The NETWORK ROUNDTABLE at the UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

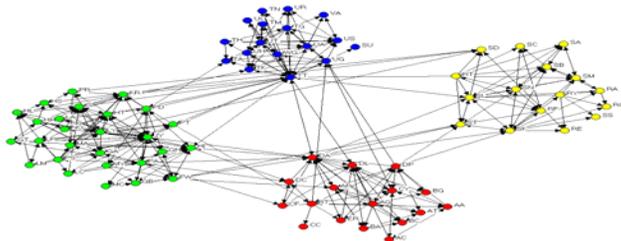# Research Report:

How Top Talent Uses Networks
and Where Rising Stars Get Trapped

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According to the cliché, it's not what you know, but whom you know, that matters. Like all clichés, this one overstates the case while also containing a measure of truth. No one has escaped the experience of seeing a colleague awarded a plum assignment or hearing from an old friend about yet another promotion and musing that such success has more to do with connections than abilities. These frustrating experiences can lead people to take extreme attitudes toward networking, however. Some dismiss it as a game for self-promoters and opt out of the activity altogether. Others, meanwhile, peruse one self-help book after another in search for the quick-fix "secrets" to a power network.

But personal networks are too important today for either response. Per the head of talent for one well-known software development organization, "Those who come in here and do well early but then plateau – and oddly enough never seem to understand why – too often think they are going to succeed on their expertise. While they can do this early, the problems we have to solve at all but the most junior levels are too complex, multifaceted and time-boxed to get done on individual brilliance. People have to have strong networks that they continually develop to be successful over time." Her observation is true of rising stars in a wide range of organizations. Recent research suggests that as much as 90 percent of the information employees take action on comes from people in their network.[1] As such, the quality and scope of an employee's network have a substantial impact on his or her ability to solve problems, learn when transitioning into new roles and implement plans of any substance.

The solution, however, is not simply the more-is-better approach to networking so commonly advocated in self-help books. Although hard-driving salespeople may thrive by building large ad hoc networks of loosely connected relationships, most high performers succeed by developing targeted networks that extend their abilities. Rather than simply adding more and more people to their Rolodex, rising stars need to adopt a thoughtful approach. They need to know how to increase *and* decrease connectivity in ways that enhance productivity and performance.

Six years ago we started research to learn what makes networks better but not necessarily bigger. To that end, we studied high performers – those in the top 20 percent of their organization's HR ratings – across a wide range of organizations in which both network

measurements and meaningful performance data were available. Our research revealed three important things about high performers and their networks. The first is structural: High performers have a greater tendency to position themselves at key points in a network, and they leverage the network around them better when implementing their plans. The second is relational: High performers tend to invest in relationships that extend their expertise and help them avoid learning biases and career traps. The third is behavioral: High performers value networks and engage in behaviors that lead to high-quality relationships – not just big networks.

Our research shows that people who do well on these three dimensions – structural, relational and behavioral – are much more likely to be successful than those who pay little or no heed to their network. It also shows how rising stars falter or get derailed entirely by not attending to their network. This research report will outline both the steps to success and the network traps that can snare high performers when they undertake network building without proper thought or discipline.

The importance of bridging positions in networks
It's easy to posit that high performers benefit from their networks, but it's harder to describe, in concrete terms, *how* networks confer that advantage. As one senior executive told us, "We know high performers benefit from their networks, but we chalk up all the good things that happen to them to luck or good fortune. Like the travelers to Oz, we don't really have a good sense of what's going on behind the curtain." High performers often create their own luck by being more attuned to the network around them. Strategically leveraging relationships enables rising stars to see the big picture better, generate innovative solutions by integrating the expertise of those with unique backgrounds, position their efforts well, bypass bureaucratic gridlock and obtain necessary resources and support.

High performers tend to occupy network positions that bridge otherwise disconnected clusters of people. [2] One way to visualize this phenomenon is by considering the game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon," named for an actor who has appeared in a great variety of films in the course of his career. [3] Participants in the game attempt to name actors who are the most steps away from

appearing with Bacon in a film. An actor who has actually appeared with Bacon is one step away, whereas an actor such as Michael Douglas is two steps away. He has never appeared with Bacon himself, but he did appear with Benjamin Bratt in the movie *Traffic,* and Bratt in turn appeared with Bacon in *The Woodsman.*

It turns out it is difficult to name any actor from the history of film who is more than three steps away from Bacon.[4] But the magic in Bacon's network is not the size of it but rather how he is positioned within the entire movie universe. He is central – though not the most central, an honor that currently goes to Rod Steiger – because he has starred in a number of different genres and so has ties spanning action, comedy, thrillers, dramas and horror films. This stands in contrast to actors with similar numbers of movies under their belt but who focused more narrowly in, say, comedies. Although those actors are highly connected within a genre, lack of ties bridging genres make them much less central in the entire movie universe network.

It works in much the same way in the workplace. As graphically shown in Exhibit 1, people with networks such as Tom's do better than those with networks such as Bill's, even though both maintain the same number of ties. With their more closed networks, the Bills of the world tend to be circulating with people who are aware of similar opportunities. For the same investment of time, the Toms, with their more diverse network, get a much greater return, as they hear different information early and are able to capitalize on opportunities that require disparate expertise and insights.

|Insert Exhibit 1 about here |

Tom's network requires effort to develop and runs contrary to most organizations, as formal structure, incentive schemes, physical layout, cultural values and other forces tend to encourage more insular networks. But rather than fall into a comfortable trap of connecting with people who are themselves heavily interconnected, high performers tend to forge ties across important subgroups. As a result, they are better able to capitalize on opportunities in the "white space" of a network than peers with more closed networks. Our research has confirmed that people who bridge subgroups are much more likely to be in the top 20 percent (as determined by performance reviews) within an organization.[5] Others have also shown that these bridge

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builders tend to be promoted more rapidly, enjoy greater career mobility and adapt to changing environments more successfully.[6]
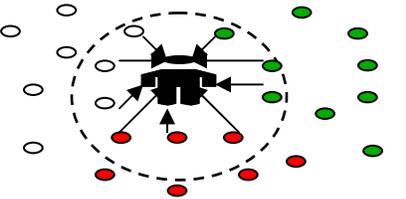
Consider how one well-known investment bank won the business of a major account from a rival bank. The client had been with the rival bank for years and had a strong personal relationship with the primary account executive. But the second investment bank won the account after it delivered a proposal for a more targeted and customized financial solution that met the client's unique needs. The change came about solely because the second banker (Dan) had collaborative ties to other product and service groups in his organization that the first banker (Geoff) lacked. Dan was able to leverage those ties to devise a more comprehensive solution for the client.

