



Career Revitalization & Role Transition through Networks

CASE CONTEXT

An established technical expert and informal leader takes on a formal leadership role. She avoids many of the pitfalls of making a role transition by using her network for support, advice and execution.



Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

Industry: HEALTHCARE

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.



Laurie is a technical expert who recently converted years of informal team and project leadership into a management

role where she runs a group of 24, with seven direct reports. She has worked nearly 20 years in the company, with technical expertise, institutional knowledge and informal leadership experience. Knowing she wanted to shift her career to a formal management role, Laurie mapped out a plan with her boss to be prepared. She took on an interim management role, supervising a small team for nine months, before being offered her current job.

"I wasn't new to leadership, but before, it was informal and about influence. And the work in this function isn't new to me. At one point or another, I had done every aspect of the work in this group ... But, this was the first time I officially let go of my individual contributor role and took on a formal management job." It is common for people in these kinds of transitions to struggle with letting go of what they did before and focus on the new demands. They overload themselves because they do not want to delegate to people who were previously peers, or because they gain some satisfaction of doing things they know well or can do efficiently. Falling into this trap leads to burnout and an inability to deliver on new expectations.

Laurie was able to leverage two relationships that helped her to avoid this trap: her boss and the person who previously held her job. Her boss helped her get clear about what to delegate and why—especially in relation to managing people who had been her peers in various capacities over the years. "There are areas where I have more interest or skill, but my manager said, *Delegate all of that. I know you can do it already ...* With my former peers, I really just needed to be clear about my role and how we will complement each other." This is an important boundary to put up when stepping into this kind of role. Clarity about what you won't do (work you can easily do but shouldn't) and what you need to do (think longer term, manage stakeholders) is an important part of a successful transition.

The leader who Laurie replaced was a mentor who had moved on to a different role. He continued to be a valuable resource and reality check. He helped her to see the bigger picture, figure out priorities and understand the personalities and dynamics within her group. "We email almost daily and talk each week. He gives me advice. We talk through how to approach things, what to worry about and what not to. He'll have an idea of a way to deal with a person or make an assignment." Much of this Laurie knows or is learning on her own, but leveraging this trusted leader's experience has helped her adapt and be more effective, faster.

Laurie has also worked to maintain relationships with her former peers and still has lunch with them a few times a week. “Mostly, we slide into those relationship discussions ... I didn’t want to be that person who disappears from the group when they get a promotion and then gets mocked for it.” She also relies on a close-knit group of four co-workers who all joined the organization at the same time. They have gone back to school together, know each other’s families and encouraged one another’s careers. This, too, is an important aspect of a network to help transition into new roles. The people who know you well can give you advice based on your tendencies and will support and challenge you.

Another aspect of a transition into this type of role is the importance of engaging and managing relationships with external stakeholders. “Building those relationships with other managers was the most difficult part ... I focused on how we could support each other, to be sure we had a common direction and were aligned.” Early on, she asked questions around needs and improvements, keeping a focus on outputs of the team. Quickly, she found a few ways to be more efficient, such as identifying clear points of contact and standardizing templates.

Another new activity is the time Laurie spends on team engagement and recognition activities within the network. “Giving recognition and visibility is important here ... When I know someone did something good or has been recognized outside our team, I’ll send an email upward or out to let people know.” She also works to keep the group engaged and collaborating through a weekly team meeting. “A 30-minute pulse check is for quick updates, but then I have everyone share highlights or needs. *What do you need from us, how can we help each other?*” She also holds one-on-one meetings every couple weeks with direct reports and periodically with the rest of the team. This helps to align work with individual expertise and aspirations—and to ensure the team is collaborating in ways to achieve goals and objectives.

Laurie’s transition to the new role was been successful. She has focused on what is different about being a manager: using the external network, building relationships and developing the team. Her next step is to build relationships with management one level up. “That’s an opportunity for development and another way to be sure my team is aligned.”

Network Insights

- **Avoid overload through clear delegation.** When taking on a leadership role where you know the work and are managing former peers, don’t hang on to your old job. The tendency is to not want to delegate to prior peers or to keep doing work you like and are good at. This will hurt performance. Get clear on what you are delegating and why and be transparent about it so others can better respect how you handle the demands of the job.
- **Leverage expertise of the prior leader.** Reach out to obtain help with prioritization of external requests (i.e., who matters in the external networks that are new to you in this role) and to understand the team.
- **Maintain ties with a small set of colleagues who know you well.** Interactions with close, trusted work friends give you needed personal support. They can also help you make sense of things and calibrate your own reactions.
- **Build relationships with external stakeholders early.** Ask how you can make their work easier or offer resources. Be sure to identify network influencers and experts your team should be connecting with to build productive, cross-unit relationships.

Use 1:1 Meetings to Help You Know the Work, Expertise & Aspirations on the Team

A critical role of a leader is aligning work with the network. To be effective, a leader has to have a sense of collaborative overload points, individual expertise and personal aspirations of people on the team.

Many successful leaders rely on one-on-ones to stay attuned to their team and network. Laurie meets individually with direct reports about every two weeks and with the rest of the team members every couple months. This allows her to make assignments and see opportunities that fit with what people like, are good at and how they want to grow. Laurie structures these sessions around four questions:

1. What in your work are you excited about now?
2. What do you dislike doing?
3. What are current developmental objectives?
4. What roadblocks in your work can I help remove?

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.