SCALE IDEAS & IMPACT

Leveraging Networks to Gain Input & Buy-in for New Approach to Speed Product Launch

CASE CONTEXT

An in-demand, experienced individual contributor leverages his network to succeed in new roles. He introduced an innovative plan for sales reps that was well received and ensured a successful product launch.

MALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: CONSUMER PRODUCTS

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

For ten years, Hunter had been gaining broad experience through U.S. and global assignments in a specialty medical products company. He held roles in operations, customer research and sales before concentrating in marketing. As he thought about his next career steps, he sought advice from co-workers, his boss and a couple of former peers who had been promoted. “I had been talking to a lot of folks to figure out if I was ready to be promoted or if I needed to do one more assignment in the U.S. market.” He had built a solid reputation across several functions and was comfortable reaching out to his network to explore possibilities. During one of those conversations, an opportunity emerged to be the marketing leader for a product launch in the U.S. “It was a high-profile, important launch and would round out my experiences and be a springboard for promotion.”

Hunter took the job, got up to speed on the product and began researching the market and customer. He leaned on his new boss to understand where he had blind spots and who were the key decision makers. He partnered with his counterpart in global marketing. “I had been involved in launches before and knew the U.S. market … She was new in her role, but she had been on a team that set sales compensation strategy, which turned out to be key … We worked well as a team. We established the mutual benefit; things I knew could benefit her and vice versa.” Hunter built new relationships to learn what was important in his a new role, rather than over-relying on his past success, expertise and network.

Early on, Hunter saw some challenges that would affect the launch’s success. The product was a specialty item that overlapped with another well-established product that the national sales force had been selling. The target customer was not evenly distributed geographically, meaning some sales teams would have higher sales goals. And overall, the product was a small-volume item. “I raised the issue that sales people may not sell the product. It was targeted to a specific audience and strategically important but not a huge volume. How could we market successfully and get the sales team to devote enough time to it? … I thought, let’s look at the compensation structure and figure out how do we incentivize this?”

He posed the challenges first to his boss, then to his boss’ boss and then to the sales compensation manager. He approached it informally, outlining a few broad points that painted the picture. “I made them aware that this was what I was thinking; it could be a problem … We hadn’t done all the analytics yet for a formal recommendation, but I wanted to lay the groundwork.” He also was deliberate about the timing, making sure the issues were raised about a month before a big compensation planning meeting.

"I wanted to get ahead of that to influence folks who were making decisions. Through those discussions and sharing basic facts, the comp manager went into that meeting ready to treat this differently." By flagging it as an issue to the right people in the right decision-making cycle, Hunter ensured that concern was shared and the rationale and the solution became their idea, too.

Hunter had the go-ahead to proceed. He tapped into a cross-section of sales reps and sales leaders to explore types of compensation and incentives that would motivate people to sell the product. "We kicked around ideas, what would they like to see. They helped me pressure test my logic." This helped him come up with an option that would have enthusiastic support from key people when it was introduced, rather than developing a plan in isolation. He then had one-on-ones with key stakeholders to informally present his recommendations. "I had conversations with the comp manager, VP of sales and with my leadership team. I laid out how I was thinking about it … So, they knew the framework first, not the plan." Later, when formally presented the specifics, the solution was pre-validated and gained easy approval.

The end result was a unique sales incentive plan that was successful. It involved creating two incentive categories, to reflect two very different levels of customer and sales territories. By sub-dividing the sales force, Hunter and his team were able to fine-tune the compensation program in a way that would benefit the reps and get the product in the hands of top-tier customers. "The way we did it had not been done before. The feedback we got was that it was very exciting and it was clear the sales force understood this niche product was a priority."

Personally, Hunter learned the value of co-creating and bringing people along throughout the process, rather than developing and planning in isolation. "I didn't go to the decision makers with an ask or a fully baked idea. It worked because I got people involved in the strategy, why we are doing it and having a dialogue … If people can be sold on why something is important to the business and to our customers and patients, they will go on a journey with you. They will go through the pain of doing things differently if they can point back to why it's important."

Network Insights

- **Tap into new relationships to fill gaps and get up to speed in new role.** Don't over-rely on past experience and the same connections that helped you succeed in the past.
- **Raise issues to the right people at the right time to gain support.** Introduce your concerns informally to influencers. Provide them with data and let them know your processes so they can help make the case and shape solutions.
- **Engage influencers throughout the process.** Establish the *why* of the work and co-create—people will be more likely to stay with you and fight through the obstacles that will arise when launching and scaling something new.

Role Transition Lessons from a High-Performing Individual Contributor

Hunter has managed eight successful transitions as a successful individual contributor. He was recently promoted to a key management role. Below is his advice for managing transitions by focusing on networks and relationships.

1. **Understand the people you work with.** "Learn what is important to them … When you have good relationships you can just pick up the phone and pick their brain. Those connections save so much time … I may not have all the answers, but I have a good idea of where to go."
2. **Ensure values align before you say *yes* to a new role.** This keeps you moving into roles that will help you grow and build your track record and reputation. "Have a good idea of who the leaders are, their priorities, the culture. Ask questions to get a sense of the unspoken stuff … Be real about what you want to do and don't want to do. Look for a good fit."
3. **Use breadth of roles for the network as much as for experience.** "It's hard to quantify, but when you have a difficult challenge it is good to have someone who has done something similar before or who can help. I try to be conscious of how to build my network, how to leverage it and how to share it with others."
4. **Use 1:1s to onboard yourself.** "Make the rounds with people who can help with the learning curve and give you perspective: team members, clients, boss, skip-level managers, cross-functional experts. They need to know who you are, what you are about, what you bring. They need to know you are not threatening; you are there to help."
5. **Finally, be aware of 3 ways people fail in transitions in relational cultures.** "They don't value what has been done before; they need to just do it all a new way. They ask but don't give. Or, they don't form personal connections."

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.