaders who are trusted and respected provide legitimacy. They should also bring tenacity (so the work won't drop, even when it is tough and other demands are significant), strategic perspective (so the big purpose or goals do not get papered over by tactics, activities or shallow metrics) and a network perspective (to create a team of influencers and bring in multiple voices).
- **Bring influencers together in a context of trust.** Express purpose beyond your self-interest, handle difficult conversations well and show discretion. Create a setting for others to be open, frank and authentic, to take risks and challenge assumptions.
- **Employ qualitative and quantitative data to mobilize the need for change.** Quantitative is typically the tip of the iceberg that supports the case for change. *Qualitative stories are the emotional experiences that mobilize people to take action. Do not under-invest in hearing and understanding those narratives.*
- **Use narratives to connect to the rest of the organization.** Show how real examples and stories have shaped your thinking and future plans. Keep listening to and learning from people's reactions and ideas; refine and adapt recommendations along the way.

Scale Cultural Change through Networks & Narrative

Stories conveyed by influencers help culture change take hold in organizations. Steps to take include:

1. Engage well-connected opinion leaders on a team or task force to design and implement initial efforts.
2. Create room for others to be a meaningful part of conversations and make sure they see how their efforts will contribute to an evolving plan.
3. Bring in evidence. Quantitative evidence often provides factual basis and support for change. Qualitative data building off the numbers captures the emotional and experiential stories needed to move people to action.
4. Use effective narrative structures to tell stories and use examples in ways that will have the most impact. Involve people who can help you learn storytelling and communicate narratives in effective ways to various groups.
5. Rely on well-connected team members and influencers to tell their stories and share the compelling narrative for change.

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.