SCALE IDEAS & IMPACT

Small Team Drives Revenue Growth via Overhaul of Sales

CASE CONTEXT

A strategic advisor moves into a crucial operations role, leading a team to reinvent the sales process and meet aggressive growth goals. With the right people and energy-building processes, a new approach was developed quickly and implemented successfully.

FEMALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

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.

Chrystal joined a start-up technology venture as head of strategy after working for a major business consultancy.

What she thought would be a two-year gig turned into eight years and an effort that was "the gold star in my career. We did the cross-functional, go-after-a- big-problem thing really well, from start to finish, with all the right people—and delivered the business outcome and had big impact."

About a year into her strategic role, the company lost a client that made up a third of the firm's revenue. "It was just an enormous step back … The question was, do we retrench or do we get more aggressive? ... Enough of us thought there was an opportunity to go big. I just think people just said, *I don't want to work at a company that's going to grow at 10 percent a year. I came here to do something bigger* … So, we decided to double down on growth … We completely revolutionized how we went to market. And I ended up in the role to lead that work."

With a mandate for growth, Chrystal created a team of ten to change the sales methodology and build out strategic sales functions. "I pulled together the one or two smartest people from each of the relevant functions. The first few names came immediately to mind because they have specific knowledge and they're leaders in their domain. They're creative. They're innovative. They're influential … Then we filled out the team with sales guys. We put them on the team, in part, because we wanted a sales person to be able to say, *I helped create this and this is the right thing for the business*. So, that was deliberate."

The team was filled with "strong personalities" and there was always "a lot of energy in the room during those meetings." From the start, they galvanized around their larger purpose and shared responsibility for success. "We had this really healthy mix of senior and junior people on the team, but everybody, regardless of their rank, was equal and on the team to work and contribute. We all felt like we were doing something that really mattered in a life-or-death way for the company."

To Chrystal, the team's sense of purpose was a differentiator, and she led the project in a way that maintained that passion. She structured her role to be both project manager and "the person who's really got their head around the work … I didn't want a separate project manager, whose job was to just remind people, *Oh, your thing is due next Friday*. We could be tighter, go much faster, if I kept up with the logistics by engaging in a discussion about the things that they are trying to solve. It's just a totally different dynamic."

©2016 The Network Roundtable LLC. All rights reserved.

"Too often dialogue stays at the superficial level when teams are coming together. And, that is fundamentally not interesting, not bringing out the best in people. So, I believe in doing what it takes to get below that superficial level, whether it's acting as a thought partner to somebody, or helping them understand the real why behind their work … If you don't get to the authenticity, nothing is going to happen. People are not going to be engaged."

As the team built out the new sales methodology and related assets, they pulled in the CEO and vice-president of sales and a range of sales and marketing people to introduce the new direction, gauge reactions and get input. Then quickly, the team rolled it out. "We had our sales kickoff and said, *Here is what we're doing and here are all the reasons why we're doing it and why we think it's going to work* … I remember getting challenged quite a bit … and the CEO stepped up and said, *We're going to do it. Nobody knows for sure if it's going to work, but it's our best guess. And if it doesn't work, we're going to fix it.*"

Chrystal's team was able to learn, react and adapt the process readily—living up to that promise to both move ahead and fix things on the fly as needed. During the rollout, they worked closely with people who were influencers in key pockets of the organization's network to obtain feedback and adapt rapidly. As opinion leaders became convinced, they created confidence in others. Sales teams held extensive debriefs after customer meetings to ask, *What worked? What didn't work? What do we need to fix for next time?* Monthly sales meetings and quarterly ops reviews continued the process. "There was a lot built in to have that sales process become a continuous learning machine."

The gamble on growth was a huge success. "Within a year, we were closing twice as many deals as we had been before. We were able to maintain a very high growth rate. We ended up beating out all of our competition over the course of two or three years … Our work was broadly recognized as having a big impact. Personally, it allowed me to transition from a strategy role to an operating role. It definitely helped catapult my career and made me very credible inside the organization as someone who could tackle big problems."

©2016 The Network Roundtable LLC. All rights reserved.

Network Insights

- **Staff a project team with people from diverse expertise domains to gain creativity and knowledge.** Also include network influencers from groups that will be affected—this provides legitimacy, keeps solutions grounded and speeds implementation.
- **Gain commitment and build energy by removing formal power.** Set team norms early in ways that value all players and all input. Do not let hierarchy steer team interactions.
- **Manage projects through interactions that do more than chase people down for their assigned tasks.** Authentically engage team members; help them see impact and build a sense of purpose.
- **Commit to the change and promise to refine.** To move ahead with speed, let affected networks know that the process includes testing and refining solutions—rather than losing time trying for perfection initially.

Personal Prioritization & Scheduling Discipline Reduce Collaborative Overload

Collaborative overload can easily pull a senior leader in non-strategic directions. Chrystal sets clear priorities and is diligent with scheduling to prevent distraction and ensure she pays attention to what matters most. Here's her approach:

1. Create anchors for organizing work and responding to requests. Define clear categories that help prioritize time in a way that optimizes the value you bring to the organization, builds your capabilities and enhances well being over time. Consider:
   - Current business contributions and goals.
   - Long-term capability development.
   - Network development.
   - Personal goals and external relationships.
2. Set time to plan the week. Structure one hour into your calendar at end of each week to set the next week's calendar, making time for each of the priorities.
3. Give enough to make a difference. Schedule sufficient blocks of time in each category to move ahead, including building needed networks.
4. Hold fast. Be willing to decline interactions or assignments that do not address current imperatives or add value to these categories. Delegate with clarity.

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.