



LEARN & ADAPT

# A High Performer's Reputation & Network Enables Rapid Career Advancement & Success in New Roles

## CASE CONTEXT

A skilled professional is rapidly promoted and has to adjust to increased collaborative demands of managing others. She builds trust by listening, observing and being open about what she doesn't know. She learns the value of having mentors and sounding boards—and the satisfaction of being a mentor to others.



FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL LEADER

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.



Yolanda is an in-house attorney for a healthcare products company. She has moved rapidly through a series of diverse and high-profile roles in six years. Currently, she is general counsel for a business unit and the only director who is a millennial. As a young leader engaging with many senior executives and supervising a team of paralegals and lawyers, Yolanda has excelled by learning quickly and building a strong network. She attributes her success in part to visibility and sponsorship—"I have been fortunate to have two sponsors at senior levels who paved the way for me in ways that good work alone would not have done." Her energizing style of "diving into the work with enthusiasm and ferocity" and "being someone people want to work with" have also fueled her career.

She moved into her current role without any substantive knowledge of the business. Right away it was important to build the trust and respect of the team, especially the more tenured people—one of whom was not very receptive to her less-experienced boss. "The approach I took was to frankly acknowledge my lack of experience in that area and be clear that I was not there to undermine her; I would rely on her expertise. I did not minimize importance of her role ... I had learned that you have to build allies early on who can help you, who trust you, and then to really partner with them."

Yolanda's approach to new roles is rooted in her childhood where she moved with her family to various countries. "I spent a lot of time observing and listening before I would step in, and I apply that in my leadership approach. *Asking questions and listening has helped me build credibility with teams because I don't try to pretend that I know what I don't know.*" Having a positive reputation—gained from prior roles where she built strong relationships with senior leaders—also gave her credibility coming in as a young leader. "A positive reputation has a snowball effect ... If people have heard good things about me, then maybe they give me more credit upfront than they would if I was coming in as an unknown quantity."

Even so, Yolanda had some struggles moving into a manager role. As a high-performing individual contributor, she was unsure how to delegate. "The hardest thing moving into a supervisory role is to trust other people to do their job well ... I didn't do it perfectly. There were times I got too involved in things that I should have fully delegated; other times I didn't get involved enough." She realized open communication was the key to finding her footing and utilizing her team's talent. "Once, I stepped over the line. I stepped back and said, *I should have just trusted you on that, I'm sorry, I'm figuring this out, bear with me.*" She asked her team to give her feedback if she got over-involved or, conversely, if she was not contributing and should.

To keep the lines of communication open, Yolanda relies on monthly one-on-one meetings with each person on her team. Those sessions have helped her become more familiar with the business, the projects people are working on and the challenges they face. “It helps us get clear on what I need to be involved in and what not ... We talk through how they allocate their time and efforts, too. What should be their highest focus?” She also provides context or suggests connections they could make to address issues or goals. “With the early-career people on my team, I do more coaching—how to navigate the environment, build their network, get the experiences they need or want to have—depending on their career path and what they are working on.”

Coaching and enabling others is becoming more interesting to Yolanda as she has gotten increasingly comfortable with the idea that accomplishment and success come through the team. “At first, I thought maybe this isn’t for me ... But, I’ve gotten over that initial hurdle, and I have gotten an incredible sense of meaning and purpose from mentoring and supervising.” Yolanda and a colleague have built on this interest and started a women’s mentoring program as well.

Looking back, Yolanda sees the important role a few people played in helping her through the first six or nine months of the new job. One was another woman who moved into the same role in another business. They were dealing with similar team dynamics—and also similar family and personal circumstances. “We formed a great working relationship and were able to bounce things off of each other.” Yolanda’s boss was also a supporter and guide. “We had one-on-ones each month to talk through how each of our transition was going, how we were managing, the political dynamics ... I needed that tenured, experienced perspective.” She also relied on a business leader to give her a different, non-legal perspective on her role and a trusted work friend “who gives an added layer of honesty and directness about what I do and don’t handle well.”

For Yolanda, the transition phase is over and she is doing work she finds energizing and interesting. “I love my job! I spend time directing strategy and getting involved in big-picture issues. I’m in a sweet spot now ... I feel confident but energized by the opportunity to keep learning new things.”

## Network Insights

- **Build allies early on.** Let people on your team—and stakeholders—know you want to partner with them, not undermine or take over their work.
- **Listen and observe.** This helps build the credibility and trust that will allow you to structure your role and the network you need to be effective.
- **Immerse yourself in the role—and delegate.** If you position yourself as the expert or “fixer,” you will hurt team productivity and set yourself up for collaborative overload.
- **Re-frame how you get a sense of purpose.** This is especially challenging moving from individual contributor to manager. Making the shift from valuing personal accomplishment to enabling and developing others is key to success as a leader.
- **Find trusted people to help navigate transitions.** Rely on people in different roles for various types of support, feedback and advice. Set regular times to talk to a peer, your manager, a mentor and a work friend (in addition to friends or family).

## Collaborative Practices to Aid Transitions

Yolanda’s rapid career advancement has taught her collaborative lessons for successful transitions to new roles.

1. *Show genuine interest in learning about people.* Often little things make a difference in relationships. “Engage in small talk and listen when people tell you about their kids or interests, so you can ask them about it later ... Learn about what other people are working on, so you can genuinely talk about things they are invested in. It also shows you know the business, not just trying to do your narrow task.”
2. *Be proactive.* Create your role and be willing to take risks. “Don’t let the demands happen to you. Find people you want to work with and things to invest in that are interesting, substantive and strategic.”
3. *Use mentors strategically and intentionally.* Be specific about what you need—don’t expect them to know what is most relevant to you. “Have an intentional approach to how that person can help you grow in your career.”
4. *Let enthusiasm and energy for the work come through.* “If you don’t have enthusiasm, if you can’t get excited about your work, find something else to do.” Our research shows that being an energizer is four times the predictor of high performance and success as any other factor we have measured over 20 years. It enables you to create reputation in networks, which translates to better ideas, talent, projects and promotions flowing your way.

### 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).