SCALE IDEAS & IMPACT

Expanding Strategic & Financial Impact by Scaling Networks

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced manager builds his team and makes the case to take on a project bigger and more complex than it has done in the past. He ends up leading an expanded network of 500 people from 70 locations and multiple business units—and transforms the capabilities of the firm in the process.

MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

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

When the chance came to bid on a transformational, career-defining project, Fritz was the evangelist for the work,

"traipsing around the company convincing people we could win the job." The work would be the largest project the company had done, in terms of scope and revenue. But if they got it—and delivered—it would materially change the capability and reputation of the company. "A transformational project like this is one that you've never done before. If you do it, it's like taking a quantum leap upwards to a new atmosphere of other similar projects. Other clients now see, *OK, you did that, then you can do mine.*"

Developing a new, large-scale strategic capability—and having the essential skills to win the work—began with Fritz's existing team. As head of a unit that manages design and development of water infrastructure projects, Fritz had been slowly building his team's expertise through three significant projects during previous years. "We were able to tell this client, *Yes, we're qualified. This is larger than anything we've done before, but look how similar it is to the last three projects that we've worked on*. We convinced them to sign us because we would bring that same team."

Because of the size and complexity of the project, Fritz also needed experts from across the company. "I had to go on an internal campaign of building the network and the rest of the project team to commit to the proposal—the geotechnical staff, modeling staff, architecture, power generation, fuel management, transportation. Literally, we had to draw from the whole company."

Within the multiple disciplines, Fritz had to convince both individuals and their business unit leaders to get behind the project. "To win large projects like this, you're up against the best of the best. So, you need your best staff, and, inevitably, the best staff always has something to do. They're never the ones with time on their hands." To engage the people he needed, he showed them how the project would change their careers and build a strategic capability for the business: *You know what's downstream of this for the company if we're successful? … I know you're busy right now. Help me with this project, and your next five or ten years will be materially different.*

Fritz also collaborated with legal, risk management and others to address liabilities. He engaged senior leaders to understand the implications of the commitment. Because of the project size and the demands across the company, the buy-in and the decision had to go all the way to the CEO. After many months of negotiating and planning, the company's proposal was presented and accepted.

The project took over four years, involving more than 500 staff based in 70 locations. A core group of project managers and technical leads were full-time on the site, working daily with the client. Most of the team worked remotely, traveling to the site every few weeks. Scheduling and project management systems, collaborative processes and technologies were ramped up or expanded across the business to accommodate both internal needs and client expectations. Project leads on the client side served as the integrators of the work. "The client had staff members tasked to be 'silo busters.' They reviewed all the work from a cross-discipline perspective. On any given issue, they would decide who needed to come together to make a decision or find a solution."

The team members were motivated and highly invested in their work. They saw it as career-defining and also understood the larger purpose of the project: to reduce risk and make a difference to the community. "I have no doubt if they were going to pick a job to sacrifice for, it would be this job." Even so, Fritz was attuned to burnout, adjusting collaborative workloads and travel demands to counteract overload. He also realized overload or dissatisfaction could come from a misalignment of skills. "Burnout also comes when you're being asked to do things that you can't do or are not a great match with your skill set. If we saw that people needed help or they weren't having fun doing what they were doing, we made a change."

Project fatigue also set in during the last year of the project. Fritz needed the team to stay engaged, even as the intensity was reduced. "One thing we did was to rotate people out on three- or four-week holidays from the project, just to give them a breath. When we were at peak, nobody got to come up for air … Also, we didn't draw the team down too quickly. We kept everybody on, but not running at the same pace. They weren't put on other projects right away, so that gave people some space, too."

The successful completion of its biggest project to-date was a financial and competitive win for the company. A new strategic capability has been established, which has opened doors to other large-scale, multidisciplinary projects. "It's really satisfying to see the work we accomplished and how we have changed the way we deliver work together."

Network Insights

- **Build a core team.** Establish the "expert network" through relevant experiences—this builds skill and relationships.

- **Identify larger opportunity**. Grow capacity and scale expertise by seeking projects where existing talent and know-how are core to success, even if new expertise must be added.

- **Work with an extended network to gain understanding.** The client or people in other business units or specialties can help you understand key dimensions of the problem space and where gaps exist with the core team.

- **Know where to find expertise elsewhere in the network.** Who can be brought in to fill gaps? Reach out through your own network and also ask for referrals: Who else knows? Who else should I be speaking with?

- **Build the new team.** When you know what you need and who can provide it, make the sale. Engage relevant experts with messaging that enables them to see benefit of committing to your effort.

Engage the Network for Strategic Impact

Fritz had to convince top performers and valued experts to believe in—and stay engaged in—his complex, multi-year project. Most of the original team stayed through the end. To engage the network:

1. Have a compelling message. It starts by engaging people around a sense of purpose which could be a developmental opportunity, mutual benefit, exciting challenge or any other reason that holds value.

2. Make a personalized appeal. Deliver the message in a way that appeals to your audience. Are they influenced by data? Provide data. Excited by a big idea? Present the vision. Driven by prestige? Showcase the resume points.

3. Adjust along the way. Remind people of the reason for the work, so they feel like their sacrifices and trade-offs are worth something. But also re-allocate workload, shift schedules and manage the teams in ways that address collaborative overload and prevent burnout. For Fritz, part of the challenge was the gap between the experiences of the onsite staff and the remote staff. "I didn't see that coming, but this project has changed how the company handles mobility, time and compensation when people go into projects like this."

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.