Despite the strength of the original relationship, the client was ultimately swayed by Dan's greater ability to produce results. The client explained, "It came down to a huge difference in delivery. Geoff should have been able to deliver the same service – I mean, they had all the same areas. But for some reason Geoff did not morph solutions to our changing needs in the same way as Dan offered." In the end, personal ties between Geoff and the client could not overcome Geoff's lack of connections to other parts of the business. "Part of it is that we are not set up for cross-selling," Geoff admitted. "But as I look at your model of networks, my guess is that I could have done a better job connecting to groups that would have helped me think about a more complete solution. But that goes against the incentives here – at least in the short term – and so is something I need to go after myself," he observed.

How rising stars go wrong: the bottleneck and the formalist
Two network traps tend to invisibly impede high performers' effectiveness and career progression if they are not careful. In the first, the rising star becomes a bottleneck, overloaded with relational demands. Some rising stars fall into this trap by being too controlling. By not delegating tasks or decision rights or by holding on to information too tightly, these people force others to rely on them. Early on this might be good for their careers and job security, but as responsibilities increase, these tendencies lead to excessive relational demands that erode their own effectiveness and turn them into bottlenecks that diminish the entire network's performance. Other rising stars fall into this trap for more benign reasons: They want to be

leaders or experts, and in their minds, a leader or expert must answer people's questions or solve their problems him- or herself, not point them toward other resources or people. But regardless of the root causes, bottlenecks end up using their time inefficiently, and they invisibly hold up work and innovation at myriad points in the network – a double penalty to the organization.

The bottleneck	**Issue**: The bottleneck creates a heavy reliance on him- or herself. Bottlenecks use their own time – and that of others – inefficiently; they invisibly hold up work and innovation in the network. **Outcomes**: Bottlenecks may experience personal burnout; the organization's dependence on them means it fails to use expertise on the network's periphery; the network is slower to respond to opportunities and threats, and innovation stalls. **Network remedy**: Identify categories of information, decision rights and tasks that can be reallocated to alleviate overloaded points and draw others into the network.

Consider Scott, a rising star within the professional services arm of one of the world's leading computer-manufacturing organizations. A network analysis of Scott's group revealed that more than 50 people in his group were seeking him out regularly for information, and another 50 or so said they would be more effective if they could get more of his time. Scott was not a hoarder of information or decisions; indeed, he was well regarded and had vowed to minimize red tape and hierarchy. Even as his global group grew into the hundreds, he was adamant that it could be managed with only two layers of leadership and that he would remain accessible and open to everyone. But as his responsibilities grew, the approach that had made him successful early on became untenable. Scott was working around the clock as he continually pushed harder in the face of endless queries, opportunities and challenges, and it was entirely common to get e-mails from him at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. Ironically, his stand against red tape and hierarchy resulted in a gridlocked organization because the network had imploded on him and his small set of direct reports. Many people working in Scott's group became disgruntled as their queries were not answered for weeks or, worse, went into the ether and were never returned.

Despite working to their limits, rising stars who become bottlenecks hurt their group's effectiveness and morale. The paradox is that although they hold up those around them, they

themselves feel that everything is happening too rapidly, as they race from meeting to meeting where decisions are constantly being made. A fairly simple solution is to identify categories of information, decisions and portions of one's role that can be given to others. For example, seemingly small decisions – such as travel approvals or pricing on routine transactions – can continually interrupt the rising star's more important tasks, and yet if he or she can't deal with them right away, others are kept waiting needlessly. Authority to make such decisions can often be allocated via a policy document or made the domain of a less overloaded "go-to" person, freeing up the rising star to pursue value-added work, widening a hidden bottleneck in the network and making peripheral network members more central.
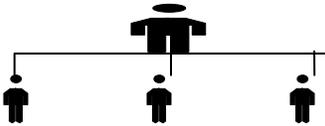
Of course, delegating tasks is a well-worn managerial solution. The benefit of a network perspective is that it renders information and decision-making blockages visible. This matters on three fronts. First, being able to visualize relational demands for information or decision making tells rising stars where they need either to pare away ties entirely or simply decrease time spent with specific people in their network. Second, a map of the network identifies those in a group who should be made go-to people: They are the ones who have ground-level credibility in the eyes of their peers. Third, visualization allows leaders to model the potential impact of shifting relational demands in a network prior to taking time-consuming and potentially expensive action. Far too often, restructurings fail when shifts to formal charts either don't leverage the recognized expertise in the network or create new bottlenecks as people sought out heavily in the pre-change environment become overloaded with requests from old and new colleagues.

Interviewing a bottleneck to identify recurring informational requests and decisions that he or she can let go of is a simple and non-threatening intervention because those duties are not central to the bottleneck's success. Unfortunately, we often find that if we return a year after an intervention, the individual in question is once again weighed down by minutiae and is once again a bottleneck. This behavior is partly a function of personality – despite the personal toll, high performers often like to be at the center of action; they allow themselves to be drawn back in because it feels good to be needed and in the know. But others in the organization share responsibility for the situation: In order for a bottleneck to cast off responsibilities successfully,

others must be willing to accept new duties, and they must be willing to choose courses of action on their own rather than continually seeking the overloaded person for advice.

A second way that rising stars go wrong is by relying too heavily on an organization's formal structure as a map of how work gets done. In doing so, they fail to understand or leverage the power of informal networks. Although the lines and boxes on a formal organizational chart should not be ignored – they do show an approximation of how power and resources are distributed – they can also mask or distort the underlying networks and collaborations that are the true currency of execution. "Formalists" miss important levers of influence when they fail to exploit these informal networks.

Research shows that managers vary in their ability to accurately describe the networks in their organization; those with the more accurate perceptions are the higher performers over time.[7] Rising stars who continue to ascend tend to have an intuitive sense of the key opinion leaders and work with and through them to implement plans and exert influence. They are able to address key fragmentation points in a network and do not let collaboration breakdowns invisibly undermine performance. And they recognize when formal and informal structure are creeping so far out of alignment that responsiveness and efficiency suffer via workarounds, poor role definitions or process flows that do not capture how collaborative work is actually occurring in the organization.

