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# Leveraging Expertise & New Relationships for Successful Transition into Expanded Role

## CASE CONTEXT

A skilled litigator moves from law firm to corporate attorney. He is now a manager and doing more of the work he enjoys the most. He has been successful by adapting his network and how he derives purpose through interactions with others.



MALE

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.



## Malik is an in-house attorney for a pharmaceutical firm and is a manager of three legal groups. He joined the

company as an attorney in litigation, after working at a law firm for nearly a decade. When he made the move, he was looking to have a broader purpose, collaboration and impact over time. “At the law firm, I was a hired gun. They have a problem; you are hired to solve it ... It felt very transactional and I wanted to have a more organic, holistic ability to get involved in problems and solutions.” In his current role, he is increasingly engaged with the business leaders, addressing compliance and regulatory issues, assessing risks and being involved in more strategic work.

When he was looking to leave the law firm, Malik reconnected through LinkedIn with a friend from law school who already worked at the pharmaceutical company. “I knew these in-house opportunities were hard to come by, so I called her when I saw a job opening ... *Do you have any suggestions?*” She was able to flag Malik’s resume for the hiring manager and, soon after, Malik was called for an interview. Research shows these “weak-link relationships” are a common source in the network for locating and moving into new roles.

It is also common for people to allow existing expectations and networks craft the role they are stepping into. More effective people are proactive about structuring interactions and building their network to steer them to work they are most interested in (for example, opportunities to leverage strengths, develop new skills, set themselves apart or gain a sense of purpose). Malik did this first by proving his ability to set litigation strategy and give legal advice. “Early on, it was about showing my immediate manager that I can represent the group and have credibility in a meeting ... I would ask to join meetings or be part of a cross-functional crisis management team or a task force, the kinds of roles I wanted to do more of ... As my position and scope has grown, the things I get involved in are more consultative, strategic, balancing competing views—which I enjoy.”

After his most recent promotion to a role that included overseeing areas where he had no experience, Malik relied on his network—other attorneys and subject experts on his teams—to fill in his skill gaps and bring him up to speed. “I’ve tried to be humble and self-deprecating ... I’ll say, *I’m completely dumb on this* ... Then, I use my experience and instincts and approach as a litigator to figure out what I need to know ... Do I need every scrap of information? Do I need a general framework?” *He doesn’t need to show he is the smartest lawyer; instead, his role is to create a context where others can do excellent work.*

“It’s a process I’m skilled at and I do it in a respectful, constructive, engaging way ... No one person can be an expert, so we pressure test things ... What haven’t we thought through? Are there gaps to fill in? Are there different ways to look at it? Kicking the tires leads us to problems or we know it’s good.”

Malik also avoided a common mistake of becoming a “biased learner”—when a leader is promoted but holds on to existing ties, rather than reaching out to other groups to gain perspective and relationships needed for the new role. He introduced himself to peers in other legal functions and to colleagues doing similar work in different countries. He identified stakeholders and business leaders in other regions and functions and sought to create visibility for himself and his team. “Everyone just talks about Legal—not a specific person or specialty ... I try to let people know we are here and who we are.” Making that effort and demonstrating skill when he was involved in a problem or project built his reputation. “I showed in the heat of the moment what we can do and that I—the human being behind it—can add value and be a good partner.”

The downside of Malik creating a reputation and pull into interesting work and networks has been collaborative overload. “The number one mode of communication around here is the calendar invite! My calendar gets loaded with meetings from 8 to 6 ... It’s frantic and I don’t have time to get any work done because I’m running from meeting to meeting and hope I’ve captured the action items. Then I wake up the next morning wondering when I’m going to get to all that stuff, because it’s another day of back-to-back meetings.” Malik has gotten better at clarifying what meetings are about, turning some down, asking for meeting notes and staying for just part of meetings. But, he struggles with delegating. “As I’ve gotten more seasoned and comfortable, I am better able to deal with more situations with less preparation; it’s faster than if I send someone else ... So, my first reaction is to solve a problem myself.” Malik has made himself too-central in the network, a pitfall faced when leaders surge into a new role. He knows the overload will be a problem for him and his team and is starting to make changes. “*It’s a short-term efficiency to do things myself, but in the long term that just eats you alive.*”

## Network Insights

- **Craft the role you are stepping into.** Rapidly develop your network *and* demonstrate your abilities in the type of work you want to be known for. Both are essential for building reputation and pulling you into work you want to do.
- **Shift the way you think about expertise.** Allow others to help cover gaps in your skill set, rather than positioning yourself as the expert. Consider how to use your expertise in new ways to create a context for others to excel and bring their best effort.
- **Don’t over-rely on your current network when entering a new domain or different role.** People fail when they have a biased network, always turning to the same people, even if they do not have the right expertise or insight.
- **Set rules or boundaries to address collaborative overload.** Manage email and availability off-hours in ways that suit your rhythms and preferences. Push back on meetings by defaulting to shorter meeting times, asking if you are really needed and be willing to leave when your time is better spent elsewhere.
- **Practice letting go and bringing others in.** Often, high-performers don’t delegate because they know what to do or like the work. This will hurt performance. Clarify expectations and accountabilities with your team and step back.

## Finding Purpose When Work Is Negative

A large part of Malik’s work is inherently negative. Litigation is tied to past events and difficult situations. The work is disconnected from the company’s mission, no matter how compelling. Malik thrives through several strategies:

1. *Keep anxiety of the unknown in check.* For Malik, being available via email and text is helpful, not burdensome. This prevents surprises and allows him to be proactive.
2. *Protect time for work that brings purpose.* Counter some of the negative or draining work with projects and interactions that are positive and energizing.
3. *Co-create solutions.* “The best interactions are when we get an idea and hang it up like a piñata. Everyone beats at it. You know it’s not personal and the end product is much better.”
4. *Structure work to optimize time with family.* Plan extra work, meetings or calls “at the time that has the least opportunity cost. I would rather schedule a call at 7 in the morning than 7 at night because I’m not going to get quality time with my kids in the morning anyway.”
5. *Care about something outside of work that is compelling enough to draw you away.* “For me, it really is my family.”

### 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).