



LEARN &
ADAPT

A Technical Expert Invests In Networks That Yield New Job Opportunities & Facilitate Smooth Role Transitions

CASE CONTEXT

A researcher builds her network out of genuine curiosity and this pays off when she needs to change roles. She relies on her network to learn what is needed in her new job, then shapes her work and her relationships in ways that keep her engaged and successful.



FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: HEALTHCARE

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.



Cora is a research scientist who joined a pharmaceutical firm following several years in academia. Now with the company for six years, she has held individual contributor roles in three areas. Early on, she was proactive about meeting people in other research groups and across the business. “I was new to pharmaceutical research. I needed to learn. I started meeting people to ask about what they did and how their role impacted processes or fit in to the business.” Cora’s genuine curiosity had led her to approach people to learn more about what they were doing. She would attend forums and ask questions, but also “just walk around different areas and talk to people.” Sometimes, there was overlap with her research or an opportunity to collaborate, or she got to know people on a personal level.

These authentic connections allowed people across research groups to understand her expertise and capabilities and gave her some understanding of other domains as well. She began to build two kinds of trust: “benevolence-based trust” (trust that you have others’ interests in mind, not just your own) and “competence-based trust” (trust that you know what you are talking about). By building her network in this way, Cora was in a strong position when the company shut down her research unit two years later. More than 100 people were laid off, but could apply for about 40 open positions elsewhere in the company. Cora was hired into a different group—a lateral move but one that was a “huge growth opportunity with interesting challenges.” For Cora, a potentially difficult time of her life was filled with opportunity—she was given offers from four research groups. Unlike many of her colleagues, she had invested in building her network while not looking for a change. “*When my group went away, I wasn’t an unknown to these other teams.*”

When she moved into her new role, Cora also used networks to fill skill gaps—avoiding a common network trap of over-relying on prior networks and strengths when transitioning into new roles. While her technical background was helpful, she was unclear how to apply it since she did not know the disease biology well. “I had to make some big shifts and learn to address what they wanted to do.” As she naturally talked to people about the work, she gained technical insight plus suggestions for other people to meet to help her make sense of her role and the direction it could take. She also was guided by a mentor who, like Cora, had moved from one area to another. “I went to him to ask, *What did you find helpful? Where are the pitfalls? What could I avoid? Who should I talk to?*”

Cora also was careful to understand and shape the role by clarifying the expectations of her boss, key stakeholders and other research teams. Early on it was clear to her that “everything is a priority!” She asked a lot of questions to understand what is important and made sure to include other areas that were affected by her work. “I met one-on-one with key people to get input and feedback and clarity.”

As Cora gained understanding of the priorities and interests of stakeholders, she began to steer the direction of her work to create a context she knew she would thrive in. “Early in the role, I started to put into motion what I was most excited to work on. There was stuff that was easier, but is that the stuff that is most exciting to me?” Similarly, she pushed to work with people she respected and would enjoy working with. “If I could get them on the project, what would they want to be doing? What are their interests and how could we incorporate that? ... You have to be a salesperson in some of this, to sell our idea and priorities and build their enthusiasm ... You have to show it dovetails with their interests ... It’s also about getting the timing right—are they ready for it now or later? If it is really important to them, they may give up resources to make it happen, then I can go back and prioritize with my boss.”

She also built relationships with external contractors, exploring ideas and sharing the science and data. “If you’re both contributing pieces to build the overall picture, having some give and take, sharing your successes and failures, putting the puzzle together with them versus just telling them what to do and here’s the money, it makes a huge difference in how engaged they are—and how engaged I am.”

Cora leaned on a few trusted colleagues to help her adapt as well. “I go to them for suggestions and advice, or if something is really bothering me. I don’t like to complain. I try to frame it up: *If this were you what would you do about it? You’ve interacted with these people before, how would you approach them with this? Can you think of anything I could be doing differently to help this work out?* It doesn’t make me feel better to just vent; I want to solve the problem.” Our research has shown that energy is built by people like Cora—through interactions that create a path forward and generate solutions. As an energizer, Cora has thrived and ideas, talent, projects and promotions continue to flow her way.

Network Insights

- **Connect with others out of genuine curiosity.** Look for overlaps to what you know or do and opportunities to collaborate. This builds reputation and trust in the network, which is invaluable for job mobility.
- **Avoid being a “disconnected expert.”** Quickly use your network to make sense of your new role, identify skill gaps and find resources to help you fill in what you don’t know.
- **Shape your network and the role.** Ask questions about what is important and how other people and projects are affected by your work. Gain understanding of the priorities and interests of stakeholders. Look for overlap between your goals and the work and people that interest you.
- **Lean on trusted colleagues to help you adapt.** Laugh or vent about challenges, but move on quickly to finding options and solutions. This fosters energy and boosts both performance and thriving.

4 Tips for Effective Role Transitions

1. **Build the network before you need it.** People who invest in this way will always be more mobile than those who don’t. “People’s roles are constantly shifting. It’s more about the relationships you build than it is about what they are doing that day ... Don’t be over-focused on how they can help here and now.”
2. **Use your network on entry into role to understand and fill expertise gaps.** It is critical to determine what aspects of your knowledge are relevant in a new domain and then rapidly build out networks to supplement gaps. “I relied on a mentor and people I knew to figure how to apply my skills, what I should focus on, what was important for me to think about.”
3. **Ensure alignment of expectations across leaders and stakeholders on entry.** “Keep checking back in with managers and a new team, follow up in writing about who is doing what, who is responsible ... to get alignment around expectations and be clear about what you are working on.”
4. **Reach to extended networks for expertise and perspective.** Stay connected to colleagues in other parts of the organization as well as external contacts in professional or academic communities. “They can give insights for specific problems ... but they also remind you that it’s not all about the bubble you are in now. There are a lot of opportunities and activities externally. Seeing that bigger picture is important for your own mental health.”

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.