The formalist	Issue: The formalist has an inaccurate perception of the informal network and therefore fails to leverage it as means to get work done. Outcome: Formalists may suffer personal frustration as things do not happen the way they expect them to. In the organization, plans will be implemented ineffectively and opportunities will be missed. Network Remedy: Identify brokers, marginalized voices, overloaded points and fragmentation where networks have fallen out of alignment.

For example, Sidney Harman, founder of Harman Industries, recalled how excessive reliance on formal hierarchy and rules brought an important factory to a halt – and revealed the power of

informal networks at the same time.[8] The problem resided in the polish and buff department of a plant located in Bolivar, Tennessee, where a crew of a dozen workers did the dull, hard work of polishing mirrors and other parts. On one fateful night, a malfunctioning buzzer failed to signal the start of a routine break period. Still, employees turned off their machines and headed for the coffee room. However, management arbitrarily decided to postpone the break for 10 minutes, when another buzzer was scheduled to sound. In Harman's words, "All hell broke loose." What appeared to be a simple problem brought to the surface a myriad of grievances derived from management's rule-mindedness. However, as Harman later reported, it also illustrated how a handful of people in the informal network of the organization – senior machine operators, in particular – occupied vital thought leader positions and held the key to a much more effective way to run the factory. In fact, in the ensuing months and years, Harman revamped the factory and its workings, turning it into a kind of campus and encouraging a significant degree of worker control. Further, he created an environment where dissent was not only tolerated but encouraged.

The case of a large pharmaceutical company in the midst of restructuring its R&D function provides another example. The restructuring was no simple task, as the primary labs were spread across three continents and the company had not yet completely recovered from the integration occasioned by an earlier merger. Midway through the restructuring process, management paused to analyze the networks developing in various units as well as to assess goals and values emerging in the newly formed global R&D group. Interviews with network members revealed a shockingly wide discrepancy in goals. Some thought the main goal was building their own skill set and knowledge base; others believed it was speeding up R&D's overall development cycle; still others thought it was adopting uniform technical standards. In the end, a list of 18 different "top" priorities came out of the assessment.

This lack of agreement surprised the leaders of the new group, who felt they had conveyed the strategic plan well and realigned aspects of formal structure to motivate the pursuit of a common vision and agenda. Yet visualizing the disparate goals arrayed in the network helped reveal the energy sapped from pursuit of key strategic initiatives as different people and groups worked to different priorities. When we colored nodes in the network to show the priorities that influential people and subgroups in the network were pursuing, the head of R&D was able to

use that information to redirect a set of well-intentioned but misguided people who were having a substantial effect on the actions and beliefs of many others in the network. He then brought together the warring subgroups for a series of targeted visioning sessions that previously only those high in the hierarchy had participated in.

Formalists miss underlying network dynamics that can greatly improve the odds of success in implementing their plans. How can they be helped? One way is by identifying a network's brokers. Brokers are similar to the Kevin Bacons of the world, in that they connect disparate groups – but unlike Kevin Bacon, they may not have particularly high numbers of direct connections. They sit in the "white space" of a network, and by knitting subgroups together, they can dramatically increase the speed of change. Assessing each network member's personal connectivity can also uncover employees who are more influential than it would seem on the surface, and conversely, those who have the ear of the boss but are much less effective in the eyes of their peers. Rising stars who avoid the formalist trap understand how to work through opinion leaders and shore up fragmented points in a network rather than let breakdowns in collaboration undermine performance. Formalists, in contrast, miss these and other seemingly invisible levers of influence and so are less effective over time.

Relationships that extend individual expertise and avoid learning traps
In addition to being positioned well within an overall network, we found that high performers cultivate personal networks that extend their abilities and help them continually learn and develop at work. Technological progress over the past 25 years has not changed people's preference for relying heavily on others – colleagues or friends of colleagues – to find information and learn how to do their work.[9] Although it often makes sense to seek out human rather than technological assistance in solving business problems, there is a risk: People tend primarily to seek out others who do what they do and see the world as they do. It's comforting, validating and easy to interact with people who "get it" – who think as we do. Such tendencies, however, prevent rising stars from extending their abilities and decrease the odds of their developing truly innovative insights outside of their narrow domain of expertise.

This is not surprising – sociologists have extensively researched how people cluster in networks according to age, race, education and gender. Unless forced to interact with others who are different, most people follow the strong tendency, known as *homophily,* to seek out those who are demographically similar to themselves.[10] Interestingly, though, our research suggests that bridging these demographic social worlds is *not* what distinguishes networks of rising stars. Our high performers were no different than average or low performers in terms of the number or strength of ties to those with different demographic characteristics. Rather, they were distinguished by having people in their network who (1) provided complementary (not similar) expertise and (2) created bridges across aspects of formal structure.

Stories abound of political leaders, executives and coaches who succeed, at least in part, because they surround themselves with good people. We argue that what makes those surrounding people good is that they extend the leader's expertise rather than duplicating it: They are complements, not clones. Take Bill Parcells, the coach who led the New York Giants to two Super Bowl victories in the 1980s. Although he is hailed as a legendary coach, those results came when he was surrounded by top assistants, men who have gone on to work wonders of their own. Cast in this light, it is hard to determine whether Parcell's success was a product of coaching or network building, but perhaps it is not purely coincidental that his return to coaching in Dallas has not yielded the kind of success he enjoyed when surrounded by elite assistants. Rather than leave this to chance – or guessing whom one should include – a network view helps rising stars be much more precise in building networks that extend their abilities.

Beyond connecting to those with complementary expertise, our high performers also distinguish themselves by having networks rich in ties bridging various dimensions of formal structure (relational predictors of high performance above and beyond position in the overall network). Consider Steve, who in the mid 1990s became director of innovation and technology in a global consultancy. His role was to learn what different operations were doing from a technology standpoint and transfer that knowledge throughout the firm. He did an enormous amount of travel and quickly became a knowledge hub as he focused on identifying groundbreaking work that others could leverage with their clients and on locating new practices and processes that could be adapted for use inside the firm as well as with clients.

Steve became highly successful in the organization and was promoted to the top executive ranks by the year 2000.

