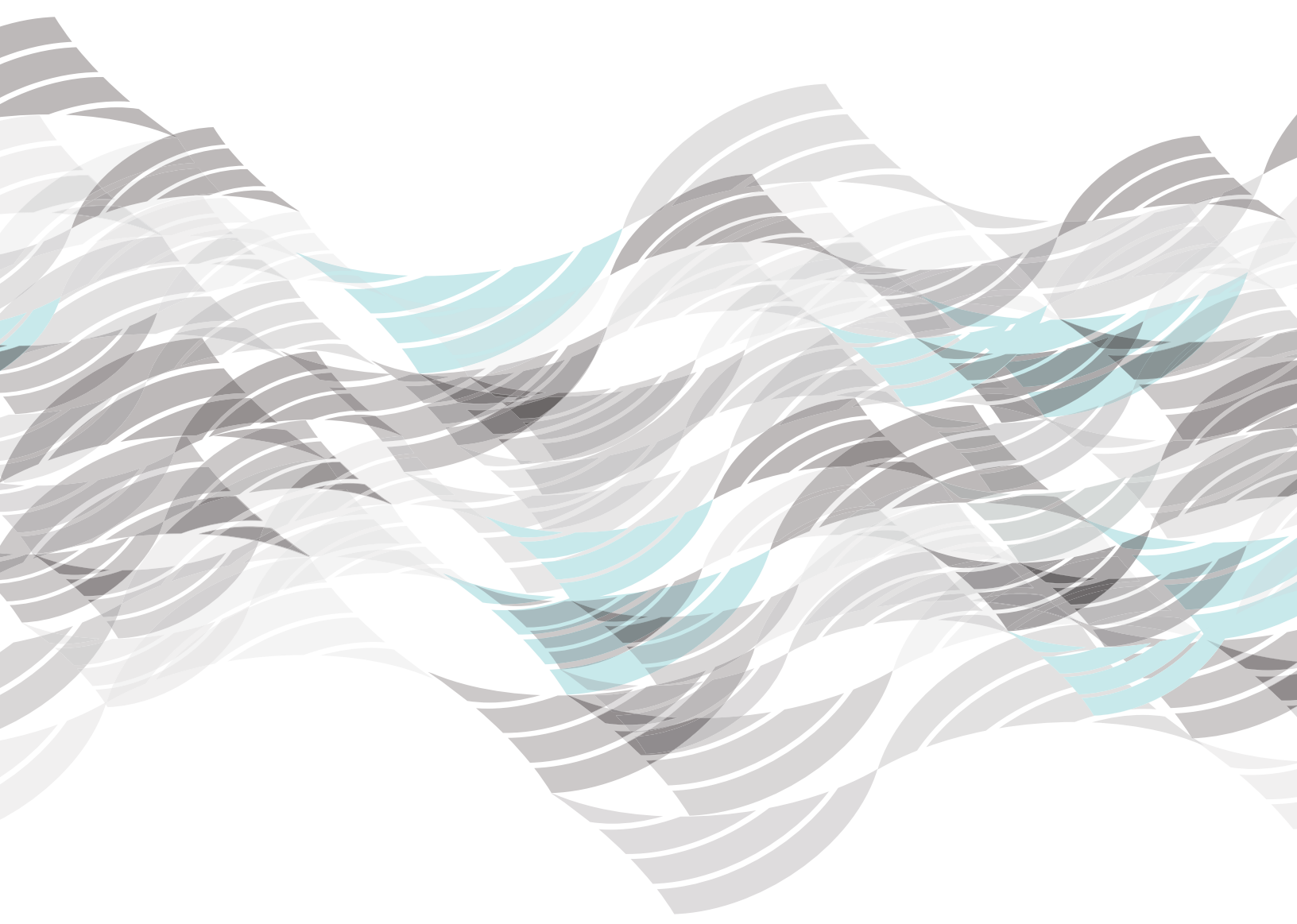




A Leader's Network

How to Help Your Talent Invest in the Right Relationships at the Right Time


By: Phil Willburn and Kristin Cullen





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Leaders must create a “fabric of personal contacts who will provide support, feedback, insight, resources, and information.”

