



SCALE
IDEAS &
IMPACT

New Capability Moves from Experiment to Scale Via Networks

CASE CONTEXT

A high-level analyst works in Knowledge Management, dealing with numerous remote and virtual teams and often handling urgent requests. His personal network resulted in a substantial innovation that took root and has gradually been scaled across this global organization.



MALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

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.



Maximus works for a global organization in a complex industry with new and larger players emerging. “We have to have equal if not better capacity to stay competitive.” As a high-level data analyst, Maximus currently operates within the Knowledge Management function. His focus is on a data project that began by trying to answer a question for a regional manager. She wanted to know if anyone in the organization had experience in a specific type of financial structuring. To find out, Maximus pulled data separately from HR records and project management data. “We stitched something together and sent her the list, and she said, *How far back does this go?* We said, *Three years.* She said, *No, I need ten years. This is not good enough ...* I thought, *This is not sustainable. If one simple question takes us three days to answer, how are we going to scale this up?*”

The answer came from talking about the request with a colleague, Yahir, a trusted, “brilliant, genius on the technology side” who had worked previously in Maximus’ unit. “We accidentally bumped into each other. And I asked him, *Can you think about a way to help us and modernize the data so we can answer the questions quickly?*” It turned out, he had been experimenting with a way to pull data, regardless of where it sits, from any system. They decided Maximus’ need was a perfect opportunity to test the process. Within a week, a trial system was created: a searchable work history of all employees. Days later, Maximus was able to send an email to the regional manager with a link to the system and “she was blown away.”

From Maximus’ perspective, the very tight and trusted connection with Yahir made the outcome possible. “We had worked together. We knew each other. There was an intuitive understanding of each other. I didn’t have to sell him on anything. We were speaking the same language ... He understood what I was asking and why it mattered: if a regional manager is asking a question that means that she is delivering a project on the ground. So, getting that right is absolutely critical to our success.”

The project then evolved from another “lucky moment.” Maximus showed the tool to another close colleague, Frederick, who was a vice president, to get his opinion and let him know what they were doing. “I said, *We did something cool. Use it if you want.*” The VP saw the value of the work, suggested some changes—and then wanted to escalate the work right away. “I didn’t put big weight on it ... A few days later, Frederick asked, *Did you talk to so-and-so yet?* I said, *No.* He said, *I’m serious. Go now.*”

Maximus and Yahir had not been looking to expand the project, or for Frederick to help them or make a referral. In fact, the interest and urgency took them by surprise. But, they met with the senior leader.

“His jaw dropped. He said, *How long did it take you guys? We said, Two or three weeks. And we explained the concept ... He said, I’ve had all these managers trying to solve what you did and they’ve been telling me it’s impossible.*”

The conversation turned to how the same idea might be applied to other corporate data and systems and problems. Maximus and Yahir were asked to create a similar tool for budgeting and expenses from the various teams and groups in the division—and to do it in three weeks for a presentation to the senior vice presidents. “We said, *Do not commit. We don’t know what we’re getting into. We don’t even have access to the data.* He said, *That’s not a problem ... We’re like, oh my God, this is a fast track.* I said, *Yahir, I am scared to death.* He said, *We’ll figure it out.*”

And they did. Three weeks of iteration and back-and-forth with the senior leader resulted in a dashboard of searchable financial data. “They were all puzzled, how this can happen? And they saw that the implications of this were huge ... Suddenly, there would be transparency across the whole division in terms of who has how much money, how much they spent on which project, for what purpose.”

A year and a half later, the searchable talent database is routinely used across the division. The budget dashboard was refined and has been up-and-running. Word spread and Maximus and Yahir are now leading the process of implementing the same budget approach in other divisions, and plans are in place to scale to the entire organization. A manager in a subsidiary “got wind of it and they are also looking at doing the same thing ... Once they see that this works, everybody loves it.”

“A colleague once gave me a formula: *Success is a function of effort and time, plus or minus luck.* And I said, *Effort and time is kind of under our control, but how do we engineer luck?* He said, *You can’t ...* But, I think with this project, the network was the engineering behind the luck.”

Network Insights

- **To create value in collaboration with someone who has adjacent expertise, pay attention to the relationship.** First, who do you trust? Then consider people who share common language / values / understanding, have complementary expertise and see mutual benefit in what could come from collaboration.
- **Build time into the calendar to share what you are doing with others in your network.** Talking through your efforts helps refine ideas, plus it builds your reputation, can inspire reciprocity and can lead to luck as you latch onto opportunities.
- **Be willing to morph your expertise or perspective to other people’s needs.** This creates pull from the network to you. The ability to morph ideas from one space to another is also critical to scale ideas from the ground up, as people with needs and resources see how to apply you or your ideas.

From Inception to Global Capability: How Ideas Move through a Trusted Network

Maximus’ idea began with a specific need. By following the network, the idea was developed, refined, adapted and scaled. Trust and personal relationships allowed the process to move quickly and with minimal resistance. Lessons learned include:

1. Find the right contributors. Trust and a shared language create a shortcut for working together. Complementary expertise and mutual benefit provide energy and engagement. “We each had our own interests, and we saw how they overlapped.”
2. Bring in select leaders. Early backing from senior levels shows there is interest in and support for an idea.
3. Avoid nay-sayers. If an idea is potentially inflammatory, protect it from levels, roles or individuals that might shoot it down early. They may overwhelm your effort with opinions and roadblocks before the idea develops.
4. Get to scale by keeping the idea under the radar. “We didn’t have a big network; we made targeted, surgical connections. And we didn’t make huge presentations—just two or three important demos that were sufficient enough to get it to the enterprise level and to the attention of the senior management.”
5. Follow the network to the next node. Find out from initial decision-makers and supporters who else to talk to.

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.