We came across Steve after a network analysis revealed him to have the broadest reach into different functions, physical locations and hierarchical levels we had seen. His was not the largest network we had seen – in fact it was not even the largest in that organization – but the number of ties bridging hierarchical levels, functional lines and physical site locations was stunning and a factor to which Steve immediately attributed his success. Early in his career those bridging ties were tremendously important in selling client work, developing a track record and rising within the firm. As he ascended to the very top of the organization, those relationships enabled him to implement global initiatives.

He remarked, "I think you see things differently when you have a better network. As you are listening to a client issue, you're not constrained. If I think of how I sell work or engage with clients, I am listening to their issues and immediately thinking about who I can loop in. You know, I could tell a client in New York that we just did that in Florida or Australia [and ask,] 'Would you be interested?' This diverse network … rose with me as I have progressed in my career and has been the most important thing I have done in terms of my success. In an almost invisible way I know I am much more effective than people who are smarter than I am but haven't had the right experiences or motivation to build these relationships."

Consistent with Steve's story, our research showed three kinds of bridging ties to be important in high performers' networks:
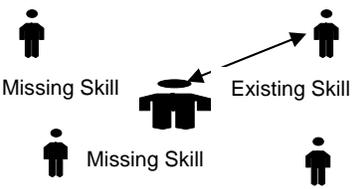
> **Ties bridging hierarchical levels**. A large proportion of high performers' ties extend across hierarchical levels. People who are higher up in an organization can help a high performer make decisions, acquire resources, develop political awareness and gain awareness of happenings in the company. Those at the same level are generally most useful for brainstorming and providing specific help or information. And those at lower levels are often the best source of technical information and expertise.

Ties bridging functional and organizational lines. Rising stars are also much more likely than others to have ties outside their function (but inside the organization) and ties outside the organization. Further, they also have a strong tendency to make time to cultivate these relationships before they are needed. Then, when new opportunities come along, they are better able to visualize how they might integrate people in their network to provide a more comprehensive solution than are their peers with less far-ranging networks.

Ties bridging physical distance. The likelihood of collaborating with someone decreases substantially the farther one is from that person. Although collaborative tools such as e-mail, instant messaging and video conferencing can bridge some gaps, proximity still frequently dictates people's networks. Often this means that people allow proximate others – not those with the best expertise – to influence their thinking. However, our high performers were much more likely to reach out across physical distance to connect with relevant expertise.

How rising stars go wrong: the disconnected expert and the biased learner

Most high performers face transition points in their careers when they need to develop new skills to thrive at the next level. Unfortunately, skill gaps – whether related to technical knowledge, decision-making ability or interpersonal influence – often manifest themselves when an emerging leader has little time to devote to learning. Those who keep moving and enjoying success find ways to augment individual abilities through their network.

The disconnected expert Missing Skill Existing Skill Missing Skill	**Issue**: This otherwise high performer does not address skill gaps – deficiencies of technical expertise, decision-making ability or interpersonal style – by leveraging relationships. **Outcome**: The disconnected expert will ultimately fail when a new role or changing times demand underdeveloped skills. **Network Remedy**: Develop self-awareness and actively build ties to those who can help address skill gaps.

Consider the example in Exhibit 2, portraying a rising manager in a major consumer products organization. Like many, this organization had a competency-based job categorization system.

The exhibit shows a subset of competencies and indicates that the manager turned to many people for help in some but only to one person in others. The initial conclusion might be that he needed more help with product quality, standards and best practices, but in fact the opposite is true – those were the manager's strongest areas. Rather than leveraging relationships to augment his abilities, he was using his network to confirm what he already knew. And the exhibit reveals a second kind of bias. Note that the manager sought out Will and Keith for advice in four of the five categories. If Keith dropped out of his network, he would have no one to turn to for help with vendor relations; if Will dropped out, he would face the same problem with consumer issues. Moreover, this reliance on two colleagues for advice in so many categories indicated a tendency he had to seek out trusted people for help with problems that lie outside their areas of expertise.

|Editor's Note: Insert Exhibit 2 here|

Network analysis helps visualizes ways high performers can take targeted action to create a network that extends their abilities, one that moves them beyond their original network, which merely reinforced old skills. Two views are helpful on this front. The first is to overlay one's network on skills demanded by a current or future role. Doing so reveals where one needs to initiate or deepen relationships to cover a weak spot. The second is to assess the specific kinds of expertise that each person is sought out for to ensure that one is not ignoring those with relevant expertise in favor of familiar but less knowledgeable colleagues. It is common to rely on friends or colleagues we trust for a wide range of advice – even in areas in which they may not have a great deal of expertise – because the conversations are comfortable. Yet personal effectiveness is undermined when rising stars continually mistake trust or friendship for true expertise.
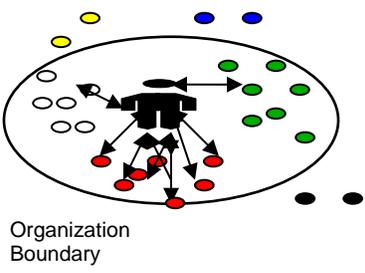
A rising star can also fall into the trap of becoming a biased learner. This happens when a rising star allows certain voices – such as those who are physically nearby or who have a similar functional background or common values – to disproportionately influence learning and decision making. Take the case of Bob, a highly skilled individual hired to help turn around the R&D function of a major manufacturing organization. Bob had a proven track record and had been hired away from a key competitor to help improve the effectiveness of what had once been

a highly regarded unit. With quality and timeliness of innovation lagging, he had a challenge on his hands that was magnified by his not knowing much about the inner workings of this 200-person group, spread across four countries.

Several months into his new role, Bob felt he had made progress in integrating the efforts of the separate labs, but wanted to test this belief with a network analysis. He was surprised to see that some steps he had taken to improve collaboration had actually resulted in a more hierarchical network, but he was perhaps most surprised when we began showing him different views of his own connectivity. Exhibit 3 shows Bob's informational relationships with key scientists in the four countries. What is immediately obvious is that he was overinfluenced by those in his home location (Country 1) and heavily underinformed by those in Country 3 and Country 4. In fact, people in Country 4 would not even have been included in his network at all except for a single tie to someone he had known in a past life and so connected with largely on a social front.

|Editor's Note: Insert Exhibit 3 here|

On seeing this, Bob immediately recognized why he was having certain troubles implementing global programs and managing development efforts in two of the countries. His open-door policy had invisibly led him to become heavily attuned to the needs and concerns of those in his home country, but he was almost blind to the two remote locations that could not get to him as easily. Rather than understand and take action on the legitimate issues of those in the two countries farthest away, he tended to view their concerns as gripes that he needed to push through. This, of course, is not a problem that only Bob experiences but is a common trap many emerging leaders fall into. Other biases crop up when rising stars are promoted but continue to turn to those in the functions or business units they came from, or when agendas become so constrained by the same people that no new information or perspectives becomes influential in a rising star's thinking. Making these biases visible to leaders is the first step in helping them increase or decrease connectivity to enable their continued success.

