



LEARN &
ADAPT

Leveraging Networks to Move into a Role that Requires New Expertise

CASE CONTEXT

A skilled professional and project leader is tapped to manage a cross-functional project outside her area of expertise. She builds trust within the team and expands her network, which helps her adapt to the role and deliver valued outcomes.



FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: TECHNOLOGY

HIGH-PERFORMING LEADERS LEVERAGE NETWORKS TO DO 5 THINGS

Based on 20 years of research in more than 300 organizations, we know that the quality of your professional relationship play a significant role in your success. We have extended this research to describe the way high-performing leaders leverage their networks to: Innovate, Execute, Scale, Thrive and Adapt.



For ten years, Alexa has been solving problems and designing solutions to make the human experience with technology

easy and intuitive. Last year, she was tapped to solve a completely different design problem: organizational design. As a project manager, she would lead a team to re-design the leadership and employee structure for a major segment of the business. “It’s a completely different body of work. I had no background in it, but they wanted someone who had a reputation for collaborating, working cross-functionally and getting big things done.”

While the director had confidence that her past success and process could be translated into the new role, Alexa wasn’t so sure—and she turned it down. Another person took the post but it wasn’t a fit. “The project turned into something bigger and they pulled me in ... It wasn’t work I wanted to pursue, but I felt I had to say yes.” Alexa felt overwhelmed by the challenge, but she learned to leverage existing and new networks to craft the role in a way that would allow her to engage and supplement skill gaps.

Alexa’s boss and a trusted peer helped her see that her unique value was her process. She knew to ask questions. “Part of my style is to question people every step of the way, to get leaders to say what they are really asking for, which may not be the solution they are telling me they want.” She knew to set expectations by creating an executive overview, “to summarize and confirm what we are going to do, the problem we are solving and who I will engage with, before I go off and do it.” She was a skilled facilitator: “I know the best ideas always come from groups of people and I am skilled at facilitating that discussion.” She also effectively used prototypes, knowing that having something for others to react to builds trust and engagement important for implementation and leads to better solutions.

Alexa’s interpersonal skills were also valued for the project. The people who had been involved before were jaded; potential new contributors were skeptical. “I put the feelers out to the team and to cross-functional partners ... I had to spend a lot of time showing people how I am leading this differently, what we need them for and giving them clarity of purpose ... I had to empathize, ask questions: *what didn’t go well in the first phase, what role would you have liked to play?* ... I committed to fixing those things and followed up on that week after week ... If people don’t want to be there, they will not come to the table with any ideas or energy.” Alexa benefitted from her good reputation, too. “They knew I would not waste time; I’m respectful of people and the process; I try to get the right thinking in the room that will lead to the root problem and then how to address it.”

Getting the right people together also allowed Alexa to supplement her gaps in knowledge. Initially, Alexa felt pressure to come up with solutions and be an expert. “There was one area I was completely out of my depth ... I opened up with a couple people.” She was surprised by their response of quickly pulling in a few people and solving the problem. *“They swooped in and rescued me. It was the first time in my career I had been brave enough to be vulnerable at work.”* Increasingly, she is seeing how being honest about her limitations helps collaboration. “I learned that asking the right people for help at the right time can make a world of difference ... *Being more vulnerable has allowed other people space to step in, be needed, take the lead ...* I saw there was no way I’d be an expert at this in time to be able to deliver what we need to deliver. And I realized, I am conducting the orchestra. I don’t need to play any instrument. My job is to make sure I am pulling in the right people to play all the instruments to create the symphony.”

Alexa found that by owning her role as a conductor, she was also more effective at engaging the team. For example, she held a lunch conversation about motivation with the core team. She shared her drive to balance work and family; others said things like helping others or exposure to leadership. “This insight helped me craft the work around what keeps them engaged, to give them the right kind of work that taps into what they naturally want to do.” She surprised herself to learn that creating a context where others thrive is rewarding, especially in a role where the work itself is not personally compelling.

As she felt more grounded in her role, Alexa also took steps to manage the surge of collaborative demands. She became more thoughtful about her time, setting three-hour blocks of time for focused work and putting to-do items on her calendar, not as a separate list. She clarifies her role in meetings before agreeing to attend and builds in a 10-minute buffer between meetings. A two-hour project meeting once a week has reduced the flood of emails. “We know whatever it is, we can hash in out in that meeting.” These steps have made the team more effective and helped Alexa to reduce overload. “I started to burn out. I had to give myself the pep talk: *You are in control of your calendar. You need to set some more rules ...* The cost of not doing that, of bringing work home every night, is too high.”

Network Insights

- **Structure a new role via the network.** Meet with stakeholders and ask questions to clarify need and set expectations. You have more latitude to shape your work than you probably realize—but you have to do it through the network.
- **Build capability early.** Tap into your existing network and reach out to build new connections to understand what is required in the new role. Identify your gaps. Use your network to help you learn and to contribute needed expertise.
- **Create engagement and purpose for the team.** Learn what motivates others and how they gain a sense of purpose. Then align assignments and shape messages accordingly.
- **Reduce collaborative overload after initial surge of work.** Set rules around calendar, email and meetings to help the team and prevent you from being overwhelmed and ineffective.

How to Thrive through Relationships When Work is Overwhelming

Alexa took on a role that was high profile, difficult and outside her area of expertise. She didn’t find the work personally meaningful and was getting overwhelmed. Here’s what she did:

1. *Check in with people who share similar values on the “why” or the “how” of the work.* “My closest people, my go-to when I am stuck, are dreamers—they are confident, they think big, they go to the *why* ... If I need a boost, I’m surrounded by those people who believe it can be done, ask good questions and remind me of what I can do.”
2. *Fit in more forward-looking, proactive interactions.* “It’s people who say, Yes, we can do that and here’s how it would work even better ... They are optimistic but realistic.”
3. *Find humor.* “You can be serious about your work but you don’t have to be serious at every moment.”
4. *Help others meet their personal goals through work.* “Part of my purpose is giving them something to connect to or believe in ... It helps you find the vision you were looking for when you have to do that for someone else.”
5. *Set firm rules to buffer from work.* “Work takes control over my life when I let it. The tricks are only as good as you let them be ... I typically work from home on Fridays; that’s the only thing that helps me stay sane.”
6. *Anchor in people or groups outside of work.* “For me, it’s family ... I am with my daughter from 6:30 to 8:30 ... If I am available to her, she’ll just lean over and talk to me ... I do need to leave more space for those unexpected moments.”

ABOUT THE RESEARCH & ROB CROSS

Building on 20 years of research with more than 300 organizations, the Network Leader Research Project seeks to understand the approach and strategies that enable certain leaders to consistently achieve peak performance. The research includes 160 in-depth interviews conducted by Rob Cross, a Professor of Management at University of Virginia’s McIntire School of Commerce. The Connected Commons is currently focusing its research on leadership effectiveness, talent optimization and organizational alignment and change—three areas where network insights can clearly drive performance. For more information visit www.connectedcommons.com or email Rob at rlcrossjr@gmail.com.