



SCALE  
IDEAS &  
IMPACT

# Leadership Practices to Scale Innovation & Transfer Best Practices Across a Global Business Unit

## CASE CONTEXT

A manager finds repeated success by prioritizing engagement and colleague development as he takes on new roles and leads new teams. He solves top pain points, brokers ideas from one context to another and helps his leadership team do the same.

Ken’s career has gone from individual contributor to experienced manager in a segment of the pharmaceutical industry that has many applications. He’s worked in both animal health and human health as well as R&D and manufacturing. He spent years in a small, specialized company where collaboration, small teams and lean processes were the norm. “A lot of decisions got made at lunch on a napkin, talking it through with all the players—not in a conference room producing slide decks for six months to get at a decision.” Ken kept the collaborative mindset, but learned to change his approach as he took on various operations roles at a large global firm, where he now oversees process improvement for one division.



MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

Industry: MANUFACTURING

Working at the larger company and in a role that involved multiple sites and teams, Ken quickly became a broker in the network. “I was the switchboard operator ... I would put people in touch with each other, as well as make sure everyone understood what the big picture was so they could execute what they were doing.” *Brokers—people with non-insular, more diverse networks—are aware of more and different opportunities than those who circulate within insular, or closed, networks. They hear information early and are able to capitalize on it.* Like Ken, people who have ties across important groups are likely to be high performers, scaling ideas and accomplishments through these networks.

## 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.

Ken brought in experience from his prior company as he saw how many processes could be applied or adapted to a larger scale and different context. He helped people set aside assumptions that kept them from seeing possibilities or how current thinking drove ineffective work practices. “As people got to know my background, they learned how a smaller company made a similar product, but did it in a way that was less costly. I talked about my ideas and got them to think about solutions. I built credibility so that soon people were pulling me into projects that were way outside of my scope. They wanted me to be involved as a fresh set of eyes.”

Importantly, *Ken did not simply provide a solution. Moving ideas and information from one pocket of an organization to another required both personal credibility and engagement with others.* Just being creative or smart would not get uptake and scale of new processes. He would try to understand others’ pain points, then tell a story of how he had gone through something similar. “If we come up with 2-3 ideas, if they go back and implement and it resolves the pain point, I have built that connection and credibility. That person is going to come to me the next 10 times.”



He also encourages disruptive thinking versus assuming small adjustments are the way to go. In one instance, a few hours with a team leader led to the reduction of a documentation process from 80 pages to 20 pages. “That was so effective the same process was used with more than 100 other products. I didn’t do anything mind blowing from my perspective, but I allowed them to think of their problem from a different space.”

Scaling ideas beyond himself also required creating this kind of engagement with his direct reports and unit as a whole. “People who are not engaged are not going to be innovative.” *When he steps in to a new role, Ken looks to quickly solve problems, gain credibility and build trust.* He asks everyone: “**If you could change one thing to make you more excited about coming to work, what would that be?**” The answers come down to fundamental things: “People want to feel valued, to feel their voice is heard and to look forward to coming to work ... Once I have that engaged workforce the level of innovation and execution is an order of magnitude higher.”

Ken sees the development of his people as key to innovation and execution moving through the business. “How do I allow everybody to unleash their potential and flourish? ... Everything we do and every decision we make factors that in.” His teams typically assign people to tasks based on the need to stretch them and grow capacity overall. “When a new project comes up, we look at who has the interest, skills or development need. Who at the end of this project will come out a better person? The whole goal is to get people better positioned to move up in the organization ... In fact, my team sees it as a leadership failure if one of our employees goes for another role and they don’t get it.”

Of course, people and plans are not always successful. “We’re going to walk hand-in-hand to the edge of the cliff ... We will do everything possible to give you the opportunity for success.” He believes poor performance is often a reflection of poor management, so the way leaders handle failure is critical. “Any time our best efforts didn’t work is an opportunity to make it work the next time. I don’t describe it as a failure. We go in with plans A, B and C—success is not binary. We’ll drive to the ideal situation. If we don’t hit it, we’ll still move it north.”

## Network Insights

- **Become a broker of ideas to scale innovation or transfer best practices.** Build a reputation as someone who can morph your expertise and prior experiences to other people’s problems. Understand their challenges and provide examples or ideas to help them proactively solve problems.
- **Create engagement within a team by identifying and solving pain points.** With a new team ask: “If you could change one thing to make you more excited about coming to work, what would that be?” and take action. By removing roadblocks and establishing credibility early on, you build the team commitment needed to innovate and scale ideas.
- **Make *developing others* a core philosophy.** Decisions about assignments and promotions should factor in people’s goals and interests. Stretch assignments may slow initial progress, but they build engagement and capability that allow you to scale innovation and organizational change/success.
- **Handle failure well.** Avoid using binary language (success or failure, win or loss) and, instead, focus on progress and what needs to be done next to move ahead. This keeps risk-aversion or complacency from creeping in.

## Creating Engagement & Reputation by Being Pulled Into Networks

Ken has ample experience stepping in to lead a new team where frustrations are high and morale is low. He quickly tries to learn and address top pain points. This begins to build a relationship and credibility—which pays in greater engagement, trust and innovation down the road.

“When I enter into a new team, I focus right away on solving the top 4 or 5 pain points they have. Most people don’t hide where their frustrations are—it comes out pretty quick ... I could go in and make those changes immediately. But, the key is to develop the solutions together, take action that removes barriers and start to model this more proactive approach that I want them to take in their work with others.”

Ken’s approach also works with colleagues outside his team. He focuses interactions on understanding a problem, then tells a story from his experience that is similar. Together, they try to generate 2-3 ideas that could address the pain point. “If people go away and use a couple of the ideas, you have developed a relationship where people start to trust you and your way of working. Over time, this builds collaboration and innovation into the culture and scales beyond you as a leader.”

### 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](http://www.connectedcommons.com) or email Rob at [rlcrossjr@gmail.com](mailto:rlcrossjr@gmail.com).