—Herminia Iberra and Mark Hunter
“How Leaders Create and Use Networks”
Harvard Business Review

Introduction

The ability to lead is directly affected by the networks a leader builds.

Leaders achieve success—for themselves and their organizations—not only because of their own abilities, knowledge, and skills but also through their relationships with others.

The networks leaders build affect how they share and receive new ideas. They provide opportunities—and place constraints on their actions. Networks allow leaders to locate resources and information outside their routine interactions. Connections can give leaders an edge.

Not having the right networks can also derail a manager's path to success.

CCL research has identified problems that cause leaders to derail: plateau prematurely in their career or be demoted or fired. The top derailment factors are: difficulty building and leading teams, troubled interpersonal relationships, failing to adapt to and leading change, missing business objectives, and having too narrow of a functional orientation. Leaders' networks are at the core of many of these problems.

Networks are also important for achieving organizational goals, including global and cross-functional integration and collaboration. Formal channels are often insufficient mechanisms for coordination and cooperation. Personal connections are needed to build coalitions, influence others, and reconcile goals that have business units working across purposes.

Networks are at the heart of social capital—what leaders can do because of and through their relationships with others. Individuals improve their social capital when they can see and understand the connections between themselves and others within and beyond their workplace. With an accurate network perspective, leaders can strategically invest in their personal networks and build the social capital that is needed at each stage of their career.

Unfortunately, building social capital is not given much attention as part of the leadership development equation.

Often, managers are given generic advice about the importance of networking and vague steps about how to do it—without providing a strategic understanding of networks, why they matter, and how they can be established and maintained over time. Plus, since most network-building advice is not tailored to organizational level, managers often receive information that may not fit their current career challenges—and may even undermine their effectiveness.

Instead, development programs and initiatives must help leaders understand, foster, and leverage their relationships with others. Further, we see that this training must be tailored to the unique challenges of the leader's organizational level.

This paper describes three qualities of a good network, then breaks down network challenges that leaders face at different stages of their careers, and offers ways that learning, development, and HR functions can support leaders to build high-quality, meaningful networks.

Three Qualities of a Good Network

Leaders may face the temptation to build expansive networks, but a large network isn't necessarily a good network. The demands of large networks can be draining—and still not provide access to the information, resources, and relationships that matter most to be effective.

More important than the number of people in a network is the quality and structure of the network.

Good networks are open. Open networks are those where the people you know are not all connected to each other. This creates what is called “structural diversity” in a leader’s network. Leaders with open networks are more likely to hear new information before others. They are better able to merge dissimilar ideas and capitalize on opportunities that require this integration. They tend to perform better, are promoted more rapidly, enjoy greater career mobility, and adapt to change more effectively (Burt, 1992; Cross, Thomas, & Light, 2008).

Good networks are diverse. Connections that cross critical boundaries in the organization provide additional diversity—and many of the same advantages of open networks. Much of the work of leadership involves working across vertical, horizontal, stakeholder, demographic, and geographic boundaries for group and organizational success (Yip, Ernst, & Campbell, 2009; Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2010). Individual leader’s network connections form the bridges that span these boundaries and allow for collective action (Cross, Ernst, & Pasmore, in press).

Good networks are deep. Leaders who build deep, quality relationships with others are able to exchange information, resources, and skills with people from different backgrounds. These deep relationships provide valuable perspective and resources, including social support and camaraderie in the workplace. Building high-quality relationships with others is estimated to be four times the predictor of performance than other network predictors (Cross & Parker, 2004).

When leaders invest strategically in the substance of their networks with these three qualities in mind, they develop more complete, creative, and unbiased views of issues. Open, diverse, and deep networks are more likely to yield new resources and crucial information.

Maintaining this type of network requires different actions by leaders at different points in their career. New people will be added to the network; others will be disconnected. Many relationships will shift in importance and intensity over a career. A critical skill is to know when and how to activate relationships—and when and how to back away from or dial down relationships.

One way to understand and manage relationships is to think about latent versus active networks.

