



SCALE  
IDEAS &  
IMPACT

# Driving a Leadership Capability Via Networks in a Global Consumer Products Organization

## CASE CONTEXT

A senior leader creates cross-boundary talent practices in a de-centralized, global company. She introduces the concept of energizing behaviors as a way to boost productivity and engage talent. Through co-creation and word-of-mouth, energizing collaborations and employee engagement are on the rise.

Linda’s job is to “create what isn’t” in support of learning and development in a global company of 20,000 people.

She oversees traditional elements of executive and leadership development and employee career growth, while seeking ways to bring large-scale capability to decentralized businesses. In past years, she’s elevated the importance of networks for innovation and efficiencies for the company. She led the creation of a database of talent to foster career conversations and bring transparency to the hiring and development of talent across the company. Recently, she’s been applying research on the role of energizers in networks—building capacity for energizing behaviors through a fun workshop and word-of-mouth enthusiasm.



FEMALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: CONSUMER PRODUCTS

The interest in energizers came from the results of an Organizational Network Analysis (ONA) conducted a couple years ago. Energizers are typically high-performers who have a significant impact on productivity, innovation and discretionary effort of those around them. The company scored low on this front, and it stuck with Linda. “I loved the energy stuff. I was attracted to it but didn’t know why ... It just seemed that it was the lifeblood of an organization. Energy would be one thing that could differentiate an organization having a great time and going places versus being dead in the water.” During a holiday week, Linda played with the ideas and how to bring them into the business. “I knew the way to make it work was to make it fun.”

## 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.

Linda drafted a self-assessment utilizing the research-based nine behaviors of an energizer [see sidebar], and brought it to the HR directors of each business. “They are the gatekeepers, the people to win over, if you want to bring something new in. They were functionally and formally the right people to work with—if we didn’t have them with us, nothing would happen.” By bringing a concept and the beginnings of a way to scale it to these leaders, Linda was able to further develop the idea. “They were there to shape it and were willing to test something a bit different. They offered ideas on how to improve it and help it land better.” Through the process of co-developing the assessment and a pilot activity, the HR leaders gained greater interest and ownership in seeing the work through. As those efforts were underway, one of them made a suggestion to reach out to the managing director of one of the businesses. He was planning a meeting of its top 40-50 leaders—maybe the energy ideas would be interesting for them? “That led to the real opportunity, which I could not have predicted.”





Linda met with the business leaders and talked through the pilot. “This is where an extraordinary bit of magic happened. They sat back and said, *Yeah, there is something in this, but we need to bring it off the page and really connect with people ... If we could involve them in a much more active and experiential way, then it will really be something.*” This was the inflection point for the ideas taking hold in the company. Through this interaction, the pilot became more experiential. Enthusiasm began to build.

Linda herself was excited when the managers decided to act out roles of energizers and de-energizers in front of the top leaders. For example, they brought to life the *difference between a de-energizer who closes ideas down and see roadblocks versus an energizer who will open up a conversation and explore an idea.* “They put great care into who would play the energizer and de-energizer, going for maximum comic effect as well as to reinforce the concepts ... It became a funny, lively and interactive event.” By presenting the energizing concepts in an energizing way, they took off. This group of senior leaders was willing to take a risk, and they transformed the learning. Other leaders wanted to bring it to their teams, and Linda’s germ of an idea acquired a life of its own.

“Since then, it’s just grown organically. I haven’t asked anyone to do it. Every time it is experienced, another referral comes, another group requests it ... Even the reserved or tough types who are not usually open to do this stuff get into it.” Linda gives credit to the quality and accessibility of the ideas, but also to the element of fun. “We have been able to create an event that is good fun on a subject we can all relate to. It’s not about getting the network—it’s about how you give to the network and interact.”

In a short period of time—and without the typical roll-out or launch of training—Linda and a few colleagues have trained 1,300 people on behaviors of energizers and why they matter. She has begun to see (and hear stories of) the big effect the work is having on how people engage with each other. The positive emotion and experience confirm Linda’s early instinct: “It was the power of the idea. It was simple and actionable and could potentially make a big difference—if we seized upon it, it would help the company and be enjoyable in its own right.”

## Network Insights

- **Factor the idea of “energizing behaviors” into talent and culture development.** Energizers are usually high-performers. They are able to get more out of those around them and enhance morale, learning, innovation and performance. Nine behaviors create energy in networks.
- **Create interest among influencers and gatekeepers for novel ideas.** Share ideas and co-create solutions with people who are formally and informally connected to key groups or businesses. Their support is invaluable to diffusing ideas and driving change across a network.
- **Be open to adaptation or evolution of your work as it travels through the network.** Rely on people who will use or benefit from your efforts to show interest and be open to unexpected, often positive, outcomes you did not foresee.

## What Creates Energy In Networks?

20 years of research has shown that energizers are not necessarily extroverted or charismatic. Rather, they tend to exhibit nine behaviors more systematically—even when under stress or time pressure. Which one or two could you improve?

1. I maintain a good balance between what I ask for and what I contribute to those in my network.
2. I consistently do what I say I am going to do and follow through on commitments I make.
3. I am committed (and show it) to principles and goals that are larger than my own self-interest.
4. I engage others in realistic possibilities that capture their imaginations and hearts.
5. I am fully attentive in meetings and 1:1 conversations and show my interest in others and their ideas.
6. I create room for others to be a meaningful part of conversations and make sure they see how their efforts will contribute to an evolving plan.
7. When I disagree with someone’s plan or a course of action, I do so in a way that focuses attention on the issue at hand and not the individual.
8. I use humor—often at my own expense—to lighten tense moments or remove status or politics.
9. I maintain an effective balance between pushing toward a goal and welcoming new ideas that improve the project or the process for reaching a goal.

### 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).