LEARN & ADAPT

Managing A Global Role Transition & Career Success Through Networks

CASE CONTEXT

A young professional sought a new experience and was successful in building the networks needed to grow in her career. She understood the informal network and built trusted connections early on—and has progressed quickly ever since.

FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL LEADER

Industry: TECHNOLOGY

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 computer scientist, Julie started her career as a developer, working in contract roles before she was hired

by a global company. She worked out of her home country for nearly five years, with minimal progression or expectation of growth or promotion within her group. Her role also involved collaborating with a person whose hierarchical approach was always at odds with her desire for creativity and collaboration in her work. "I was coming up to my 30's and I had a small panic attack realizing I was still in the same place, doing the same thing … I put in for a transfer to the U.S. and I had, pretty quickly, a very successful career over here." She transitioned in as a project manager and within eight months, she became a people manager in the same group. Two years later, she was in exactly the role she aspired to and has continued to be successful and satisfied in her work.

Newcomers often struggle or fail in such situations due to lack of a network that helps them learn norms, gain insight and build influence. It is common to look to the formal structure and hierarchy for understanding of the work, priorities and the role, which leaves people unaware of the informal ways work is accomplished. In role transitions, it is important to understand multiple perspectives and know who holds expertise and influence. Falling into the "formalist" trap of over-relying on formal structure as an indicator of who to build relationships with results in less-than-expected performance and missed opportunities to learn and grow in the role.

Julie avoided narrow, formalist thinking and quickly sought to understand any cultural and operational differences as well as the political landscape. She knew one person on her team from a prior project, who became her confidante and an entry point into her new network. "She was my strongest connection when I arrived, so I got all the background information of what were the relationship problems, what were the various pieces of the work, what was going on—basically, I wanted to see what the chess board looked like the moment I walked in … Then, I just observed people and asked questions." Being attuned to the informal dynamics of the team and groups around her allowed Julie to make thoughtful choices about how she engaged. She was able to integrate into the team easily and was drawn into work in ways she could have the most impact.

She built up her network and established her credibility quickly by taking on a tough problem the team had been working on without making progress. She brought confidence and a new perspective to the work. "Because I didn't have any baggage, I could be quite independent in my approach."

"I had a pretty strong self-confidence … I met with senior leadership in program management; I stood up and didn't let them think of me as a second-class citizen … Because of that, I very quickly earned a high level of respect and built very strong networks with that influential program management group. They immediately started treating me like a member of their team. That respect and involvement generated my credibility inside my own team—and brought me to the attention of other teams, too." By quickly connecting with influential others in ways that demonstrated value, Julie was catapulted into an important network.

Julie believes those relationships, built early on, with an influential group and with a broad scope in the company, set her up for sustained success. Her visibility and credibility carried her through layoffs and reorganizations and opened up opportunities for interesting assignments. As the development work in her first team wound down, she moved to work directly for the program management group on a special assignment. Shortly after, she made the transition into a program manager role herself. "Of course, I had done the work and delivered, but that first bond, that network, continued to build for me and pull me in … That first network allowed me to move into the one role I had really wanted to be in, which was program management."

Since then, Julie's career has continued to grow in a way that keeps her learning and thriving. Her successful transition to the U.S. allowed her to have completely different experiences and opportunities than if she had remained where she was. "The American office gave me the opportunity and allowed me space to learn and fail and try new things. I would overcome a challenge or achieve something, then I'd be given the next one and then the next one and then the next one."

Now, Julie is involved in another opportunity, moving into a program management role in an area that is new to her and new for the company. "Again, I'm at the beginning of another wave in my career. If I'm successful, I'll make a big move forward again … I am relying on a lot of new network contacts right now that are changing the way that I think, changing the way that I approach the work and helping me with the transition."

Network Insights

People who transition into roles with a collaborative mindset can shrink the typical time to build productive networks from 3-5 years to 6-9 months.

- **Avoid the formalist trap on role transition.** Your boss and other leaders are part of the picture, but don't assume they can tell you all you need to know about who to engage with and how work gets done.

- **On entry, locate a trusted confidante who can orient you to cultural norms, influential players and political landscape.** Just be sure not to over-rely on one person for too long.

- **Observe carefully who is referenced in conversations and who you are recommended to for a sense of the network.** You can build your network more rapidly by always asking who else you should be speaking with.

- **Connect with influential groups or people early.** These connections create legitimacy for you that then results in others pulling you into projects and opportunities.

- **Use newness to your advantage to build understanding, credibility and trust.** Meet people, ask questions, apply your skills in ways that matter to others. Small investments early on will have a big payoff over time.

5 Cultural Factors that Impact Global Role Transitions

Working in a global company, Julie has seen cultural differences affect whether an employee takes an assignment outside of their country and how they approach relationships if they do. Consider these 5 differences:

1. **Work practices.** What systems and norms are obvious? What is tacit? How do people interact, hold meetings and work collaboratively?

2. **Attitudes about satisfaction**. If you are not doing well or feel like there is a good fit, what are the options? Is looking for a change seen as complaining? Or is employee satisfaction part of the conversation?

3. **Expectation of mobility**. Is it widely accepted to change roles or move locations? Do you wait to be asked or do you pursue next steps? What are the limits to mobility?

4. **Influence of friendships.** Are decisions about promotions or leadership opportunities driven more by social ties or expertise and ability?

5. **Problem-solving styles.** How do people frame problems, bring others in and organize solutions?

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.