



A Leader Engages Authentically With Stakeholders & New Team As She Moves to a Global Support Role

CASE CONTEXT

A seasoned leader chooses a career path that pulls her well out of her comfort zone. She uses her network ties to shape the role, adapt her expertise and accomplish work that impacts stores, employees and customers around the world.



Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: FOOD &
BEVERAGE

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.



Most of Jo's career has been spent in fast-paced retail and restaurant businesses. For 25 years, she was "in the field,"

managing stores and regions, training staff, executing business. About a year ago, her company—a global chain with thousands of locations across diverse markets—pulled her in to a newly created corporate role. "Rather than working with a single region, I'm responsible for creating and designing programs tied to the site experience—anything that touches the customer or sales teams in the store." The change has been dramatic: moving from execution to strategy, from regional to global focus and from being in different locations every week to working at headquarters.

As significant as the change was, Jo was intentional about choosing and shaping the role. "I was really curious about the global strategy, how a global org works from a business and strategy perspective." For a couple years, she played out scenarios with her mentor and her manager. "We talked about what this type of role could look like. How could it benefit the company? How could it benefit me? It was an ongoing discussion. It was not something I was immediately interested in and what I would do right away. And the role didn't exist ... My mentor said, *When the time is right, let me know and we'll figure it out.*"

Jo also talked to leaders in other corporate functions to understand and craft the role. Over the years, she had built good relationships with people in logistics, finance and HR, and she asked her manager and her mentor to put a list together as well. "I met with a lot of them, told them what I was thinking about and asked them, *How does it feel? How does it work? What do you find energizing about it? What do you find frustrating about it?*" By being proactive and exploring with others in her network, Jo created a role where she could grow and have impact in ways she found compelling.

Even so, the transition was much harder than Jo expected. Her sense of purpose, identity and success had been tied to her collaborations. "Being in the field is about connecting with people, and that's what I got excited about. The relationships and helping people grow in their careers was very satisfying ... I went from an org of more than 4,000 people to a team of 22. And, I was in an office setting, with the same people, every day ... It was very different for me ... I've never worked harder and been more frustrated and exhilarated at the same time!" Jo needed to shift her sense of purpose and value—not being able to make that shift is a common mistake that can derail a career. "What excites me now is the ability to impact the company globally, being able to impact hundreds of stores feels pretty good. I had to adjust and find what provides me satisfaction."

Jo avoided another potential source of failure: becoming a “disconnected expert,” over-relying on past expertise and unable to address skill gaps. She wisely spent significant time with different business leaders to understand how best to support them. The initial meetings were personal, with no agenda or topic. “I asked about them: *How long have you been here? What did you do before? What do you love most about your job?* ... It was strange for them! ... But the more I did those meetings, the more I got to know the managers and their teams.” She also learned early on not to try to be the expert or the person that everything needed to flow through. She looked for how her unique skills and background could contribute. “My team did not need me to be the person who knows the most about anything ... What they needed was someone who was available, who would listen and would try to help. I may not understand what was needed, but I knew who might have an answer ... My connection with those leaders was how I was going to be most effective.”

Jo also protects time for one-on-ones with her direct reports to build good relationships and trust. She focuses on the *why* of their work and how they can work together ... “It’s important for them to know that I prefer when we don’t approach things the same. I like when there are different ideas and I like when people bring their own perspective ... I want people to be themselves.” *Leaders win greater engagement and effort when they celebrate unique approaches, rather than pointing to what is different from what they would have done or what has been done in the past.*

At about nine months into the role, Jo is sending team members to meetings, delegating and getting them involved in issues earlier. “Now that I have established relationships with the business leaders, there is trust ... I’m bringing my team in, giving them more involvement and exposure ... It makes them feel good, and it’s really important for development.” In doing so, she also avoids the trap of the “overloaded leader,” being too-central to the network, blocking progress and becoming personally overwhelmed. Making this shift was possible because of the way Jo focused on building relationships and *not* on positioning herself as the indispensable expert. “If I had approached it that way, I wouldn’t have lasted six months in the job!”

Network Insights

- **Don’t let existing systems and structures define you and your next steps.** Roles are not defined the way they used to be—and they change rapidly. You can shape work in ways that have value for you if you leverage the network.
- **Ask other people about their experiences and feelings about their jobs—not just the mechanics.** Their answers will help you see potential pitfalls and adjustments you need to make in how you see the value you contribute and purpose you derive.
- **Build reputation on relationships, not expertise.** Understand how you can best support your teams and internal clients. Get to know them as people. This builds trust, prevents you from being the person everything needs to flow through and helps your team (the subject experts) stay engaged.
- **Avoid collaborative overload after initial surge into a new role.** Make intentional choices about your time. Develop, delegate and rely on others. To make this work, don’t sell yourself as “the indispensable expert” in the beginning.

4 Leadership Principles to Build & Engage Collaborative Networks

1. *Know people as individuals.* Jo sees this as especially important to people in their 20s, but applies it to everyone. “People want to know, *Do you care about me as a person? Do you know me?* ... If you care about people that way, you follow that connection and that feeling ... You build trust.”
2. *Have clear North Star principles and priorities.* In the swirl of 100s of competing priorities that all seem essential in the moment, people need focus and clarity. “We need to be moving toward a goal. Accountability is important, so you have to know what the 3 or 4 most important things are. There is a discipline to let go of the rest.”
3. *Manage performance and cultural fit problems quickly.* “You cannot allow people to stay who either don’t get it or don’t care to get it. With folks like that, you can’t move the team forward ... As you move those folks out it elevates others, lets them know what they do does matter.”
4. *Stay invested in cross-functional work and collaboration.* “Do it together or don’t do it at all ... When everyone has their own priorities and it is hard to come to a consensus, you have to commit to the relationships ... People need to be comfortable to share what they are thinking, to disagree, to have a debate and discussion ... It’s healthy.”

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.