It's not who you know, but how many...and how different

February 12, 2008

Bert Cannella has spent several years studying knowledge creation and how new ideas emerge in organizations, and after a good deal of research, one thing appears clear: If you want to stay on the cutting edge, grow and maintain your network.

In a series of papers coauthored with Ann McFadyen, Cannella found that biomedical researchers at Baylor University and Johns Hopkins University who worked with different colleagues over time were more productive than those who worked with the same people. The results of the study have been published in Academy of Management Journal and Strategic Organization. A third paper is currently under review at Organization Science.

"In order to stay on the cutting edge, researchers have to frequently add new people to their networks over time," Cannella explains. "I think the same thing holds true for executives in a lot of cases. As times change and as events occur, you need new people in your network. You can't just work with the same people over time."

Cannella is no stranger to studying the way executives work. Since earning his PhD from Columbia University in 1991, Cannella has published more than 30 referred articles and delivered more than 40 refereed presentations on topics including corporate governance, entrepreneurship, knowledge creation, competitive dynamics, executive compensation, executive labor markets and related subjects.

Cannella joined the Freeman School in July 2007 as the Earl P. and Ethel B. Koerner Chair in Strategy and Entrepreneurship. Prior to joining Freeman, he served as the Hahnco Companies Professor of Strategic Management at Arizona State University. Prior to that, Cannella was the B. Marie Oth Professor of Management at Texas A&M University and director of the Center for New Ventures and Entrepreneurship.

Cannella says his study of biomedical researchers suggests that the best network for knowledge creation is one in which an individual has close ties to a group of colleagues, but those colleagues don't know each other and aren't tied to each other.

"As you bring in new people who aren't connected to your existing circle of friends, you get these really fresh perspectives," Cannella says. "You get some new ideas and new ways to take things, which is really helpful. A much less productive situation is where you're part of a team where everybody works together on a variety of issues. There's no fresh ideas. New insights are hard to come by in that kind of setting.

"I'm not saying you should discard your old friends," Cannella adds, "but you need to be working with some new people."