Active networks consist of two-way relationships where individuals have demonstrated reciprocity in working together, helping each other, and offering resources. With that foundation of reciprocity, the level of trust grows. Reciprocal, trusted relationships that are regular and ongoing are a leader’s most active network.

Latent networks include relationships that are currently low on reciprocity, trust, and/or frequency. They may be newer relationships, looser ties, or old connections.

By assessing the quality and structure of their networks, leaders can intentionally activate or pull back on relationships to create the networks that are most critical for their current roles and challenges—and in preparation for future roles.

Latent vs. Active Networks

	Latent Networks	Active Networks
Reciprocity	Little or no give and take, relationship is one-sided. <i>Example:</i> An industry sales representative who gives you information on current trends.	Notable give and take. Relationship is mutually beneficial. <i>Example:</i> A colleague in another unit on whom you depend—and who depends on you—for information to achieve goals.
Intimacy/Trust	Low level of trust and disclosure. Loose commitment. <i>Example:</i> An employee of a competitor that you have become friendly with at industry conferences.	High level of trust and disclosure. Strong commitment. <i>Example:</i> A friend who you confide in regarding work and personal challenges.
Frequency	Sporadic contact. More than 6 months ago. <i>Example:</i> A former boss you check in with occasionally.	Regular or ongoing contact. Within the last 6 months. <i>Example:</i> A former boss who has remained an informal mentor and you talk every few months.

Network Challenges: Different Levels, Different Needs

Successful leaders across organizational levels have networks that are open, diverse, and deep. However, the challenges leaders face vary over time and as they take on larger organizational roles. This reality affects the leadership development needs—and the network development needs—of managers at different career stages.

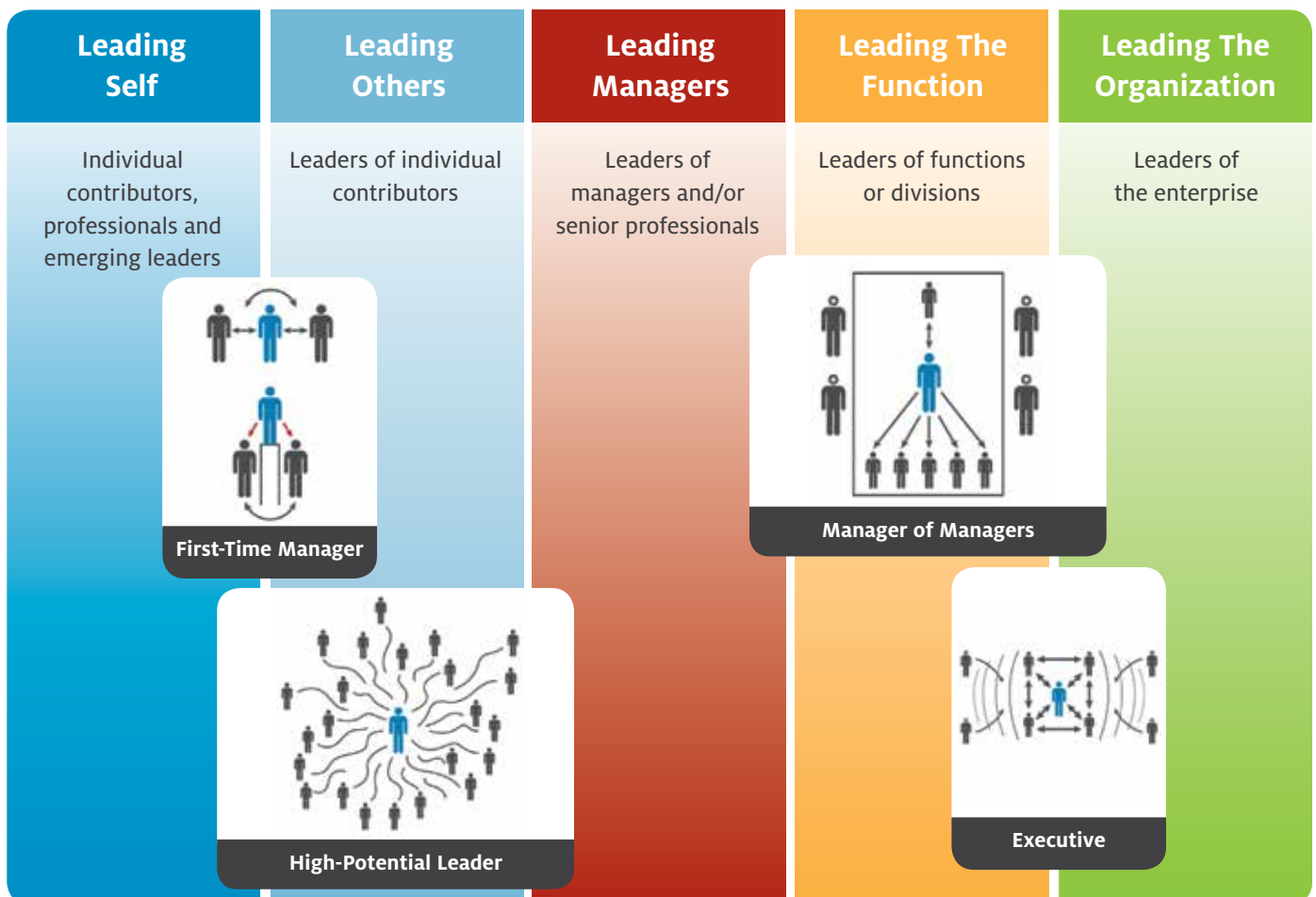
CCL created the Leader Development Roadmap to focus learning and address challenges that leaders face at different organizational levels. We wondered if network development advice could be fine-tuned by organizational level as well. So we tracked the organizational level and network patterns of leaders who took our “leadership network diagnostic” (see “Applied Research” section).

