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ADAPT

A Seasoned Expert Gains Experience & Network Insights Through Expat Challenge

CASE CONTEXT

A financial specialist spends three years contributing to the turnaround of a facility outside her country. She experienced cultural challenges and a tough business climate. After some early missteps, she adapted her approach, built a strong team and was successful.



FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL
LEADER

Industry: FOOD &
BEVERAGE

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.



Alyssa has worked in financial services in both public sector and private companies, most recently for 15 years in a global food and beverage firm. When a business unit in Asia was struggling to meet sales and production numbers several years ago, Alyssa was part of a team to fix it. “We needed to achieve efficiencies to get back on track and make it cost effective to start winning in the market.”

Alyssa had not worked outside the UK, but had ties in finance groups at sites around the world. As a high performer, she had been part of a leadership program that connected her to peers and created visibility and networking opportunities with organizational leaders. At one dinner event, she was seated with the CFO of the group that housed the failing business. “He said he was recruiting good people ... It just sparked something in me. After dinner, I followed up, and the next week I was being interviewed.”

Four months later, she had moved. She felt confident in her transition, knowing there would be other expats on the team and the general manager and HR director were from the UK. She quickly connected with them on the logistics of where to live, things to do and settling in socially. They filled her in on cultural perceptions and work norms such as scheduling, email practices and meeting protocol. “That worked really well and landed me quite a good place for when I arrived.”

What Alyssa missed was how her management style and approach could be a mismatch to business culture. “I’m quite an impatient person, and when I’m interested in something, I ask lots of questions. Sometimes my questions came across as abrupt or condescending. Why do you do it that way? What does this mean? ... I was told that sort of style isn’t going to work.” She also would bring up solutions or how things were done in other parts of the company, thinking it would spark ideas or add value to the solutions she offered. “I got negative feedback about that. They said, *Stop going on about what everyone else is doing. We don’t care. It feels like you’re name dropping all the time, not doing what’s best for us.*”

She struggled to hit the right note with the people she managed and, more broadly, the operations managers and teams. She worked to better understand the business challenges and what needed to be fixed. She asked her boss to help her figure out the network. “Who do you think I should be talking to? Who has information? Who would be a good ally?” Alyssa realized she needed to listen more, to better understand the sensitivities or undercurrents in the work. “I think the changes we made needed to happen. But the way I was doing it wasn’t right.”

As she worked with the managers and teams to understand their processes and the financial implications of plans, Alyssa was more effective in some areas than others. One manager was open, wanted support and involved her in meetings. “He could see how we could work together to move things forward. That was a really good partnership and relationship.” Other managers had no interest. “I spent as much time as I could with people who could help me and less time with those where it was harder ... But, by not connecting with those people, it did make my job harder. And I didn’t get up to speed as quickly as I wanted to in those areas.”

During this time, Alyssa was involved in tough decisions, including budget cuts and layoffs. She relied on a small set of people to give her perspective and support. A close friend back home offered emotional support and was a sounding board. “She had no concept of what was happening in my business world, so wasn’t biased. She would say, *You’re doing the right thing, Alyssa. Or, I wouldn’t do it that way, I’d do it this way.*” A fellow UK expat was another resource to help her think through the experience and keep going. Within her direct team, she was able to build good working relationships. Her manager was a good advisor on the business issues.

Interestingly, her formal mentor—who was back in the UK—was not someone she turned to. She felt he was too senior to worry with her issues and that she would create a poor impression of herself. Looking back, she sees that a stronger peer network—people doing similar work or facing similar challenges—would have helped her better navigate the work.

Even with the difficulties, Alyssa and her team accomplished their goal, moving the business from suffering major losses to break even. Alyssa moved on after three years, and the business stayed the course and future projections were solid. Alyssa’s greatest sense of accomplishment came from developing her team. “I helped them become business partners. I had been able to coach and develop them to understand that finance was more than just churning out numbers.” She also took the lessons learned on the interpersonal side into her next role. “I recognized that I hadn’t done as well as I should, especially at the beginning. I landed an awful lot better in my current job. And, I’m a lot more resilient that I thought.”

Network Insights

- **Invest heavily in building a network that supplements expertise gaps in technical domains, cultural awareness and business model understanding.** Do not shy away from less receptive people at first—this can create blind spots or difficulties downstream.
- **Don’t over-apply your personal view of what creates value in interactions (rapid problem solving, task orientation) or legitimacy of your ideas.** Practice active listening and consider emotional factors as you try to understand people’s motives and drivers for how they engage with you and the work.
- **Maintain a robust network of relationships inside and outside of organization.** To be resilient through difficult transitions, you need people to help you test ideas and perspectives, validate your thinking and give emotional support. Do not have a hero mentality of needing to solve problems yourself and not admitting challenges.

Building a Support Network for Successful Global Role Transition

Alyssa’s expatriate assignment was her biggest career challenge. She learned through mistakes and successes to pay careful attention to how she interacted with others. Ways to be successful in global transition include:

1. Build relationships that facilitate cultural awareness of a new country and organization. Focus on small norms that can derail people’s trust in you.
2. Employ active listening on entry twice as much as you think you should. Be sensitive to people’s perspectives and fears. Don’t try to solve problems immediately.
3. Leverage your boss on entry to know who to talk to for business understanding and support. Have those meetings—then ask those people who else you should be speaking with. This helps you gain influence in and understanding of the network.
4. Create legitimacy for yourself in a way that resonates with the culture. Be cautious about referencing past examples or accomplishments instead of focusing on the current people and situation.

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.