



LEARN &
ADAPT

Networks Provide Expertise, Support & Purpose to Enable Senior Executive to Adapt & Thrive

CASE CONTEXT

A leader transitions into a global role by building new relationships to gain needed perspective and support. Initially, she is very involved to learn the work and the network. Then, she prioritizes her time and attention in ways that add the most value in order to build bench strength and prevent collaborative overload.



FEMALE

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.



Brenda has spent 20 years in a major manufacturing company, progressing across functions and roles and moving

up the ranks. She has run highly technical teams and high-volume work. A track record of managing tough jobs led to a plant manager post. A few years ago, she shifted to a global role, managing a group that maps out future manufacturing processes and interfaces with numerous engineering and operations teams. She has adapted to this senior role in ways that have allowed her to be effective, while also gaining satisfaction in the work.

The shift to a global role posed business and technical challenges. Plus, the work was long-term, large-scale and strategic, rather than tactical and self-contained. "When you run a plant, you are all in one location. It's easy to get to know people ... In this job, I found it challenging because people are spread out, so I'm traveling 60 percent of the time. And, we are working on strategies that are going to drive change in the future versus, *I need to make my numbers today.*" She also had multiple stakeholders and functions to engage. "It's very important to have a good, strong relationship with my functional partners and make sure we are aligned on what's important ... A lot of my time is building those networks that weren't there before."

Initially, Brenda listened and sought feedback to fill in gaps in her perspective and knowledge. "The first 30 days, you just listen. You meet your direct reports, your peers, the teams. *How we are structured? Are deliverables clear? Are we efficient? Do they see themselves as a team?* ... I had my perspective on areas I thought should be a priority, but that's just one perspective. It's arrogant to walk in and say, *I am going to fix these five things.*" She spent time in meetings within her group and in one-on-ones with managers who are the critical interfaces with external teams. In one instance, she got valuable feedback on the integrity of a key process and took time to understand it and do something about it. That initial openness established relationships that have since proven valuable and reciprocal. "The more that people see that you are open to hear their perspective, the more they are willing to share information upfront ... I've built credibility, so that same guy now calls me about product changes or cost overruns and says, *I'm going to work with your team to manage it.*"

Brenda's instinct to reach out, hear a range of perspectives and learn from new people is in contrast to the instincts of many leaders who rise to senior roles. Research shows that people tend to over-value their expertise and existing network. They continue to rely on trusted ties—holding on to 70-80 percent of ties from the prior role, rather than seeking out new experts, advisors and allies. This behavior creates unintentional bias about what is

important in the new role and prevents leaders from building the skills or doing the work that matters most. “I knew I only had one slice of the pie. I went in asking, *Who should I be talking with?*”

In every role change, Brenda also identified people to help her learn and gain perspective. First, she would seek out a person who excels in the same or similar role. When she became a plant manager, she met and learned from another plant manager who had strong metrics and a solid reputation. In her current job, she found a peer who does different work, but had similar challenges. She asks questions like, *What is important to you? What enables your team to perform the way they do?* “Sometimes you know who is good, but you can watch: who is effective, who has influence, who has the right moral compass?” She would also find a “truth teller,” someone who knows her well enough to be honest. “Once, I had someone in my team pull me aside and say, *Hey, you probably didn’t know this, but your facial expressions didn’t match what you said.* Those are the things you need to hear.” Truth tellers are also great sounding boards to gauge whether a leader is over-reacting or not seeing an issue clearly.

The broader network is also vital. Brenda seeks out people who share her values in work: those who talk because they have something to say, rather than just to talk, and people who are not self-serving. “I look for people who have good intentions for the team and for the enterprise.” She hears diverse views by holding open, no-agenda meetings with 20 different people once a month. It may be a regional group, or just women or just people managers, or a cross-section of people. “Every time, I walk out of there with two or three things I didn’t know and something I should be working on that I now see.”

Eventually, Brenda gained clarity on her unique value-add and how to leverage the network. “In the beginning, I wanted to be in every meeting ... Now, I will say, *so-and-so can handle it* ... Others can do 80 percent of what I can do; let me focus on the 20 percent they can’t do.” In a role transition, leaders should expect this surge of learning, collaboration and effort—but then be prepared to shift their emphasis to essential work and priorities moving forward. If not, the demands and the collaborative overload will set in. Six-to-nine months into a new

role, effective leaders are building bench strength and managing their calendar to be effective in the long term. “I could fill every day with meetings. I have to block off time to think and make sure I am following up on the key things I need to be doing.”

Brenda’s successful transition was also fueled by her sense of purpose. She is energized by helping people to accomplish their work, but also by making sure they feel good about the work itself. Her current role also gives her a chance to collaborate to create positive change. “We may not see the change for a couple years, but that’s the legacy we’re working toward.” That focus on the long-term and legacy also factors into how she parents. She picks one activity to commit to with each child (coaching a sport, volunteering) as a way to pull herself into activities outside of work and spend meaningful time with her kids. She also adapts her schedule—leaving work to help with kids, taking a call from home, going back in to work later—something she wasn’t able to do earlier in her career but she sees as invaluable.

Network Insights

- **Build the network needed to supplement skill gaps.** Avoid the “biased leader” trap by creating new ties to help you gain needed experience, expertise and perspective.
- **Seek out people who have done similar work.** Find people who have expertise in the role you are now in and leverage them as initial advisors or for long-term support.
- **Find two or three confidantes who know you well, share your values and have a sense of your role.** Leverage these “truth tellers” to get brutally honest feedback about the work and how you are interpreting or responding to things.
- **Block out time for your priorities.** Delegate and step away. After the initial surge of learning in a new role, focus on managing collaborative overload by investing in connections you need to build bench strength and create work/life balance in ways that work for you.
- **Invest in relationships and activities that provide purpose and energy.** When both work and non-work networks are chosen, valued and maintained, you will thrive and adapt.

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.