The biased networker	**Issue**: The biased networker allows certain voices (such as those with similar functional background, physical location or common values) to become disproportionately important in business decisions.
Organization Boundary	**Outcome**: Poor strategies, inflexibility and unethical decisions are all potential outcomes resulting from insularity or from allowing certain voices to become too privileged. **Network Remedy**: Identify and correct overinvestment and underinvestment in relationships.

Network biases afflict many organizations, particularly those that are overtaken by hubris, and they breed insular leaders. CBS News and *The New York Times* have been battered in recent years by resignations on the heels of false reportage that had not been put through normal channels of verification. The leaders of those organizations were guilty, in part, of creating a culture that shut out dissenting voices. Perhaps the most famous example of an insular culture leading to disaster is Enron. At that benighted firm, Kenneth Lay gave the reins to "the smartest guys in the room," Jeff Skilling and Andrew Fastow; he failed to heed the warning of someone from outside that exclusive club, Sherron Watkins. Everyone knows the outcome.

In a somewhat less explosive example, Philip Purcell was recently ousted from Morgan Stanley, partly for maintaining an inner circle of advisers that was composed mainly of his former Dean Witter Discover colleagues. People on the investment bank side who had been with Morgan Stanley for years were frozen out. Purcell's firing of three senior investment bankers prompted the resignation of two other high-ranking executives, which enraged a group of dissident alumni shareholders and set the stage for Purcell's removal from the company.[11] This kind of excessive loyalty to members of one's previous networks is both common and dangerous.

Attitudes and networking behaviors associated with high performers
Finally, we found that high performers often distinguish themselves not just in the quality of their networks but in their beliefs and behaviors regarding relationships. More important than the number of relationships they forge is the strength of those relationships. To be sure, our rising stars were active in reaching out to others, as commonly prescribed in the self-help

literature. But beyond that, they invested well in relationships. For example, they tended to reach out to others before they had a need, and when they did connect, they listened; probed; others' needs; and often gave information, resources or contacts without expecting an immediate return. At the same time, however, even early on in a relationship, they continually focused on ways to create value all around and quickly made it clear that they could be trusted to honor commitments. And perhaps most importantly our high performers had a much greater tendency to connect with others as people as opposed to means to an end. People generally liked being in their company and tended to feel better – not used – after interactions.

Consider Will, an executive hired into a major professional services firm to establish a critical practice. Will had built both domestic and international practices in other firms. But though a veteran of consulting, he was unfamiliar with the culture and people in the globally distributed organization he had joined and had little time to bring about substantial change. As he was given insufficient resources and people, he had to establish credibility through high-quality client work while also tirelessly building his network of key partners in the firm.
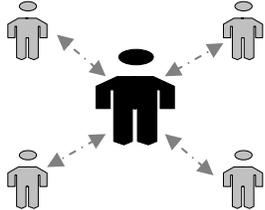
He did a number of things early on to this end. Despite his seniority, he immediately joined a high-profile merger engagement and helped deliver a strong success that quickly resulted in additional sales. As stories of this and other client wins spread, Will was increasingly drawn into engagements and sales opportunities, where he also established himself as a team player. Rather than looking for credit for each sale, he was happy to provide expertise and assistance as needed to ensure others were successful. In addition to client engagements, Will made it a personal goal to meet 100 of the most senior partners within his first six months. Though seemingly taking time away from "real" work, these meetings not only generated future requests of Will's practice, but also helped him to provide better support because he knew each partner's background and goals.

Importantly, Will's efforts went beyond building reputation in the partner rank. He also focused heavily on developing and supporting those working with and for him. His willingness to jump in and help the team, regardless of the hour, became legendary among those lower in the hierarchy. For example, after a long night at one client site, Will was on his way out the door at midnight. But rather than walking past a conference room where a team was working on a

client deliverable, he joined in and worked with them into the early hours of the morning, helping with the analysis and presentation. Such investments quite often returned to Will by way of greater commitment and effort from those in his practice. In addition, his reputation spread and created a pull in the internal labor market as other high performers jockeyed to work with him. These and other network investments very rapidly increased Will's credibility and influence, and within only a year and a half, he was asked to lead a much larger global practice within the firm.

How rising stars go wrong: the surface networker and the chameleon
The primary behavioral trap rising stars fall into comes from following self-help advice on how to be a good networker. Some high performers, as they emerge into leadership roles, know they have to be better at exerting influence through networks but engage in surface behaviors that do not build enduring relationships. A quick trip to Amazon.com reveals one of the problems, as well over 30 books provide the secrets of how to be a "power" networker or the like. These books too often start with a bias in assuming a big network is what is needed. As a result, they tend to focus on one person who knows a lot of people and then suggest a recipe for success based on what that person does.

The surface networker	**Issue**: The surface networker engages in surface-level interactions to connect with others but does not engage in behaviors that build the personal connection, sense of trust and reciprocity critical to relationships that are truly helpful over time. **Outcome**: The surface networker's loose contacts tend to be effective only when he or she has something to offer, not when he or she is in need of help. **Network Remedy**: Use the network diagnostic to uncover self- and peer perceptions and modify behavior accordingly.

There are several problems with this. First, as we have seen, high performers don't necessarily have big networks – in fact, we found that networks that were merely large, with no other distinguishing characteristics, had a slight negative effect on performance. Rather, as shown above, what high performers do is invest in ties that extend their abilities. Second, most people do not want to live their lives in a world of nonstop or "power" networking. Too often, such surface networkers are seen as politicians, salespeople or office gossips – those you see coming in the hallway and duck into a cubicle to avoid. Third, the surface networker's loose ties to a large number of people tend to be useful only when the networker can be a broker – when he or

she can create value by connecting others. Unfortunately, surface networkers often do not benefit from the reverse scenario – others bringing opportunities to them. On a related note, when things go wrong – which is often when you most need others – surface networks do not help in the way that well-invested relationships with a history of trust, reciprocity and maybe even true friendship do.

