LEARN & ADAPT

Managing Successful Role Transitions Throughout Career Via Effective Networks and Collaborative Practices

CASE CONTEXT

A respected expert with global experience traces her success back to a pivotal early-career role. She learned to be open to others and leverage an extended, diverse network when opening a new facility in Asia. Her relationships and network practices shaped the progression of her career.

FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

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

With a degree in engineering, Marley had been hired for a technical job supporting a critical manufacturing

function in a single facility. A year later, she was involved in the set up of a new building and processes on that site. Year three, Marley was offered an international assignment that changed her career path and possibilities.

The company was building a new facility in Asia and Marley's boss put her name forward as a candidate for the start-up team. "I was inexperienced. How could I help in a start-up? … But, I was young and mobile and interested in international travel." She became one of 20 people from across the company and from different cultures and backgrounds assigned to the project. "*The assignment was expected to last nine months; we stayed for two years … Those people became my family and the network that shaped my next ten years at the company*."

The typical career trajectory for Marley would have been to work in a single facility and slowly gain more experience and greater responsibility. "I would have only known people in that individual plant. But as a result of this brand new facility, suddenly I had access to a network within 20 sites, not just on one site. I had access to how they do things in 20 different places … I would have been responsible for a particular technical aspect, and I'd say to the people in my group, *I need to find out who does this at your site. Who can I talk to?*"

The move was a major transition, professionally and culturally. "The most important thing was that you had to be open to change yourself and be receptive to new ideas … I didn't go out and say*, In my site this is the only way we ever do this* … I quickly realized that, even though we might have standard procedures, they might slightly deviate or have different nuances per site." Marley and her colleagues created a practice of gathering ideas and input from the larger network and learned from each other to come up with the best practices. "It was a massive opportunity to be able to learn. Not just from the culture we were in, but other sites. We wouldn't go to those sites, but we had exposure through other people."

The experience accelerated her career, both in terms of knowledge and the network. Encouraged and mentored by the site manager, Marley learned to ask questions, reach out for information and bring diverse people and groups into a process or change effort early on. "These things became foundational very early on. I felt that I grew up on that job. I was given way more authority, way more responsibility, and it seriously accelerated my career as a result."

"I guess you gain confidence because people are relying on you a lot more. You either sink or swim. So, I was thrown in the deep end, and I guess I was lucky enough that I was able to swim."

Throughout the process, Marley's group of peers relied on each other for support as well as specific expertise. "They were the people who were invaluable. We all went through the same shared experience. We were learning as we went … And, we were all thousands and thousands of miles away from family so we relied on and got to really know each other."

The deep connection established by shared work and experience carried over well after the new facility was operational and team members went their separate ways. Marley ended up working in different countries with several of her peers. For years, the team relied on each other for ideas or network referrals. Through that initial project and the network she established, Marley gained a reputation broadly in the company and benefitted greatly from being a known expert in her field. "As a result of getting exposure to a global project, I formally joined one of the global groups and did not return to my home site. I still haven't gone back to a site-based role."

Twelve years after completing that pivotal, early-career assignment, Marley continues to work globally and is heavily invested in networks for success. Currently, she works in a global engineering function that operates with extensive collaboration within the company and externally with contract partners. Her projects take her to various countries and sites, and her network strategies, connections and strong relationships are invaluable.

She also maintains an extended network outside her sector by leading a regional association in her profession. Through that network, she is bringing external best practices and innovation into her company—and she is steering an effort to change how the engineering function delivers key projects. "*As we try to do things better, my company network and my external network are coming together*."

Network Insights

- **Use newness to your advantage.** Ask questions, seek help or admit that you do not know. Small investments early on will have a big payoff over time.

- **Build the network needed to supplement skill gaps.** Seek out experts and people who have done similar work. Be open to new people who can help you gain needed experience, expertise and perspective.

- **Rely on trusted colleagues who know you well.** They will offer personal support, help you make sense of things and give you honest feedback.

- **Maintain relationships across functions, expertise, locations and roles to get a full view of the work and the challenges.** Rich, boundary spanning ties are associated with performance. Marley's positive experience of this early on set the tone for future transitions and career success.

Leveraging External Networks for Ideas & Best Practices

Marley's career is built on a valuable global network within her company. She is equally invested in her external network—peers working in similar roles across different organizations. She relies on colleagues in a professional association for ideas and resources that can be applied to her work. Here's how the group has thrived and added value to members:

1. **Be clear about focus**. A clear shared interest and a common goal will mobilize the group, drive the agenda and give depth to interactions.

2. **Schedule regular meetings—and stick to them**. Quarterly face-to-face meetings and monthly calls sustain sharing and engagement in Marley's group.

3. **Use an online forum to carry through ideas and interactions as a group**. A LinkedIn group and discussion boards are good for information sharing and extending the network.

4. **Offer educational events and resources**. Marley's group provides online training and webinars. Occasional learning and networking events are hosted at a hotel or conference venue to bring in guest speakers and encourage new membership.

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.