We found that along the road to the top of the organization, leaders face distinct network challenges. Typically, during a role transition or a career shift, leaders must modify their relationships to remain effective.

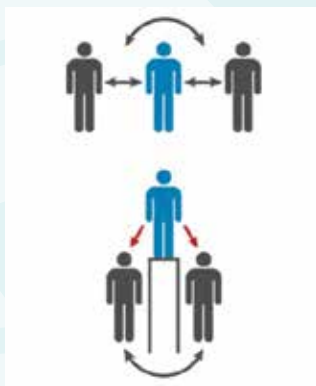
We also found that leaders behaved in predictable ways at each of these points. And, in most cases, the predictable network reaction caused a counter-productive pattern in the leader’s network, creating a derailment risk.

Of course, as with any framework, there are exceptions. Every leader does not experience these challenges, and certain challenges may reemerge at different points in leaders’ careers. But by understanding the patterns and pitfalls that exist, organizations and individuals will be able to take an informed look at leaders’ networks and tailor a response.

Network Challenges Mapped to CCL’s Leader Development Roadmap



First-Time Manager: Transitioning Relationships



The promotion from individual contributor to a first-time manager is seen as recognition of ability and a sign that the person is able to take on new and different roles and responsibilities.

Taking on a management role often causes strains in the personal network of the promoted leader. As a manager, success comes through the success of others, not individual skill or contribution. Managers must work through and with others in unfamiliar ways. And, for the first time, leaders are in a position to manage people who had been their peers, even friends.

Key Change: Positional Power

First-time managers need to learn to manage existing relationships in the context of newly found positional power. The feeling of hierarchy is extremely disrupting to existing relationships—and can affect the leader’s ability to create new relationships as well.

Predictable Network Reaction

The reflexive reaction of many first-time managers is to try to maintain past relationships to preserve some normalcy and continuity in the context of this big personal transition. They work to maintain the status quo with their former peers and friends. For example, if the group went out to lunch regularly, the first-time manager tries to continue the tradition. If the group griped about the work and the organization, the newly minted manager often goes along with the norm of complaining.

Derailment Risk

By not actively transitioning relationships in the context of new positional power, leaders often lose respect from direct reports. Former peers begin to spend more time talking to each other about their boss—and less time talking with their boss.