That was the experience of Susan, a very solid and creative product developer at a well-known consumer products organization. Her expertise and raw intelligence allowed her to succeed as an individual contributor on a wide array of technical projects. She got things done by brute force of intellect, attention to detail and systematic follow-up. Early on, her projects were always completed successfully, leading to tougher assignments that eventually enabled her to develop a critical patent holding the key to a new process technology.

Susan's performance and individual accomplishments were so good that she became a favorite of senior technical leaders. They promoted her to an important leadership role for a new product category initiative. She was aware that working as a manager would require her to make new connections, and she had learned through coaching and leadership programs about the necessity of working through others as she took on more responsibility.

But she took only part of this advice to heart and focused little on developing trusted and reciprocal ties with peers throughout the organization. Although she built relations in the hierarchy, her behaviors with peers and direct reports remained superficial and closed. Her lack of lateral connectivity killed her when she tried to implement her efforts or required the advice, expertise or resources of colleagues in other departments. These same superficial behaviors targeted to her employees also had a negative effect. She stole the energy from the team, and over time word got around: People worked behind the scenes to avoid being staffed on her project. Her new category project stalled, and she was eventually assigned to another category, with future advancement unlikely.

Our high performers, by contrast, understood that their networks were important to their work and thus worthy of investment; they did not view time spent developing those relationships as time taken from real work. They recognized that effective networks come from a balanced

investment in accomplishment and relationships. In particular, we found that our high performers framed endeavors in ways that required them to turn to their networks for resources or expertise. Although somewhat risky, this mind-set allowed them to accomplish things of greater substance than they could on their own, solidified their reputation for excellence (resulting in more opportunities) and helped them develop an understanding of what the people in their networks were able to contribute.

Second, the high performers in our research were selective in initiating relationships that extended their abilities. When they reached out to others – including to people they didn't know – they did so with a clear and well-articulated reason for connecting (even if only to explore an idea). In several instances, we found individuals who had created the equivalent of a personal board of directors – a small group of people informally assembled with the intent of providing advice, a sounding board and honest criticism. This concept, originated by the Young President's Organization (YPO), requires one to recruit, organize and reward one's personal board. The idea is to ensure that you always have people to turn to for the truth.
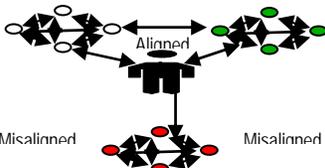
Third, our rising stars tapped into and responded to their networks appropriately. They maintained a balance, for example, between what they asked for and what they contributed to others. They worked to develop a reputation for reliability, and as a result, others sought them out and recommended them. Consistency between word and deed – what they promised and what they accomplished – created trusting relationships around them and encouraged others to turn to them with opportunities. They were clear about their values and consistent across time and between subgroups of people in their actions, which established their integrity and drew people and opportunities to them.

Finally, and perhaps most important, our high performers were avid learners. Regardless of age or place in the hierarchy, they were capable of accepting new ideas, challenges and even disagreement from the members of their personal networks. Even when they elected to reject much of what they heard, they were open to learning new things. This "eyes wide open" approach increases the odds of making useful connections.[12] To this end, our high performers were careful to maintain and adapt their networks for effectiveness over time.

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A second behavioral network trap to avoid is becoming a chameleon. Chameleons are networkers who tailor their actions to fit in with whatever group they happen to be with at the time. Rising stars whose early influence was built on persuading those over whom they had no authority to do things for them are likely to fall into this trap. As these leaders absorb the sometimes conflicting interests, values and personalities of different groups, they are unable to achieve the necessary coordination and alignment between them.

This tendency to blow with the prevailing wind is one of the only personality traits that has consistently been shown to have a negative impact on network patterns. It turns out that those who mold themselves to the values, interests and dynamics of a given group fragment the overall network. By trying, for example, to appear as "one of the guys," a leader can inadvertently create impressions of favoritism, and the various subgroups in the network can lose sight of the overarching objectives that guide them all.

The consequences of the chameleon's changeability and the dissimulation it implies can be enormous, particularly when issues arise at the boundaries of legal or ethical behavior. Richard Nielsen, a specialist in organizational ethics, has noted that managers often find three important resources in short supply when they face ethical dilemmas: time, advice that can be trusted and self-knowledge. [13] Time is critical because the pressure to act can short-circuit rational judgment; the absence of time, when combined with the inability to get trustworthy advice and inadequate insight into one's own personal values and priorities, can be devastating. In short, managers make bad decisions when they don't know what they stand for, and a crisis is not the time to figure that out.
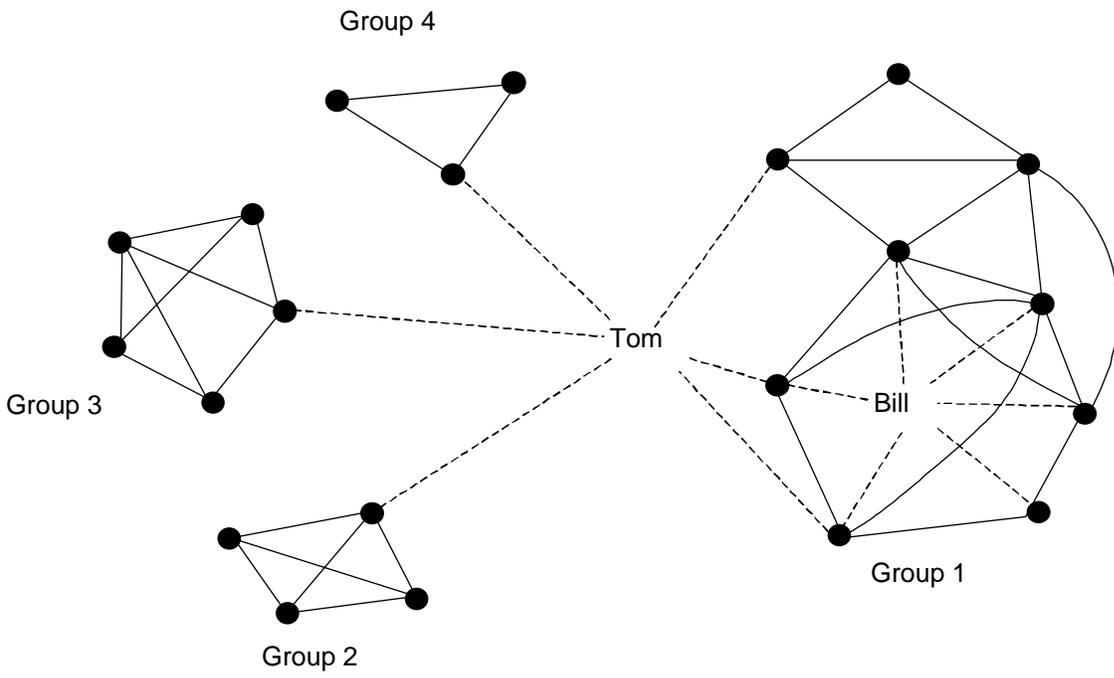
The chameleon	Issue: Leaders absorb the interests, values and personalities of diverse subgroups, causing misalignment where alignment is needed. Outcome: Lack of alignment among key people and subgroups that need to work together slowly and invisibly drains momentum and effectiveness from the work effort. Network Remedy: Use network techniques to discover where and how people need to be connected underneath the leader.

