LEARN & ADAPT

Network Strategies Enable Leader's Transition into a Senior Role Managing New Technical Domains

CASE CONTEXT

An experience leader and technical expert becomes a director of a R&D group outside his specialty. Drawing on success from prior role transitions, he adapts his network and invests in his team to be effective and avoid collaborative overload.

MALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: MANUFACTURING

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.

INNOVATE EXECUTE SCALE THRIVE ADAPT

A scientist and technical expert, Bart joined an R&D group in a global manufacturing company right after earning his PhD.

He held several individual contributor roles, and then became a respected lab manager, overseeing teams of researchers. Seven years ago, he rotated out of R&D to work in engineering. The work broadened his scope and pulled him into more strategic assignments and leadership roles, overseeing and working on multiple projects. Last year, Bart took a director-level job back in R&D, but in an area he did not know and that included a broad range of technical domains to manage. The new role interacts with engineering, design and production leaders across the company to ensure research priorities are aligned with business needs.

Leaders like Bart typically immerse themselves into the role to get up to speed on the technical aspects of the work, the new teams they have inherited and the external relationships they need to manage. In transitions, this surge of work is necessary. The trick for senior leaders is to gain clarity on where they add unique value and need to give their attention—and where to step back. Our research has shown that leaders who do not shift their patterns of interaction after the first six-to-nine months fall into the network trap we call the overloaded leader, or bottleneck. These leaders create a heavy reliance on themselves that cannot be sustained. They become inefficient, prevent direct reports and teams from learning and gaining opportunity, and, over time, experience personal burnout.

Bart managed this transition well on a number of fronts. His prior work in the engineering area set him up well. "There were times when I hated my job! I wanted to be in research! Looking back, it was a great experience … The most important part was meeting the people. In all those different projects, I established contacts; each had a different network." Being part of various cross-functional projects gave him knowledge of the capabilities and interests of diverse people and groups; now he knows how and when to turn to them or bring them in. Bart also knows the business better. "Because I've done their job and been in a plant and taken the late night phone calls, I have some street cred—I'm not just the geek from R&D."

To be effective at this level, leaders also need to match projects and activities to their network—to visualize the work and capabilities in the network simultaneously when generating solutions. *This requires leaders to have a rich awareness of others' expertise, the ability to engage people and clarity about their own contribution.* "I know who the experts are and the essence of the problem, then I let them do their job. I help with making decisions, knowing who the key points to connect are and making sure that they're connected."

Often people are focused on meeting current demands and don't take the time to learn and build a robust network—which later backfires. "I see people dive into a problem, and they're just so busy that they don't connect all the dots to the other areas. Or, they don't know who to ask. Or, there are silos and, culturally, people aren't encouraged to talk outside their group … You've got to make sure people are talking in early R&D discussions before it gets to the point where things are too far baked. Then it's more difficult to make adjustments."

Bart reached out to leaders and influencers in other functions who relied on his group's work, asking managers on his team who he should get to know. "I made it a point to understand all the customers for our research. I check in regularly. Are you getting support from my guys? Are we aligned strategically? What's coming up in your world?" Often relaxed, casual conversations lead to ideas and opportunities. "I don't go in with a formal slide deck or agenda. I just want to connect … Usually, there will be two or three things that come out of those discussions, *Oh yeah, we should follow up on that*." Being confident enough to go in without an agenda leaves Bart room for co-creation and discovering how his group can fit in with the needs of others.

Similarly, Bart invests in weekly, one-on-ones with his direct reports. These open-ended conversations help him connect personally to understand where people are with work and in their lives. Bart also uses these sessions to work through specific issues or upcoming deliverables. *While unstructured one-on-ones may seem like lost time, they build engagement and trust in the relationship. They help managers gain greater knowledge of the expertise and aspirations of others, which allows them to assign tasks and leverage the group more effectively*. Bart's teams know when they do or don't need to go to him to solve problems. He knows when to jump in and trusts the network solve problems around him.

In addition to effectively leveraging his team, Bart also has avoided the overloaded leader trap by prioritizing and working efficiently. "I've always been very good at prioritizing things … I get more emails, more collaboration, but I don't view it as a negative. I'm very responsive to my team, my peers and others that I need to be. The rest, I can ignore. They'll let me know if it's important."

Network Insights

- **Surge into role to build new ties and learn. Immerse yourself in the work.** Get to know direct reports, team members and external customers, influencers and experts.

- **Avoid becoming overloaded by adapting after 6-9 months.** Don't continue to be involved in everything. Decide where you add value and pull back on the intensity and frequency of your collaboration in other areas.

- **Think of the work and the network simultaneously.** More efficient collaborators envision projects and opportunities as a set of activities they map onto people in their networks, rather than taking them on alone.

- **Maintain external network through check-ins and open-ended meetings.** Don't always go in with a request or an agenda.

- **Hold frequent 1:1s with your team.** Getting to know their capabilities, interests, aspirations and motivations allows you assign tasks and leverage group more effectively. Plus, you build trust and greater engagement.

Network Success Principles for Transitioning into Senior Executive Role

Bart has learned to build and use networks to succeed in multiple career transitions. Here are five principles he lives by when taking on a new role.

1. **Look internally**. Know your people. What capabilities are in the team? What drives or motivates each person? What do they do now? What do they want to do?

2. **Look outward**. Know the external ties and influencers. What do partners or customers need? What do they expect? And, know your peers—people doing similar types of work or at a similar level. They are your source of advice and perspective.

3. **Understand the most valuable things the team or function can do**. Use the network to identify and sell that value. Shared vision or purpose sets the agenda and priorities for future projects and interactions.

4. **Get out of the way**. Don't micro-manage people's work or their lives. Be clear on accountabilities and evaluate performance—then let smart people do what they do best.

5. **Have fun**. Support people to do what they like to do, where they feel valued and can have some fun.

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