SCALE IDEAS & IMPACT

Scaling Network on Entry by Morphing Expertise to Influential Network Members' Problems

CASE CONTEXT

A product manager has held roles in a variety of start-ups and large companies. She has learned that asking questions and adapting what she knows pulls her more quickly into projects and networks where she is trusted and able to have the most impact.

FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: TECHNOLOGY

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

Maya fell into a project management role right out of grad school, working for a small start-up run by a friend.

What she thought would be a short stint in high-tech turned into a career. "Tech was not a natural fit" for someone with a biology background looking for work in public health research, but she found an affinity for the entrepreneurial life. She went through a few job changes as start-ups she was with were sold or merged. Today, she is still in technology but made a big shift by working for an established global firm.

The role came about as part of a merger. Not long after the change, Maya was recruited out of her group and onto a different project. She found herself facing organizational culture shock and an entirely new group of colleagues and work. The start-up culture she came from was highly collaborative and close-knit. Friday team meetings involved beer and each person sharing something they were happy about, or an opportunity they were working on or something they were grateful for. "It was welcoming. I felt like I was a missing piece of what they needed and had been there for years." When the company was sold, "It was a bit of a rude awakening!"

Maya began to navigate the work and the network. Often, newcomers look to the org chart and formal structures for guidance and understanding of influence and resources. They miss the underlying networks and collaboration through which work is accomplished. Another typical response is to try to immediately work in ways to impress or show worth to others. Neither strategy is effective in creating a network that pulls people into opportunities rapidly or builds reputation. *What does work is to be someone others want to draw in. Two things create that pull: morphing what you know to other people's needs and being an energizer.*

Maya was assigned to help with a major product launch, working with a large team and looming deadlines. Rather than pushing herself into the team with ideas to fix problems, she appreciated the work and the pace and began to adapt to the team. "I listened, so I could tell when people had resistance to an idea or see problems they were having … I was willing to jump in where they needed help. *I was comfortable with ambiguity. I would ask questions, listen to understand and then restate to see if I had it right*." From there, she offered an idea or described an approach, adapting her knowledge and experience to the specific context, and asking if that might fit the need. "Sometimes the solutions were very simple, but no one had done it … The things that were stressing them out were getting pushed under the table, so I could take care of it."

By being open to the team—and genuinely so—Maya created positive, energetic interactions. "*I try to come at things with zero agenda or ego. I'm here to do the work; I'm here because I like it. There is no secret agenda*." She understood that by contributing effectively to the work, she would build trust over time. "I love the work and want to see it get done, I'm very open and authentic about that with the team and the engineers I work with … I am now part of the family; people want to work with me; I have built a level of trust." Maya's ability to create energy in interactions was partly due to her overarching interest in the work, which pulled her toward other projects and people. Our research shows energizers in networks always stand for something larger than their own self-interest. Being an energizer creates pull into networks—better ideas, projects and people flow your way—and is the top network indicator for high-performance.

The network Maya established continues to be fueled by collaborative ways of working. Rather than working in isolation or getting a project "presentation-ready," she brings in other people upfront. "I do most of my thinking through collaboration. Before I have a plan, I've already gotten everyone's ideas and feedback. I've already created the network. So, when it comes to writing or doing the work or getting something accepted, it doesn't take as much time." She's seen colleagues invest so much in preparation, only to be shot down in a meeting. "A co-worker asked me why does everything go easily for you? I told him, *When I go into a meeting, there is no cold person in the room. Everyone already knows where I'm coming from … People don't push back at that point. I've already done the hard work*."

Maya has been at the company now for almost two years. She's been promoted twice and formally identified as a high-potential. She is glad that at a young age and as a newcomer, she has gotten the attention and support that comes from formal recognition. But, she sees the importance of the way she contributed to the work and built her network early on. "Building networks is crucial to my work … The mentoring and training is nice, but I'm investing in the relationships for the long term."

Network Insights

- **Don't rely solely on formal structure as an indicator of influence or how work is accomplished.** When starting a job, ask your boss for a list of people you should meet. At the end of every meeting, ask for names of two other people you should be speaking with. Do this until relevance fades.

- **Listen carefully and focus on morphing what you know to other people's problems.** Don't try to show how smart you are or profile past accomplishments.

- **Show your authenticity and willingness to stand for something larger than your personal self-interest.** This builds trust and energy in interactions with others and you form a reputation as someone people want to work with.

- **Co-create ideas and outputs by being comfortable in ambiguity.** Get input from others early in the problem-framing aspects of work. You'll get better ideas and a stronger solution. Plus, you build awareness and support among people who are affected by the work.

How Experts Become High Performers by Getting Pulled into Networks

Experts become well-known and sought out by *how* they present themselves. This cycle is far more effective for pulling you into the network than trying to showcase your smarts or resume.

1. **Take risks early in a project or job to meet people**. Schedule time with people to explore ideas for fit. Take advantage of company events and informal settings, too.

2. **Do NOT try to communicate to others your expertise, knowledge or pedigree**. Show them your value by focusing on their needs and adapting or applying what you know to their problems.

3. **Ask a lot of questions**. Find out about their work and the way things are currently done as an initial means of learning where your expertise might fit into what they care about.

4. **Use active listening to understand other's problem, repeat what you have heard and explain how what you know might fit or how you could help**. Follow-up with other ideas or to see if your contribution helped or a solution worked.

5. **Do not be dissuaded if a given meeting does not yield fruit**. Always ask who else you should speak with and follow recommendations until you start to hit a point of diminishing returns. This process will get you connect to people who are key "nodes" in the network who will be critical to you in the future.

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.