



SCALE  
IDEAS &  
IMPACT

# Organizational Investments Build Agile, Collaborative Networks to Drive Impact

## CASE CONTEXT

An experienced project and team leader has a broad view of the firm, which she leverages in her role to build collaborative capability. She has learned and scaled the firm's ability to work collaboratively with multiple partners, across business lines.



FEMALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

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.



Lauren was a strategist for an energy company before taking her skills to a firm where she could facilitate

partnerships and investments for global development. She held a number of roles connecting strategies across sectors and locations before what was an “interesting twist” in her career. A family member was doing research on HIV/AIDS, and Lauren got curious about the economic and development impact of the disease in emerging markets. She ended up building a program that pulled together private companies, NGOs, pharmaceutical firms, investors and communities to counter the epidemic and impact of HIV. Over time, the program grew and was spun off into various local programs. “The innovation was supported by investment and a growing network—without that network, I would have done nothing. I had no idea about the subject, was not qualified in any way.” In subsequent roles, Lauren also took a network approach to creating and scaling ideas and driving change. Currently, she works in a change management role to build collaborative, cross-unit capabilities across the global organization.

“The best projects are when we are making the investments with the client, and we are also collaborating with other funders, government and community leaders ... We reach out to colleagues who could be influential in creating connections or relationships ... The team keeps the pulse of all stakeholders involved in large projects and engages investors who are willing to expand beyond a narrow focus.” By engaging the expanded network, “using all the levers,” the firm is able to reach beyond its scope to scale work and have greater impact.

While working through extended networks, part of the challenge is to find the right balance between inclusion and efficiency. As projects in the organization became more complex and brought in multiple stakeholders, the tendency was toward larger teams. Efforts to collaborate and bring in multiple perspectives evolved into large meetings, slow decision making and layers of approvals. “We went from being too-small and narrow in our teams to the opposite ... That was a major obstacle to efficiency and impact.” Now, core teams are much smaller with clear, consistent processes and people in clear roles to communicate with stakeholders.

Along with team structures and project processes, Lauren sees how leadership behaviors can encourage collaboration. For larger or more ambitious projects, senior leadership should be engaged early on to give input, remove roadblocks or communicate with stakeholders.

Leaders who create a context where team members feel supported to speak up, seek feedback and take risks will benefit from stronger ideas and solutions. “Senior managers who are hands-on and give input to teams directly are a lot more effective. Genuinely giving their opinion along the way creates a positive environment around the entire team ... Feedback is more systematic; conversation is ongoing and routine, so the input goes both ways.”

The firm also established a new role to interface with clients and reach across the organizational silos and boundaries to find expertise or transfer solutions from one sphere to another. “We would say, *Wouldn't it be great to share this practice or this expertise across platforms and into other departments?* Our clients and communities don't care about our silos, so we now have senior people whose job it is to look across needs, projects and clients to make those links and connections.”

Lunchtime learning sessions are another way expertise and experience gets shared across divisions and teams to foster informal collaboration and idea exchange. Managers also rotate through a series of master classes that Lauren developed. Participants are given a project scenario and asked to work in teams to come up with a solution. They get to know peers from other groups, learn about the range of expertise across the firm and practice collaborative, innovative problem solving. The process seeds the personal networks of the people who are the drivers of the firm's projects and future growth. A similar idea is behind an extensive on-boarding process for new hires. A week-long program includes a focus on building a personal network and steps to make it happen. The process has been a success, reducing time for newcomers to integrate into the network from three-to-four years to just nine months.

Keeping people connected to the right networks also is a challenge for longer-term employees. Studies show that people on the periphery of a network are more removed from the energy and opportunity centers of an organization. In Lauren's work, that can happen due to geography, as experts and managers work remotely or in the field with clients. Short-term assignments at headquarters, involvement in a global leadership program and more transparent talent management are ways to prevent people from being disconnected for too long.

## Network Insights

- **Use “all the levers” to expand the network and scale work.** Hire for collaboration. Support teams with tools and systems to reach beyond a narrow scope to scale work and have greater impact. Reach across boundaries, ask for referrals and pursue relationships through clients, colleagues and loose network ties.
- **Find the right balance between inclusion and efficiency.** Build small core teams with clear roles and processes for decision making and engaging with various stakeholders. Teams that are too large slow down progress and drain energy.
- **Look to leadership to fuel collaboration.** Senior leaders have different networks and a broader perspective. Engage them early to get input and make connections. Team leaders set the tone for open communication, risk taking and collaboration.
- **Leverage natural brokers.** Or, like Lauren's firm, create positions to formalize the brokering process. Non-insular networks are needed find expertise or generate ideas, and to transfer and scale solutions from one sphere to another.
- **Engage the fringe of the network.** Make network-building a priority during on-boarding to pull newcomers in so they can contribute quickly. People also get isolated over time: training, cross-functional classes, short-term and developmental assignments provide opportunities to re-connect.

## Purpose, Fluid Boundaries & Time to Rejuvenate Create Space & Energy for Demanding Work

How do mid-career leaders stay engaged through career moves and personal transitions? Lauren has several strategies that work:

1. **Find a sense of purpose in work.** Different roles will feel more or less connected to mission or values. In work she is less passionate about, Lauren gains her purpose by helping others accomplish their work. “I enjoy being able to connect the dots for them, remove roadblocks and use my network to make introductions.”
2. **Set boundaries so that personal and work commitments are managed in ways that suit your rhythm and preferences.** Some people set firm rules; Lauren is happy to fit in emails or other work in flexible ways. Dinnertime or bedtime routine with kids is off-limits, but otherwise she likes staying connected and on top of things. She also shoots for predictability: one day a week to work at home and periodically scheduled late nights at work. This way she, her colleagues and her family know what to expect.
3. **Invest in people and activities to remind you who you are outside of work.** Lauren realized she thrived as a parent, spouse and manager when she structured time for herself. This now includes weekly dinners with friends and a monthly music class.

### 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).