Leaders in this situation are unable to hold people accountable or they often play favorites, based on their close previous relationships. Direct reports begin to position themselves in good status with the leader to garner better support for performance evaluations, promotions, job opportunities, and compensation.

The tendency to protect existing relationships also blocks much-needed broadening of the network. The new manager will need to strengthen relationships with direct reports who are not in the “friend” group and build connections with a new group of peers working across functions.



Primary Network Goal: Transition Relationships

Ideally, first-time managers will begin the process of transitioning relationships in the early days and weeks of the new job. But anyone who is in the position of managing a group of individual contributors will want to assess whether they have successfully transitioned their relationships. **Specific steps for transitioning relationships include:**

- **Take stock.** Which relationships need to be activated? Which ones need to be dialed back or changed? Decide on specific things you will start doing (regular one-to-one meetings with each direct report) and things you will stop doing (overlooking missed deadlines).
- **Actively monitor relationships.** Paying attention to the interpersonal dynamics in your network will allow you to adjust your approach over time.
- **Become skilled at giving regular feedback to direct reports.** Look into CCL's SBI model for help with this task.
- **Ask others for feedback.** Let your direct reports, peers, and boss know that you want to get their thoughts on how you are managing the role and transitioning your relationships.
- **Regularly discuss the team's goals/objectives.** This approach can change the nature of your conversations with former peers.
- **Branch out with new relationships.** Don't be afraid to shed old group norms.
- **Delegate.** And do it as soon as possible.

High-Potential Leader: Strengthening Relationships



High-potential leaders live in a world of increased work pace and organizational expectations. They are trying to make a name for themselves and their work.

This ambition drives them to take on responsibility, push hard for deliverables, and find high-status projects. They ask to be put on new task forces, their calendars are full of meetings, and they are working many more hours than their peers. If formally recognized as high potentials, these leaders also receive more developmental opportunities, support, and investment from the organization than their peers (Campbell & Smith, 2010).

Key Change: Exponential Increase in Pace and Pressure

A major change for these rising stars is an ever-increasing work load and the pressure, pace, and relationships that come with it. They now have more projects, more responsibilities, and more people to lead—and results are expected quickly.

Predictable Network Reaction

High-potential leaders tend to build broad, far-reaching networks. Building these relationships helps them manage their workload, accomplish their goals, and create visibility.

High potentials are also likely to be “brokers”—they are the link between otherwise unconnected individuals or groups (Burt, 1992). This provides them with access to people and information. However, there is a limit to the number of ties an individual can successfully manage and influence (Aral & Alstynne, 2011), leaving many high potentials with superficial network relationships.

Derailment Risk

High-potential leaders who neglect to build trusted and reciprocating relationships within a broad, far-reaching network are at risk of derailment. This is a case of knowing many people but not building relationships that are strong enough to be leveraged.

High potentials who try to ask favors from weak ties (acquaintances) often put their relationships into an awkward position and fail to deliver results.

Primary Network Goal: Strengthen Relationships

Leaders may experience the network challenges of a high-potential leader at all levels, but we have discovered that they are particularly true for first-line supervisors and middle managers.

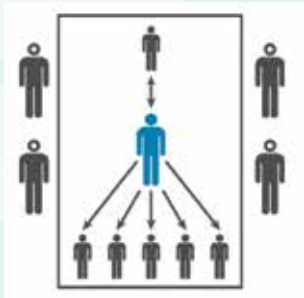


To strengthen your network, first evaluate relationships based on frequency interaction, trust, and reciprocity.

Then work to solidify key relationships. Sinan Aral, Adam Grant, Arthur Aron, and Seth Godin offer excellent advice in this area.

