



SCALE
IDEAS &
IMPACT

Engaging Global Networks to Create & Deploy New Capability

CASE CONTEXT

A global manager restructures a core function that has cross-boundary and long-term implications. He builds support for and executes the work through a global network—to great success.



MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

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.



Trey is part of the management team of a specialty division of a global consumer products company. As general manager of one segment of the business, he works in close partnership with the sister companies. Not long ago, he led a restructuring of the supply chain, away from a decentralized, shared-services approach to an in-house function. “It was a great strategy for the first few years of the business, but as we became larger, more successful and more diverse, it was apparent that that model no longer fit the purpose.” The change would require him to leverage networks within the parent company as well as build relationships into the individual businesses operating in different countries.

Trey co-lead the work with the head of finance and had a team of six people in the supply chain and finance functions who were involved in the work over 18 months. The effort required considerable project management to map out and implement. Trey also understood that making change on a global scale would require influencing and gaining buy-in from across a range of businesses, hierarchical levels and expertise. “The easy bit was knowing *who* needed to be influenced within the different teams and part of the organization; the structures were very clear. The more challenging bit was to explain *why* we felt that it was the right idea and convince them.”

Trey and his co-leader invested significant time up front to articulate the vision. “We had to work through the win/lose—we saw it as gaining, but others could see the change as a loss. We needed to get people to look beyond the short-term outcome or narrow scope, to say it is worth taking a bit of pain because it is the right thing to do; the big picture is worth it.” Trey invested first in selling the vision up to the divisional leadership team, who would then help pitch the idea laterally to their counterparts in the sister divisions. “Understanding their goals, getting the vision right and getting executive support made it easier to go and have the detailed the discussions on the implementation side.”

Engaging their peers in the finance and supply chain functions of the sister companies was more difficult than Trey expected. Some leaders reacted to the short-term challenges and costs and did not have confidence that Trey’s group could do the project on time and in budget. Collaboration and overlap would remain in other aspects of the business, even as the supply chain capability shifted, so those ties would remain valued. Looking back, Trey would have put greater effort into those relationships and to having empathy toward their perspectives.

“That was the hardest group to interact with. We did not put ourselves in their shoes sufficiently in terms of role playing or scenario planning how we would get our message across and why we feel this was a good idea. It turned quickly into a confrontation, which put people in entrenched positions and behaviors ... We got to the right place, but we should have had more empathy in those first discussions.”

Meanwhile, Trey sought to engage the internal team—the people in finance and supply chain management who would have to make the transition and adapt to the new approach. “The key there was to over-communicate ... As senior-level sponsors of a project, we have a clear vision of what we are trying to achieve, but a lot of our discussions are high level. You have to give the implementation folks time and space to catch up with your thinking. We got out there with a lot of face-to-face, quality time to get them on board. We talk to them in their environment, where they are comfortable where they are more open, receptive and able to ask questions and bring up issues.”

As the implementation rolled out globally, Trey also learned lessons of cultural difference. “The U.K. and U.S. cultures were similar in giving feedback and gaining agreement. In Asia and Brazil, people were less comfortable expressing concern, asking questions or clarifying expectations in a meeting or open forum ... We had some challenges in delivering a message and thinking it had landed, but it clearly hadn’t.” Trey realized his assumption that corporate culture would be stronger than local cultural influences. “That was a mistake. We had to shift how we would engage with people, take more time getting local teams on board and adapt the plan to reflect the local offices.”

The new process is a couple years in and it is broadly viewed as a success by all three groups: senior leaders, sister businesses and the internal team. “Even with the folks who thought they had something to lose, there is agreement that pushing this separation has led to greater clarity of objectives within the overall organization strategy ... It forced through clarity about who does what, and all of us are more effective because we don’t have that extra tension in the partnership.”

Network Insights

- **Leverage a broad network to gain clarity of the problem space and develop a solution.** A cross-section of stakeholders, influencers and experts are needed to offer ideas, bring in diverse perspectives and iterate.
- **Build common vision early and invest time in both formal leaders and key influencers in network.** Be clear about the why with people who will carry the message at a high level and make decisions about resources and priorities.
- **Factor in the perspective of those who will be affected to avoid unnecessary conflict and speed implementation.** Assume a stance of empathy, take more time to listen and engage in ways that address their true concerns.
- **Recognize and work with cultural differences.** Without awareness and ways to check for understanding, misalignment, gaps in understanding and possible problems will remain hidden.

Promoting Collaboration in a Global Group

Trey has lead dispersed groups and global operations for years. Some lessons learned to promote effective collaboration:

1. *Find your go-to people.* “Know who to call when you are trying to find something out. You want to have relationships with people who are well-connected into the other location or culture *and* who have a positive outlook on making and facilitating those connections. They are open and generous with their time to point you in a direction and help you find people who can help you ... And, be that kind of person, too.”
2. *Push cross-boundary ties into the larger group.* Don’t make everything flow through you. “I try to facilitate interaction across different levels and groups and locations, so I am not the only one with the relationships.”
3. *Bring people physically together.* Have team members meet in person at least once. More broadly, encourage people to build their networks through company training programs, functional conferences or other events that bring together diverse groups. “We explicitly tell people to introduce themselves, make contacts ... We’ll force the issue by deliberately mixing up table plans and training groups so people don’t just sit in their existing teams.”
4. *Assign cross-functional, strategic work.* Pull together teams to work on projects that are important to the organization. “We deliberately bring together people from different levels, functions and geographies to promote critical interaction across the business.”

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.