Lack of alignment among key people and subgroups drains momentum and effectiveness from a project or an organization. Worse, it can create infighting and an "us versus them" mentality as people focus on their own interests and objectives and lose sight of how contributions fit into a larger mission.

High performance and leadership in a connected world

Although the focus of this paper has been on the networking behaviors – and traps – of organizational rising stars, many of the same ideas can and should be applied to the people at the very top of the organization. Indeed, we believe that now more than ever leaders need to attend to important network dynamics around them. As organizations continue to shed hierarchical layers, as they enter into more and more complex horizontal alliances and joint ventures and as globalization accelerates connections across national and cultural boundaries, organizational leaders need to be ever more adept at exercising informal influence, at finding ways to learn faster than the competition and at stimulating creativity in others. These are consummately network behaviors.
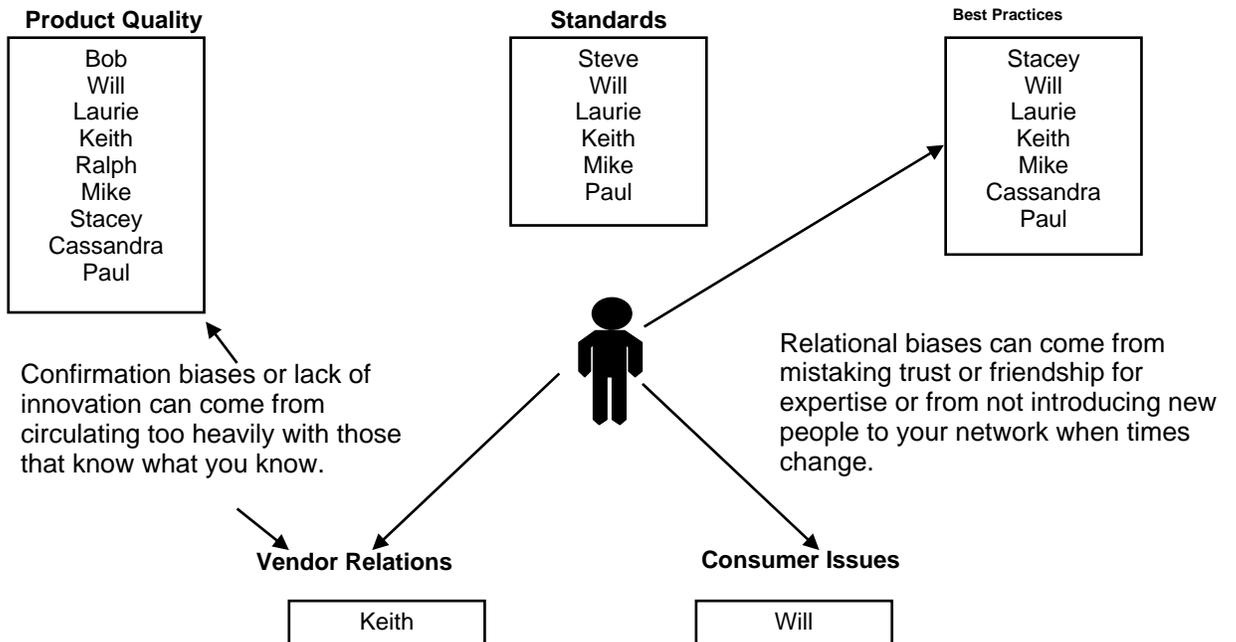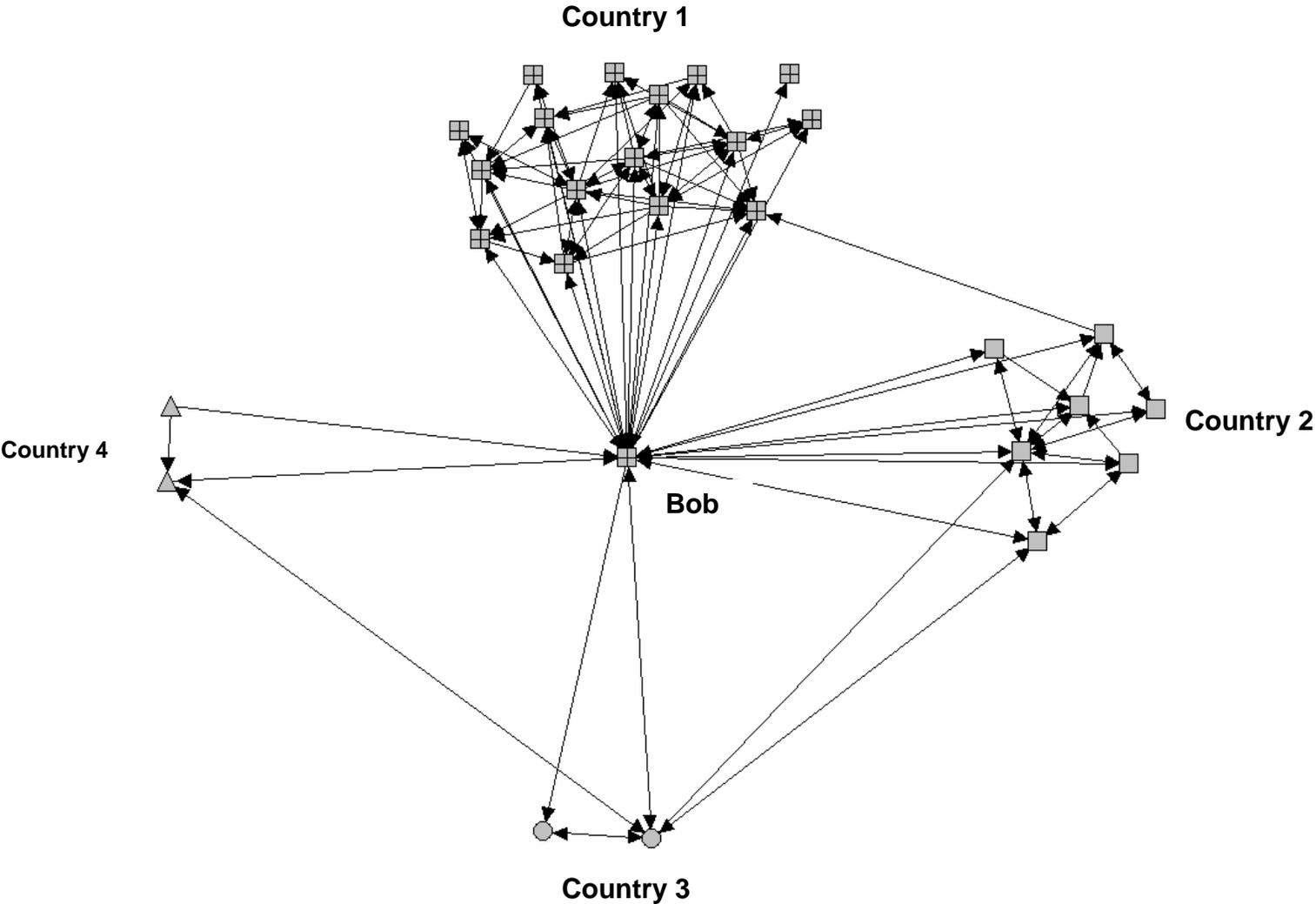
Exhibit 1. **Assessing Network Structure**