- **Increase the “bandwidth” or depth of your relationships.** Sinan Aral, NYU professor of management and a network science expert, says to:
- **Increase the number of topics you discuss with the other person.** The number and variety of topics discussed in a relationship increases its overall depth.
- **Decrease the number of projects and relationships that are managed at one time.** Aral explains that we only have a limited “bandwidth” for creating deep relationships, thus he suggests strategically limiting the number of projects and relationships and picking projects where the same relationships cross over—this will give you the benefit of multiple projects without adding many more relationships to be managed.
- **Share more of yourself.** Psychologist Arthur Aron of Stony Brook University argues the value of self-disclosure. Don’t do too much too early, he adds. Just be one step ahead of the person you’re trying to build a strong relationship with and you’ll move quickly to having strong ties with them.
- **Be a giver.** Adam Grant, Professor at Wharton (University of Pennsylvania) and author of *Give and Take*, says don’t just match what people are willing to give you. When you are willing to go one step further, the relationship will deepen.
- **Go out of your way.** Author Seth Godin says when you go out of your way for someone—break your routine, habit, schedule to help someone out—that relationship will go further than you originally thought.

Manager of Managers: Creating Strategic Relationships



As a leader's responsibility increases in scope and scale, success becomes measured by the ability to execute on strategy and manage resources.

This is true for anyone managing other managers, managing functions and divisions, and managing entire organizations. These leaders are the operational hub of the organization and are constantly torn by opposing stakeholders and revolving priorities. They are swimming in requests, action items, deadlines, meetings, and performance requirements.

As a result, the need for a strategic network increases in importance—a big shift in how many leaders manage relationships.



Key Change: Lack of Independence

Organizations provide high-potential leaders more freedom for taking on initiatives and getting things done.

Strategic leaders no longer have this independence. Managers leading in the middle zone of the organization must constantly serve their executives and their people, translating requests from the top to the bottom and then from the bottom to the top again. Higher up in the organizations, leaders of divisions or functions must mesh their own vision with that of the larger organization.

Predictable Network Reaction

The lack of independence and focus on execution drives leaders to build networks of people who can get stuff done. Because leaders at higher levels have very little time or energy for mistakes, they often don't feel that they can take risks and trust people who are "unknowns." Their natural reaction is to surround themselves with people who reliably filter, respond, and execute.

Derailment Risk

Leaders who are preoccupied with execution neglect strategic, future-oriented relationships. But it is these strategic relationships (mentors, advisors, strategic business partners, career coaches) that determine whether or not leaders will thrive in their current role and make it to the next level (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007). Even when leaders know they need to network more strategically, they often feel they don't have time to do so. They are caught in a polarity between strategy and executing on current demands. The ones that can do both succeed.

Primary Network Goal: Create Strategic Relationships

The right strategic connections will vary, depending on the organization and the level of the strategic manager. It only takes one or two deep strategic ties to make a difference in a leader's success. The key is to periodically evaluate your network and determine if relationships are tactical or strategic, immediate or long-term, surface or deep. Then seek to build ties with people who will help you understand and achieve your business and career objectives.

Ways to connect strategically with others include:

- **Reach out to colleagues in the same role.** Build strong ties with your peers. They are experiencing similar issues and are also key to accomplishing goals that span organizational departments or functions.
- **Ask for business advice.** Learn to lean on others. Seek out advice from experts outside your field to understand how they relate to your job. Get the perspective of others who have managed similar projects or problems.
- **Seek career advice.** Don't go it alone. Find a coach, mentor, HR advisor, or other person who can give you perspective on the big picture as well as help you figure out what you need to do to be ready.
- **Connect others.** Introduce two people who should meet each other. Let them know they each have information, ideas, or insight the other would find useful.
- **Help a contact get a job inside your organization.** This creates a tie for you in another area of the business.
- **Delegate more operations to your employees.** You may need to coach and develop individuals as they take on these tasks, but it is essential if you are to work at a more strategic level.

Executive: Reversing Insularity and Isolation



As managers move into the top executive role, their world changes again. Life in the C-suite is about full responsibility and accountability.

Senior executives must create strategy for the organization and manage multiple stakeholders and audiences. Developing strategy requires these top leaders to find both organizational and political support for their ideas. At the same time, they must manage their public image and the image of their teams. In fact, CCL research found that the ability of an executive to effectively drive strategy across the organization is directly tied to his/her image in delivering key statements around the organizations goals (Willburn, Hackman, & Criswell, 2008).

Networks are a significant factor in a leader's ability to manage these dual efforts and to create direction, alignment, and commitment throughout the organization.

