Connected Commons

SCALE IDEAS & IMPACT

Leveraging Networks to Drive Cultural Change

CASE CONTEXT

An influential expert leads an effort to steer and support culture change. Early on, he provides the context, processes and direction. He develops his team and helps top executives take first steps. Soon, much of the work shifts to the network, moving both top-down and middle-out to define and drive cultural change.

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.

INNOVATE EXECUTE SCALE THRIVE ADAPT

A global organization had tremendous ambition and almost unlimited potential. Yet, it wasn't making expected

strides or having the impact it hoped. The CEO saw that the work culture was holding them back. Changes to structure or strategy or finding the right systems wouldn't make the difference without a change in culture. John was brought in to lead the work and to give direction and shape to a culture change process that was seen by many as impossible. "We have tremendous intellectual assets, brilliant people. There's been a culture of perfectionism and value placed on proving how smart you are. And, surprisingly, we have a very hierarchical organization. These are some of the things that have held us back."

One year in, "We are on a new path. All indicators suggest that long-standing culture is starting to thaw … We see and sense it in the conversations that people have, before we can see it in terms of impact … Agendas are being dedicated to how we work together. The process has become super-collaborative, within my team and also broadly in the organization."

The work began with an emphasis on simplicity over complexity. In the effort to make everything world-class, best-of-the-best, the organization had equated complexity with being correct. "That lends itself to an over-burdensome infrastructure. Checkers checking the checkers … systems and meetings designed to be bulletproof … memos that are more like research papers." The complexity slowed down the process of getting work done and it prevented cross boundary collaboration and innovation.

For John, simplicity makes it possible for more people to engage—and to engage sooner. "The work we have to do is complex, nonlinear and it is emergent. Given the nature of the work, we have to be adaptive, fluid and flexible. If we take the time get it fully baked, it has gone in a different direction." Adaptive work requires being co-creators and not criticizing when everything isn't buttoned up. This was a behavior that needed to first be modeled by top leadership. For example, the preparation that went into presenting to the executive team was legendary. The possibility of another way emerged when one team was asked to present to the executives with just two days notice. The conversation was rich and collaborative, showing that working in more emergent, less perfectionist, ways can be beneficial. That experience was applauded and the story told and re-told as they worked to build this value into more interactions throughout the organization.

Top-down commitment and behavior change was essential, but John put equal weight into the middle-out flow of culture change. He conducted a network analysis of the entire organization to identify key players in network. "Through the network analysis we identified people who are naturally playing connector, broker and energizer roles. By giving them space and access to do what they naturally do, we are activating the middle of the organization to amplify and accelerate change." For example, the informal network has been involved in clarifying what the future culture should be and what behaviors do and don't reflect that desired culture. In another change to the usual, formal, data-heavy presentations, a group of these culture advocates told stories to the executive team. They recounted a time when they experienced a valued cultural practice and shared the positive impact. "Those stories created more opening for collaboration and change, more than any amount of data."

John also works through his network to break down operational practices that run against the new cultural direction. "When the bureaucracy and systems are so complex, they cloud and distort that natural purpose, the *why* of our work. People are unable to sustain the energy they need to perform at their best. They lose that sense of purpose and end up leaving." Within the HR function, for example, John's team has changed the performance management process to focus on conversations between managers and employees as drivers of desired cultural behaviors. Rewards and recognition, hiring processes, employee development, as well as routine systems for approvals and documentation are all changing to show greater trust and transparency, simplicity and respect. "Now that we have identified the future state, we look to integrate that cultural direction into every touch point."

"All our work adds up to creating an environment where the unique talents of people are able to be more directly connected to that big purpose of what we are here to do … The ongoing challenge is to figure out how to tie the higher-level organization purpose to the individual day-to-day experience and personal sense of purpose … I think mission or purpose is very much carried through networks. Every personal interaction you have can take a step toward that or away from it."

Network Insights

- **Elevate challenges around collaboration to the level of culture.** How do cultural norms drive effective—or ineffective—networks?

- **Employ network analysis to identify connectors, brokers and energizers.** Find ways to help these natural opinion leaders amplify and accelerate the work and the pace of change.

- **Use narrative techniques to bring depth, emotion and reality to analytical, data-driven audiences.** Seek to pull stories and examples from the network and to push stories of desired cultural value back out to the network.

- **Adapt organizational processes, incentives and technology to align with cultural values.** Misalignment on small things will derail larger culture efforts due to the gap between what is said and what is experienced.

How Relationships Enable & Sustain Work-Life Balance

Relationships and roles outside of work provide needed perspective and space to thrive over the long term. For John, making clear commitments to those roles pulls him outside the bubble of work.

1. Clarify core domains that you care about besides work. Consider family, friends or community and what matters for the person you want to be. John reminds himself, "If you don't start acting in ways now to become the person you want to be, then you will never become that person."

2. Structure a time each week to compare calendar and time commitments to these domains. "When things get out of whack, I know I've got to find a way to recalibrate."

3. Have a person or group of people to hold you accountable. Be willing to have difficult conversations (e.g., with family if that sphere is falling off due to work demands). "Sometimes you try to hide and not try to discuss overload … When we have trusted people in the network it engenders more support than less."

4. Invest in relationships within each category to keep you both motivated and committed. "The whole thing is having people in my life … pulling me toward something that's important."

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.