Group 4

Group 3

Group 2

Tom

Bill

Group 1

Exhibit 2. Expertise Overlay

Product Quality

Bob
Will
Laurie
Keith
Ralph
Mike
Stacey
Cassandra
Paul

Standards

Steve
Will
Laurie
Keith
Mike
Paul

Best Practices

Stacey
Will
Laurie
Keith
Mike
Cassandra
Paul

Confirmation biases or lack of innovation can come from circulating too heavily with those that know what you know.

Relational biases can come from mistaking trust or friendship for expertise or from not introducing new people to your network when times change.

Vendor Relations

Keith

Consumer Issues

Will

Exhibit 3. Visualizing Learning Biases

Country 1

Country 4

Country 2

Bob

Country 3

[1] Rob Cross, unpublished dissertation.

[2] Among the classic research papers supporting this conclusion are Daniel Brass, "Being in the Right Place: A Structural Analysis of Individual Influence in an Organization," *Administrative Science Quarterly,* December 1984; Ronald Burt, *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition* (Harvard University Press, 1992); Ronald Burt, "The Network Structure of Social Capital," in *Research in Organizational Behavior,* vol. 22, eds. Barry Staw and Robert Sutton (JAI Press, 2000); Martin Gargiulo and Mario Benassi, "Trapped in Your Own Net? Network Cohesion, Structural Holes, and the Adaptation of Social Capital," *Organization Science,* 2000; Ajay Mehra, Martin Kilduff and Daniel Brass, "The Social Networks of High and Low Self-Monitors: Implications for Workplace Performance," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, March 2001; Joel Podolny and James Baron, "Resources and Relationships: Social Networks and Mobility in the Workplace," *American Sociological Review,* October 1997.

[3] Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Little, Brown and Company, 2000).

[4] A popular Web site at the University of Virginia has created a network of all movie co-appearances. It can be found at http://www.cs.virginia.edu/oracle/ should you want to try your luck.

[5] Rob Cross and Jonathon Cummings, "Tie and Network Correlates of Performance in Knowledge Intensive Work," *Academy of Management Journal,* December 2004.

[6] Daniel Brass, "Structural Relationships, Job Characteristics and Work Satisfaction and Performance," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1981; Ronald Burt, *Structural Holes;* Ronald Burt, "The Network Structure of Social Capital"; Martin Gargiulo and Mario Benassi, "Trapped in Your Own Net? Network Cohesion, Structural Holes, and the Adaptation of Social Capital"; Joel Podolny and James Baron, "Resources and Relationships: Social Networks and Mobility in the Workplace"; Raymond T. Sparrowe, Robert C. Liden, Sandy J. Wayne and Maria L. Kraimer, "Social Networks and the Performance of Individuals and Groups," *Academy of Management Journal*, March 2001.

[7] David Krackhardt, "Cognitive Social Structures," *Social Networks,* 1987; David Krackhardt, "Assessing the Political Landscape: Structure, Cognition, and Power in Organizations," *Administrative Science Quarterly,* June 1990.

[8] Harman's story is told in greater detail in Warren Bennis and Robert J. Thomas, "Crucibles of Leadership," *Harvard Business Review*, September 2002.

[9] The classic reference showing people to be more important sources of information than other repositories is Thomas Allen, *Managing the Flow of Technology* (MIT Press, 1977). Since the publication of that work, research in the situated learning and network traditions has only reinforced how important people are as sources of information. In our own work in over 80 organizations, we have yet to see a database or other repository of any sort approach the importance of another person as a key source of information to get work done.

[10] Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, "Friendship as a Social Process: A Substantive and Methodological Analysis," in *Freedom and Control in Modern Society*, ed. Morroe Berger, Theodore Abel and Charles H. Page (Octagon, 1964).

[11] Jed Horowitz, "Morgan Stanley Crisis Grows as Top Bankers Leave," Dow Jones Newswires, April 13, 2005. Available online at http://news.fxclub.com/forex/news?action=printday&day=13&month=4&year=2005&key=3d3a7f8875 94b81069442a22b975abc414362ba3.

[12] Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas, *Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

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13 Richard Nielsen, "Corruption Networks and Implications for Ethical Corruption Reform," *Journal of Business Ethics,* 2003.