



# Moving into a Senior Executive Role: Take Time to Set Priorities & Build Trusting Relationships

## CASE CONTEXT

An experienced leader takes on a senior-level, corporate role. Rather than pushing through a new agenda to make her mark, she takes a longer-term view. She focuses on building trust, breaking down silos and reframing priorities.



FEMALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: FINANCE

## 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.



Shelia took an indirect path to a senior-level job at a global financial institution, where she has been for 22 years.

Most of that time, she worked in investments, on numerous teams, in multiple locations and on a diverse range of deals and projects. Five years ago, she switched to corporate and was promoted a year ago to CIO. Leading a corporate function was never Shelia's goal, and she thinks that has been a professional advantage. "If I had been gunning for a job at this level, if I had that lens in everything I did, I'd probably not be in this role. I would have been selective on the projects I worked on or more focused on getting my face time. Instead, I was focused on collaboration and relationships ... I often say my only professional skill is that I know this company—I am effective because I know how different pieces come together and I know people at every level and throughout the business."

Her path to senior leadership may not work for all, but she maintains her belief in the value a strong network, effective collaboration and trust. When she took over IT, she decided to invest in understanding the people and the context, rather than pushing through a 100-day plan, which she had done in a prior role "The last role involved creating something new and I needed to energize and focus the team, but this context was different. Leadership had been a revolving door and the team was change weary. They were not necessarily going to be excited about my new ideas! I tried to have a steady hand ... I deliberately did not have a 100-day plan. Implicit in that, you're telling the people, *You've been doing all of these things wrong and in a 100 days, look how much I could fix it.* That's disrespectful to them and would suck too much energy out of the group."

Shelia's existing relationships within the IT function helped her cut to the heart of what was going on and what was needed. And, she spent hours listening to and connecting with the many people she did not know. "I had to get people comfortable with me so they'll talk to me." She learned that most people were not seeing the whole or collaborating with other teams. She began to introduce people to others where there were overlaps and connections, including people in two teams that were doing essentially the same work. "Coming in, my greatest value was being a connector and an integrator. I helped people to understand how what they were doing connected to the business, to the broader mission and to each other."

She also began to shift the emphasis away from narrow processes or activity-based metrics. "What are we trying to achieve? Our goal is to change the business ... Talking about the *why* and redefining what success means has been difficult, but that's been a big part of my effort."

By shifting the focus to the end goal, employees started to get out of a narrow process mindset and develop an eye for outcomes. But talking about the bigger picture has been backed up with action. Shelia has pulled projects that were on track because they didn't serve a larger business need. She's given support to struggling projects that have value and potential for tremendous impact. She's pushed the performance review process to factor in "outcomes over activity" and reward collaboration. Over time, Shelia hopes people will trust in her approach and trust each other. "We have to collaborate extensively to survive and instead people had their blinders on and delivered results narrowly. They were not trusting, not collaborating."

Relationships with external stakeholders were also part of Shelia's work to align IT goals with business outcomes. Shelia's reputation, connections and knowledge of the company gained her access to formal budget holders and key influencers. "They felt a disconnect between what was happening in IT and what their needs actually were. I gave decision-makers information and built relationships so we stayed ahead of the business need."

Shelia's personal investment in internal and external relationships has put her at the center of many meetings and decisions. "I look at my calendar on Sunday nights, and from Monday through Friday, it's hour-long meetings from 8 to 6." Moving forward, Shelia plans to leverage the trust she has built and pull back a bit. Silos have been bridged and new relationships have been established—she is not needed as the go-between as often. Meeting times can be cut in half, and she knows information will still flow to her and back out into the organization. Her team is prepped for more strategic thinking and collaboration. People in formal management as well as informal influencers are able to take the pulse of the organization and carry the messages Shelia has been touting.

The transition for Shelia and her group is a work in progress, but she is happy with her long-term bet. Metrics continue to be defined based on the business. Satisfaction with systems is improving. A sense of purpose and pride is growing as people see impact of their work. "We'll see if it works. But, it feels good to be able to turn the ship a little bit!"

## Network Insights

- **Collaborate with respect, build trust and be authentic to build a reputation that creates pull into other opportunities.** Standing for something larger than your own self-interest pays back over time and in ways that are often invisible to you.
- **Don't assume you have to prove yourself to your new group or leaders by making immediate change.** Often "100-day plans" fail because they are based on uninformed views. Plus, they send a message of arrogance, impeding the trust and collaboration you need to do your job.
- **Clarify what is worth doing and what is not to drive results.** In Shelia's case this meant tracking impact on business rather than activities. Communicate this clearly and solidify it via performance measures and incentives.
- **Look for ways to be an integrator and help people see the benefit of working together across silos.** This approach shows your value without robbing others of ownership or engagement.
- **Be an active external ambassador.** Cultivate relationships with formal and informal stakeholders outside the group.

## How High-Level Leaders Boost Performance by Investing in Informal Networks

When experienced leaders take on a higher-level role, they often rely too heavily on the formal structure, trying to please the hierarchy early on. Leaders with a "formalist" view miss the underlying paths of influence and collaboration—which are valuable currency for execution. Plans fall short and opportunities get missed. To avoid this network trap invest in the informal network by identifying:

1. **Brokers.** Who are the influencers and opinion leaders with informal ties that bridge locations, functions or expertise groups?
2. **Marginalized voices.** Who should be involved and what groups should be considered, but have been left out?
3. **Bottlenecks.** Where are the pinch points within your group and across groups? Where do information and decisions get stuck, slowing down performance?
4. **Fragmentation.** Where does the network break down? Where are the gaps in collaboration, conversation and alignment?

### 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](http://www.connectedcommons.com) or email Rob at [rlcrossjr@gmail.com](mailto:rlcrossjr@gmail.com).