



LEARN &
ADAPT

Crafting a Role & Driving Success through Networks in a Major Job Transition

CASE CONTEXT

An innovator with a successful track record joins a bigger company in a role that was created just for her. Operating as an internal consultant, she adapts and moves from isolated expert to becoming an orchestrator of innovation through the network.



FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: PROFESSIONAL
SERVICES

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.



Camelia has built a career around jumping into a vaguely defined role and making it work. Early on, she managed global events for an industry association with little guidance and no experience. A few years later, she took on a similar role for a different business, but quickly ended up in marketing, eventually gaining project management and product development experience. She was then recruited by a former boss to set up a marketing technology function, an entirely new capability for the organization. Her creativity and ability to start up new, innovative projects—as well as her business knowledge—put her in the spotlight when the company was merged. She was asked to take on the job of driving innovation for the business—a new role, created for her.

“The president’s view was that we needed more innovation to drive revenue growth, but that was the only direction ... The company has a tendency to know they need to do something, but have no idea how to do it, or even what we mean ... I actually like this ... For about a year, my job was more of a discovery role ... I could create it and develop it as I went.”

Camelia was accustomed to inventing and creating her approach to a new job, but this situation was unusual in several ways. She was a virtual employee, reporting to the president and head of HR, operating as an individual contributor. She had some established relationships from her role before the merger, but her network within the new structure was limited to her two bosses. “I was fairly isolated. Because this was a new role and there was no real road map or clarity about how to do this, I didn’t have a team or colleagues to naturally engage with.”

She began with a research mindset, reading about innovation and how other companies view and implement innovation. She connected with a newly formed marketing group, a small team that was wrestling with some of the same issues around the organization’s capacity for new development and innovation. That core group became friends after meeting at a company event. “We’re all about the same age, the same kind of place in life, with young kids ... We were also all in the same position of doing work that had been formed under the banner of the merger and was completely new ... Over time, we got to know each other, learned about our families, what we are struggling with. I was able to really open up and be vulnerable, to say, *You know what, I don’t know. Here’s what I think I’m doing but I’m really struggling and I’d love any input that you have.*”

With this group, Camelia was able to test her thinking about an innovation strategy. “I was able to bounce ideas off of them and get their feedback.”

Another person she met had been with the company a long time and helped her understand the history and capabilities, the politics and the personalities.

Over time, Camelia determined that the innovation strategy should not be focused on developing innovative products. Instead, the focus should be on creating innovative people. She went back to the president and the HR leader and presented a narrative that wove together the research and her sense of the organization. She said, “*We are thinking about this wrong*” and was able to change their perspective. Her role then shifted to fostering behaviors and systems needed for innovation.

Looking back at that first year, Camelia understood that her sense of isolation—“I was an island”—could have been mitigated beyond the small network she used as a sounding board. She put the expectation on herself to learn, to solve and to recommend. With that pressure, she didn’t look to experts outside the company or engage people across the business to gain their perspective. She saw her work as a challenge of expertise, which is common among high performers stepping into a new role. Often “disconnected experts” do not address gaps in their knowledge or their style—and they miss out on the ideas, perspective and expertise of others. Camelia benefitted from a few key relationships, but would have struggled less and gained useful input if she had reached out to a broad and less-insular network.

Supported by her two bosses, Camelia positioned the role to fit within an existing group. She continues to use her relationships in marketing for support and input. Her new boss is available and engaged with Camelia and her work. To move the innovation agenda forward, Camelia is now building a network of innovation leaders across the company.

“I am building new relationships ... Being a virtual worker is still challenging ... For now, a lot of what I’m doing is building trust—meeting face-to-face with different groups, learning, not judging, showing compassion, listening to understand rather than oversimplify what other people are doing. To think I can have a big impact on my own isn’t reasonable. My work now is to create the core network of leaders and influencers who want to innovate and make sure they are empowered and supported.”

Network Insights

- **Leverage relationships to craft the role and outcomes.** Tapping experts, network influencers and leaders appropriately can help you to shape role and expectations rather than being shaped by inertia, initial assumptions or the way it was done before.
- **Create “pull” from internal and external clients early.** Rather than engaging in ways that “push” your expertise out, create pull by asking a lot of questions, giving status in interactions, morphing what you know to other’s needs and showing interest and empathy.
- **Avoid the disconnected expert trap on entry into a new role.** It is common for people to turn back to trusted ties in times of transition—but often these people do not have the expertise or networks needed for the new context. Spend time identifying areas you need expertise or support in and build connections appropriately. This can be especially challenging if you are more introverted or are working virtually, but it is critical to success.

Building Trusted & Effective Virtual Networks

Camelia says there is no shortcut to building relationships when you work in an isolated office or your team is dispersed across locations. It takes time and effort, including:

1. Initially, travel a lot. Face-to-face conversations allow you to establish rapport, start to get to know people and help create a sense of connection. Spend time with key colleagues and build your network. Ask leaders who you should connect with—and always ask those people who you should be talking to as well (usually this second step helps you get to network influencers).
2. Be authentic and willing to be vulnerable in conversations. Describe what you are working on and gaps where you need help or ideas.
3. Go off-task for part of the interaction. Learn a bit about the other person’s interests, inside or outside of work, to begin to build trust.
4. Use micro-behaviors that put people at ease. 1) Mirror their intensity—be willing to connect on either a low-key or more expressive way, depending on how they show up; 2) Be empathetic (e.g., *I see what you mean*); 3) Offer others status rather than presenting yourself as the expert or someone who is smarter; 4) Be genuinely interested—people will know if you are faking it.

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.