



SCALE IDEAS & IMPACT

Leveraging Networks to Build a New Service Offering

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced project leader routinely relies on core teams and cross-functional support to develop and implement client-focused solutions. His purpose-built networks drive results by keeping aligned with the *why* of the work.



MALE

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.



Bryant has deep knowledge of the research tied to employee motivation, engagement and learning. For more than a decade, he has worked for a firm that develops a range of programs and products designed to help companies attract, retain and develop employees. His current role is leading a small team to measure quality and improve program effectiveness. Much of the firm's work is customized for clients, resulting in the development of a wide range of solutions and approaches. Bryant and his team have worked to connect best practices and scale effective solutions across the firm's various specialties and markets. A recent project resulted in a tool that allows the program-development teams to measure current projects and develop new ones based on essential principles.

The idea for the project began when Bryant was working directly with colleagues involved on the research side of the company. So many fields—ranging from neuroscience to behavioral economics to social learning—were exploding. There was a sense that client work would benefit from new information and big ideas; the question was how to make it actionable. “We needed to update our perceptions of who people are and what that means for how companies motivate and engage employees ... A small group of us began trying to parse out the most meaningful principles we could capture from the science.” Bryant and two others started the project and informally reached out to involve others who would have a vested interest in the work. “We talked to people who had curiosity *and* who were also in roles to facilitate the roll out and application when we were ready.”

The small core group identified the principles and supporting elements. They returned to their curious peers in program development, seeking sounding boards for how to simplify and package the ideas in a way that would be useful to clients. They landed on the idea of an assessment, modeled after a framework that had been used successfully in a different context. “We had initial interest and a framework to work against. The key was to understand the end goal and then refine the work to get there.” Bryant and his team created a prototype of the assessment and began to shop it out to different teams. “We scheduled a series of meetings with the program design teams, sales and marketing and client program managers. In every session, we walked through the prototype and applied it to see how it worked and where the bumps were.”

The process of engaging others through the prototype helped Bryant refine the tool and gave him insight to the projects or groups that might be ideal candidates for testing. People were able to practice how to apply it, and Bryant could see who was most enthusiastic. “When we were ready with the next iteration, we had a good idea who would be our early adopter teams to try and take it to a client.”

The process of involving the people who are selling and designing programs early on and in various stages was essential for the adoption of the tool. It’s an approach that is common in Bryant’s organization, encouraged by leadership at all levels and across the organization. “We have steering committees or core teams for just about everything. We’re good at getting that cross-functional representation ... Nothing goes too far down the tracks before we get the real-world perspective of people who have to do something with a new idea or a big change.”

This approach of engagement resulted in significant energy in the work. One early adopter saw the bigger purpose in the work. “She had strong personal drive to make sure we are on the leading edge of our field. She talked about this work as being part of our bigger goal, tied it to the notion of being better designers for ourselves, more effective for our clients and to be recognized in the industry.”

As the work was implemented, Bryant and his team continued to support the expansion of the process. “Our job is to make sure they have what they need to do it well.” They collaborated with marketing to create stories, videos and case studies around the principles, why they matter and how they are applied—examples of how communication supported both internal adoption and interest among potential clients.

After one year in the piloting phase, the work was expanded. Teams have become familiar with the principles and how to apply them. Client projects have gone from an average score of 40 percent on the assessment to nearly 70 percent. “More teams are using the assessment and we are seeing improvement across the board—exactly what we wanted to see happen.”

Network Insights

- **Establish project teams based on skill, plus curiosity and influence.** Bring in knowledgeable, interested people, but also include people who can facilitate input and a smooth rollout.
- **Clarify and align understanding of purpose.** Establish the “why” in the work. Help the team or unit have line-of-sight to the value proposition or unique offering. This builds engagement for ideas and execution.
- **Create a framework or prototype to test with internal or external clients.** Provide opportunities to test early on, then revise based on input. This boosts uptake of new effort more broadly and willingly.
- **Ensure leader behavior does not run counter to purpose.** Reinforce value in the work through leader visibility, behavior and transparency—all critical early on to establish lateral networks needed for implementation. Leader recognition also helps bring purpose to the frontline.

4 Ways to Foster Peer-to-Peer Collaboration

Bryant and his organization thrive on strong peer-to-peer networks to innovate and scale new ideas and products. Some tips for strong peer-to-peer collaboration include:

1. **Establish and reiterate purpose.** Why does the organization, unit or network exist? What is the value proposition or unique offering? What are you trying to accomplish in the work and in your business or industry? What culture, behaviors and collaborative practices are needed to reflect or align peers around the purpose?
2. **Ensure leaders are consistent in what they do and what they say.** Leader recognition and behavior is critical early to establish peer networks. Leaders at all levels need to be synched to the purpose and behave consistently.
3. **Diffuse communication practices and use technology to support, communicate and celebrate valued behaviors broadly.** Tell stories to reinforce collaborative practices and celebrate behavior.
4. **Employ peer recognition practices.** Anyone can give recognition for collaborative support: helping out a colleague, pitching in for another team, breaking down silos. Tools to help you recognize your network may include internal news feeds and symbolic rewards as well as points systems or games that add up to bigger awards.

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.