Network Practices that Pull an Individual Contributor into a Productive Network

SCALE IDEAS & IMPACT

CASE CONTEXT

An early-career project manager builds the networks to help her learn new tasks and skills and to develop the organizational and leadership savvy she needs to grow in the company. Her individual performance is magnified by her role as an energizer and connector within the larger network.

FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: TECHNOLOGY

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

Two internships during college led Celia to a job in computer science, working with engineers, product
developers and data analysts. Nearly three years later, she has contributed to several teams and is now a project manager for a new product. Through various role transitions and changing managers, Celia has built a network that has fueled her early-career learning and performance.

From the beginning, Celia's experience was positively influenced by her managers and skip-level managers. "As an intern, I could see these were the people I needed to learn from ... One of the early things I learned about myself is that I have the ability to put people at ease; people feel comfortable talking to me ... One of my managers said, *You are the glue that holds the team together. You bring the passion and energy that unites them.* I didn't know that about myself."

Creating energy or engagement is one thing individual contributors do when they are effective. They pull others into their work or ideas or networks by the ways they interact. Celia began to pay attention to what she did (or didn't do) as she worked with others to accomplish goals. She watched and emulated leaders around her. Today, she knows her physical presence—eye contact, body language, talking with her hands to show excitement—communicates interest and energy. The way she talks to others shows she's listening and giving space for others to contribute. "I do a lot of repeating back, reflecting back what someone says. When I first started doing that, it felt weird but now it feels natural ... I also talk in an emphatic and optimistic way. I try to see what is possible and convey interest. Even if internally I am negative and cynical, I don't portray that because I know it doesn't help or bring anything good. I focus on what is good, what is important, why it's great to be a part of something."

That sense of being part of something important comes, in part, from Celia's larger network. She jump-started her network as an intern, reaching out to people across levels and functions. Initially, she saw this as a way to learn and gain help—now she brings value to her peers and her project team by virtue of who she knows. "As an intern, I was encouraged to meet people, seek out people to answer questions or just go have lunch. From that it spiraled ... Now I am more sought out by other people; the people already in my network extend my network for me. Whether for a work reason or a personal reason, I am able to connect people with others. Then they appreciate that connection."

Within the network, Celia works to establish genuine and respectful relationships. She prefers informal and direct conversation to email exchanges. "My best collaboration is one-on-one, in person. Too often, people use email or online interactions as a crutch to avoid vulnerability. They don't want to risk an interaction where they could come across in a negative way … Some of this is how we are taught in school, where you are focused on looking smart, instead of talking things through … I am OK to be vulnerable. I am not afraid to look dumb or ask a stupid question. If I've missed something I'll go ask— let me get the information in whatever way I can."

Celia's current role came about when one of her managers moved to a different group, heading up the development of a new product line. "My project became a different priority, and he said you can pick between these two things for what you want to work on … He made me feel like I had a choice, but I'm pretty sure I didn't have a choice! A couple days later he came by and said, *OK, you're with me, right?*"

Celia was excited to be immersed in the project's fast-paced and creative work. "It was a fun time. We were doing a lot of brainstorming, prototyping." Initially, she made a lot of progress by working directly with the engineers. As the work evolved, she learned a lot from the other project managers— particularly how to balance structure with ambiguity. "In your first jobs, people give you specific tasks. This was different. I had to learn how to live in an ambiguous situation for quite awhile."

Recently, Celia began to make some changes to address collaborative overload, dividing work with a trusted peer and delegating to the team. Influencing without authority, she tries to keep the engineers interested and engaged in the work. "You want people rallied around the idea and why they are doing it … I talk about the impact of their work, what's happening with the customer. I also am very open to new ideas. I don't say *no* to anything right away. I'll say, *let's explore that, anything is possible*. That mentality is a fun mentality."

Celia has gained new skills, developed an effective leadership style and strengthened her network. She has contributed significantly to the product design and the process for moving it forward. "I have now established myself in this role—it's a good start."

Network Insights

- **Engage with others by creating energized interactions, not by showing how smart you are.** Being right or having the answers is less important than connecting with others, creating energy by seeing possibilities and morphing what you know to the other person's work.

- **Leverage managers for introductions to others doing similar work.** Build your network early and it will become an asset. As you become central, you will reach out less and be pulled in more based on your reputation and connections.

- **Learn to be comfortable with the ambiguity of face-to-face interactions.** Make yourself vulnerable and willing to explore rather than drafting bulletproof emails to convey your ideas. In-person conversations allow you to uncover possibilities and build more trusted relationships.

- **Scale beyond yourself to avoid collaborative overload.** The two-year-mark is a typical pivot point for individual contributors. Divide and delegate work in new ways. A core capability at this point is influencing without authority, which includes getting others energized by your projects and helping them gain a sense of purpose.

How Junior Individual Contributors Leverage Managers & Mentors to Improve Performance

Celia's relationship with a skip-level manager strengthened her technical skills and provided ideas and energy. He helped her navigate team processes and grow her network. To build a similar relationship with a boss or mentor, try these tips.

1. Set up bi-weekly meetings. Discuss one or two things that are going well and one or two challenges. This will give you ideas on how to approach groups, solve issues or present information. Your mentor will benefit, too. Often, satisfaction increases for mentors as they help others.

2. Seek advice on priorities. Ask your mentor to help you establish priorities, see work in a broader context and talk through strategies for managing competing demands.

3. Ask for help connecting to others. Who does your mentor know in the organization who is working on similar topics? Meet with these people early on.

4. Talk about your professional aspirations. Seek advice on how best to prepare for what's next. With awareness of your current role and your future interests, he or she will be able to position you for future opportunities.

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.