Key Change: Performance + Personal Scrutiny

The key change in this transition to the C-suite is the overwhelming organizational pressure for performance and intense personal image scrutiny. At this level every action or non-action is watched by the board, peers, direct reports, and the rest of the employees. Competitors also are watching for signs of stress, overload, and uncertainty. These C-suite executives must be "on" at all times assessing whether or not their actions and words are being understood, reinterpreted, or misrepresented.

Predictable Network Reaction

Pressure and image scrutiny drive the executive to work only through proven relationships. These trusted relationships have been built and cultivated over many years so the executive knows they are dependable and reliable. These key people provide a buffer zone for the executive and serve as an extension of the executive.



Primary Network Goal: Reverse Insulation and Isolation

C-level leaders tend to circulate amongst themselves and they also hold back and shape the information they share. So the CEO is insulated—but the whole executive team is likely to be experiencing similar isolation. In addition to determining which relationships need to be activated and which need to be minimized at an individual level, it is a good idea to look at the network patterns of the group as a whole. **Ways individual leaders can break insularity and isolation include:**

- **Consider your image.** What habits and behaviors may contribute to your isolation? What can you do differently to signal a change?
- **Tap into your latent network.** Look for previous contacts and relationships that you can re-energize.
- **Spend time at a start-up within your business sector.** Get unfiltered access to people and information.
- **Schedule skip-level meetings to get unfiltered information.** Find ways to talk to people throughout the organization and factor their experience into your decision making.
- **Attend a conference you have never before attended.** Step out from your current circles of colleagues and the same pool of information.
- **Be a guest speaker at a local or national event.** Again, this pushes you out of your established patterns and opens the door to new relationships and ideas.
- **Find a personal network assistant.** Start using your staff to find you interesting and new people inside and outside your organization to meet for short informal meetings—be curious, understand their world, and follow up if you find something interesting.
- **Introduce two executives at the same level who do not know each other.** Use your position to help others make valuable connections. Your behavior can start to shape and strengthen networks throughout the organization.

Take Action: The Role of Learning, Development, and HR Functions

As a Human Resources executive, your work automatically cuts across functions and levels in the organization.

A first step for boosting network effectiveness is to consider your personal network and the network connections within your function. Consider whether your group has activated the right relationships—or if a different balance of open, deep, and diverse ties are needed in order to access information and leverage your ideas.

Beyond investing in your own network, we suggest the following ways to use network knowledge to develop the social capital of leaders in your organization.

Tailor network development by level. Leaders face different network-related challenges at different points in their career. Social capital development efforts must take this into account when offering guidance to managers. The basic ways to map and evaluate networks are the same for each level, and some best practices overlap. However since the network needs are different based on the nature of the work and the level in the organization, the priorities and potential derailers also will be different.

Debunk the myths. Zealous circulation of faulty advice necessitates the busting of a few myths, according to Ibarra and Hunter (2007). We agree and encourage you to get the word out about these myths.

The following statements are FALSE:

1. Developing strategic relationships is insincere and manipulative.
2. People build and use their networks only to get ahead.
3. Networking is not real work, so leaders shouldn't build in time for it.
4. The goal is to increase the number of business cards in your pocket, contacts in Outlook, connections on LinkedIn, or Twitter followers.
5. You need a certain personality to succeed in networking.



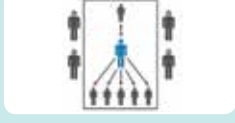

Provide tools and information. Individuals can also quickly and effectively examine the effectiveness of their network using CCL's Leader Network Assessment. (Access a free version by e-mailing willburnp@ccl.org.) This tool helps them move beyond generic information about the importance of networking (which people usually hate to hear and hate to do).

With or without CCL's assessment, provide people in your organization with a basic understanding of networks—they are essentially the connections you have in your life; they will vary in terms of importance and depth; they will change over time.

Let leaders know that good networks tend to be structurally diverse (everyone you know isn't in the same circles); cross critical boundaries (your ties represent a range of functions, levels, etc.); and consist of quality relationships (numbers are not a good indication of the strength of your network).

