Connected Commons

SCALE IDEAS & IMPACT

Early-Career Network Creates Energy & Opportunity

CASE CONTEXT

A millennial looking for experience and challenge finds it as her natural connecting behaviors pay off. She easily gains access to information, people and projects—and is valued as an informal connector.

FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: COMMUNICATION

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

Sariya is not afraid to talk to anyone. Not the CEO, not a new boss, not a frontline employee. In fact, she's taken a lesson from an early customer service job to heart. "I have the 10/5 rule from my prior organization. If people are within 10 feet of me, I smile. If they are within 5 feet of me, I say hello or engage them in some way. Whether I'm in the elevator or in the cafeteria or in the bathroom or the café area, even in passing, I will just strike up a conversation: *Hi, how are you?* Or, *I don't think we've met before. My name's Sariya*."

Sariya's natural tendency to meet and greet has earned her nicknames like "the mayor" or "homecoming queen." Her outgoing, curious nature also has opened doors to new projects, greater scope and a role as an informal connector.

Sariya has been working for her current company for three years; she was an intern before she was hired. As an intern, she was given a project to plot out a particular employee experience and make recommendations how to improve it. Her manager gave her names of three people who touch the process. "Then, I just put myself out there. Picked up the phone, introduced myself. From those first people, I tracked down who owns different pieces of the process or had ideas or managed related pieces. I found the people I needed to find."

Later, as a new hire, she realized her success—and her personal enthusiasm—would be highly dependent on working through networks. "I do that with most projects I work on. In my ongoing work, my group owns a technology but we don't own the process. So, we go out to our partners for everything … In another project, I utilize my network to make sure that my clients get the information and resources they need. For example, someone may want to do a survey, so I have to connect with the right people in management or in legal. Or if someone has an idea or a tool they want to implement, I coordinate and say, let's to talk to this group or that group to make sure we have buy in."

"In the time I've been here, I've never had anybody tell me they don't want to give me their opinion!"

Network Insights

Recently, Sariya's willingness to communicate and collaborate across functions and levels was leveraged on a project that would touch the entire employee population. "It was really exciting because I got to work on something merger related, something nobody's done before … There were challenges, and we needed to be sure to get it right. But it was energizing. The team was like, *We're going to get this to work and its going to be really great!*"

The merger-related project was bigger in scope and responsibility than Sariya's previous assignments, but her confidence was strengthened by the opportunity. "My manager was really excited by the project and she asked me to lead it. Nobody before had trusted me to do that … She was as excited as I was about giving me the opportunity to do the project."

Sariya and the project team pulled together people from the parent company and the newly merged one. They interfaced with technology teams, compensation and benefits people, and employee communication.

"We were building a whole new process and figuring out how it would work. We needed to look at it in different ways, and listen when someone said the way we were going to do it isn't going to work because of X, and then bring the team back to the drawing board."

The dynamic nature of the work and the creativity around problem solving was an energizing experience, not a draining one, largely because of the people on Sariya's team. "The team was enthusiastic and we worked very effectively together. Even the problem solving was exciting; we kept asking, *How can we make it work more efficiently? Who else should we ask? What information do we need?*"

In her three years with the company, Sariya gained a reputation for being in-the-know. "Because I talk to everyone, I have a good idea of what people are doing and what they are working on. I'll hear about things. I'll get pulled in and people will say, *Hey, we are looking for info on this and do you know someone who can help?* I'm definitely a connector."

Early career professionals and individual contributors benefit from exposure to varied people, groups and functions. Boundary spanning networks provide valuable information, access and opportunity.

Key relationships help build confidence and experience. A manager who delegates, trusts and leads via networks builds the network potential of their teams and direct reports.

Over time, networks must evolve. Research shows bigger networks are not better networks. Targeted, new network ties are needed as projects change and individual contributors move into leadership roles.

Managing an Early-career Professional? Provide challenge, build trust, create the team

People early in their careers may not have much experience working in teams and engaging through networks. Some may naturally gravitate toward connecting and bringing in others—like Sariya does—but others may not. If you are managing early career professionals, use everyday experience and assignments as network opportunities by:

1. Providing challenge. Bring employees into important or exciting projects that will help them learn and keep them engaged and connected to a bigger goal or purpose. But also use these experiences to help people build relationships and expand perspectives. Sariya was excited to be involved in a project tied to the merger—and it was an assignment that forced her to work across boundaries and build new connections.

2. Placing trust in others. Let go of having to do it all yourself. Instead, show how to lead through the network. Sariya's manager said, *This is your project. I'm here to help you along the way, but you own it*. Sariya felt trusted, which added to her enthusiasm and willingness to give greater effort.

3. Developing the team. Build energy within the core team—and the extended team or network. Help them gain enthusiasm for the work and for the relationships they are able to establish. Sariya gave and gained energy from the project team, which was especially valuable when problems arose or elements changed.

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.