



LEARN &  
ADAPT

# A Start-up Founder Leverages Networks to Adapt After Acquisition by Global Company

## CASE CONTEXT

A technology leader figures out how to maneuver in an unfamiliar context and culture. She pays attention to the network to learn and then works to create a more open, collaborative environment within her team.



FEMALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: BIO-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.



Maggie knows small companies and start-up cultures. She worked at several start-ups while completing degrees in biology and business. A decade later, she founded a biotech start-up that served a small market and employed less than 50 people. The firm caught the eye of the leading player in a related technology—and almost two years ago, Maggie sold the business. She became a senior leader in the company, bringing over most of her start-up team and gaining another 40 scientists, researchers and technicians. “All of a sudden, we had a chance to apply our work broadly, to scale our ideas. But the context was so different.”

Maggie had to adjust from a nimble, close-knit team with a start-up culture to an established organization, filled with many more experienced leaders and thousands of employees. “Some of the people they put on my team were 20-year veterans at the company ... The culture is very strong ... We were bringing change. I am a change agent—but I am vastly outnumbered!”

It turned out that cultural differences were extreme. Maggie stumbled into problems she didn’t expect. It was a big change for her to understand and also to help her original employees navigate. “It’s been a hard nut to crack ... Before, it was super flat, transparent, open offices ... Literally, everyone knew what happened in everybody’s world. It was a constant search to solve the biggest problems as a team and go after the best ideas regardless of who’s in what role ... Here, it is super-hierarchical, private offices, a history of competition instead of collaboration.” She tried to understand the new group and the larger organization via the network. She held weekly one-on-ones with direct reports and periodic skip-level meetings. “I found people were reluctant to share information, but I didn’t know why.”

She also found that people would ask questions expecting debate and decision, while she takes more of an exploratory, open approach, seeing possibilities rather than pushing an agenda or asserting her expertise. She was surprised to learn that employees were thrown off when she would make the comment, *It could be*. “Someone finally told me, I don’t know what that means! What are you thinking? Does it mean you don’t think it will work and you will let me fail? Does it mean you don’t care? ... I was like, *No, it really means, it could be – it’s a possibility.*”

Maggie wanted people to be comfortable to talk to her or bring her in. Equally important was the need to get people talking to each other. “We’re not going to build the right thing if we don’t engage people across and outside of our groups, if we don’t develop a curiosity for what each other is thinking.” She started “forcing proximity and shared experience.”

Maggie created a cultural integration team and some cross-functional project teams. She instituted all-hands meetings and social events to get employees together with people they would not usually interact with. She brought in a consultant to run a trust workshop—which met with cynicism and she did not have high hopes. “But it was fantastic! ... When people work in silos, you see behaviors that you don’t understand and you wouldn’t have done and you rapidly assume poor intent. But then you go into a workshop and see, *No, this is a bunch of great people trying to do the right thing ...* They have different information and different experiences of what the right things are. What we need to do is figure out how to give them the benefit of the doubt. And talk more!”

She also sought to bridge silos within the company. Early on, she reached out to other leaders to understand their work and then ask, *Who else should I talk to?* “Pretty quickly, I got to five or ten key people who have been useful contacts ... Now, a lot of people come to me.” A combination of her expertise and unique contribution (“Our start-up was a bright, shiny object.”) drew people to her initially, but her ability to engage and energize people deepened those connections. This pull or energy is created by Maggie in several ways: she breaks down tasks, relates her team’s work to the work of others and thinks about where connections would hold future value. “I ask questions. I’m rarely trying to push something I want to happen ... It’s more about teaching others to take ideas and build on them and find new influences ... It’s intentionally seeking out others who will come at it with a different lens ... And I’m learning that creating that habit in others is what I am going for.”

Maggie continues to adjust and adapt. She is starting to see how she fits in and how she provides value and gains purpose. “Adapting to a very different culture than the one that I built has been interesting. It’s still weird, but I see where it is going now ... I know things that are instinctive to me in terms of learning or how to collaborate are not instinctive here ... I see my role now as engaging and inspiring people ... My network, my instinct and ability to connect people and places in the company, that is a role I can play and something others are starting to see value in, too.”

## Network Insights

- **Identify opinion leaders and engage with them on entry.** Be sensitive to cultural differences—adapt your style and behavior accordingly. Or, educate others on why you do things in certain ways.
- **Invest in mechanisms that build trust across key players.** Staffing practices, one-on-ones or workshops can shift interactions and improve collaborative outputs. They are important, even when people are reticent to be involved or take time away.
- **Ask for referrals to people you should know and are important to your work.** When you meet with people always ask *who else* you should speak with. This often will get you to a small handful of people that will matter for your work and help you build legitimacy.
- **Focus on creating pull in interactions, not touting your expertise.** Ask questions, morph what you know and can contribute to other people’s problems, see possibilities and look for where ideas or perspectives might integrate.

## Finding Purpose & Re-energizing When Culture Is Not a Fit

The corporate culture Maggie is in today is worlds apart from the small start-ups she’s led before. When she wonders whether she should stay, she recalibrates in several ways.

1. “One of the big reasons I cling to hope is that the top leadership team is awesome. They are incredibly supportive of me and they do want see culture change ... When problems seem insurmountable, I can go talk with them, brainstorm, come up with great ideas.”
2. “Another thing that keeps me going is the incredibly talented people here. They are super driven, super smart ... They can do amazing things—I just need to tilt them a bit to get them to think in a different way, be less competitive with each other.”
3. “I also see value in not being in rapid-reaction mode. I’m having different kinds of interactions ... I need to block time for reflective thought ... Sometimes it’s just going to the gym and then I come back more clear.”
4. “I stay engaged with my start-up community, and that’s been really good for me ... In part, I get a pulse of the market, but it’s also a reminder of the things I’m good at: getting an early-stage start-up off the ground. Talking to people about that and being able to help them, selfishly, I just feel better about myself and feel more balanced.”

### 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).