Finally, share simple principles for managing networks:

- **Know your network-building tendency.** Research indicates that people have a tendency to build certain types of networks (Burt, 2012). These networks may or may not be the network you need for the position you have—or the role you want next. Think about your habits and patterns for connecting with others and consider other approaches.
- **Assess your current network and job requirements.** The right network at any point in time is a matter of fit with a leader’s current job and responsibilities. What type of network do you need for your current role and challenges? What should it look like a year or two down the road or as you make the next career move?
- **Take actions to build and manage your networks.** Pay as much attention to the development of your network as you do to the development of your skills and competencies. Building and managing networks should be thoughtful and strategic work. The table below will help you think about the network challenges you may face at key points and how you might overcome them.

Level	Situation	Key Change	Predictable Network (Re)actions
First-Time Manager	 <p>Managing former peers and work relationships for the first time.</p>	First time feeling of positional power	Maintain similar status of past relationships
High-Potential Leader	 <p>Making a name for themselves and their work</p>	Pace of work/expectations exponentially increases	Building broad, far-reaching relationships
Manager of Managers	 <p>Executing strategy and managing resources</p>	Lack of independence—constantly serving others	Focusing on tactical, short-term relationships of current use
Executive	 <p>Creating strategy and managing publics</p>	Overwhelming organizational pressure and image scrutiny	Closing off network, working only through trusted colleagues

- **Assess the network of your organization.**

Map your organization's network to identify how work really gets done in your organization. Organizational Network Analysis provides insight into how social capital is shaped and distributed in your organization.

- Use this knowledge to accelerate the social capital of new leaders by identifying network power players they should connect to.
- Assess the connectivity of the network across critical boundaries in the organization. For example, examine whether the executive team is isolated from the rest of the organization and the types of boundaries they are or are not crossing.
- See the CCL white paper, *Developing Network Perspective*, for other uses and insights network analysis provides in organizational development and change initiatives.

- **Learn more.** A growing number of thought leaders and researchers are building the collective knowledge about how networks work and the implications for effective leadership. We list a number of resources at the end of this paper to help you learn more about individual network analysis as well as information about organizational network analysis, if you want to put networks into the larger context.



Accelerating Leadership Networks: One Company's Story

Like many multi-national, market-leading companies, our client was eagerly and aggressively investing in talent. One effort was a program for high potentials designed to fast-track their development. This cadre of leaders would then jump a level in the organization.

The program appeared to be a success—these rising stars had skill, knowledge, and learning ability. But because they were moving through the organization so quickly and with such a focus on producing results, they did not build key relationships along the way. The “seasoning” that comes from the process of building relationships and navigating through those connections was missing.

CCL worked with the firm's robust in-house leadership development function to incorporate network development into the high-potential training process. The participants learned what goes into an effective network, how it should change over time, and the value of knowing when to activate or pull back on different relationships. By taking a strategic approach to network development, the pool of talented managers have high-value jobs—and the high-value networks they need to work within and across the organization.



Conclusion

As you design and implement leadership development initiatives, you are creating a pipeline of leaders with the skills and capabilities for their next position. What they may be missing is the network they need to succeed in their new organizational role.

Organizations, specifically human resources, talent management, and leadership development functions, must invest in the development of social capital within the organization. Networks and relationships are the currency for collaboration—and without the right ones, leaders are constrained and organizations are limited.

Applied Research

The framework for level-based network challenges was developed based on five years of applied work by Phil Willburn using a paper-based leadership network diagnostic tool in two different training environments aimed at developing effective leadership networks. The first consisted of intelligence community managers from various organizational levels worked on their collaboration challenges through the lens of their personal network in one of two courses (Best Practices for Community Collaboration and Managing Collaborative Analysis).

The second was a fortune 500 company in the science and technology field. This data followed the career trajectories of high-potential leaders and high-performing middle managers and executives for five years by mapping their personal networks. Approximately 300 managers and high potentials have taken the paper-based leadership network diagnostic.

For more information about the leadership network diagnostic tool or applying this work to your organization, contact Phil Willburn, willburnp@ccl.org.

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