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# Managing Personal Networks & Team Connectivity in a Highly Specialized R&D Group

## CASE CONTEXT

A new leader learns to manage incoming demands and collaborative overload. Her ability to work across teams and groups continues to increase her credibility and the value of her team.



FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL LEADER

Industry: MANUFACTURING

## 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.



After eight years as an individual contributor in a technical field, Whitney was promoted to manager of an R&D group.

“In my previous role, I was involved in technology transfer, working with people who were part of product implementation ... The network of people I worked with—suppliers, manufacturing, purchasing, engineering—and that collaborative experience helped me in getting this new role.”

Much of Whitney’s work involves managing priorities, communicating among her team and the numerous stakeholders or internal clients who request their services. The specialists on her small team are often in demand due to their unique skills. Much of the group’s research is documented and is a useful resource across the company, but those same records often spur requests for the team. Word of mouth also brings projects to the team. One way she manages the workload is to meet face-to-face with potential customers. She asks questions and pushes for specificity on the needs. This process allows her to show her team’s capabilities and boosts their credibility. It also helps her understand the requests clearly before she commits her team. “I try to understand where they are coming from and their priorities and then connect that with what we can do.”

Within her group, she uses 30-minute meetings twice a week to update projects, manage workflow and assess collaborative demands. This process allows her to effectively forecast work and make commitments. “*The check-ins let me know what they are doing, how they feel about the workload and who they are working with. I can then help educate the customers about the work and the pace, or help the team prioritize.*” Work requests may also come in directly to a team member, often a follow-up piece of work or a need from someone who already has a relationship with the specialist. The team has found the collaborative intensity of work has increased dramatically and they are spending more time answering questions and fielding requests. With the consistent meetings, the work is made visible, and Whitney is able to take on more of the communication and collaborative aspects or shift work among team members.

She also tries to manage the work in creative ways, including by cross-training an extended network of technicians. “I arranged to provide training on some of the more repetitive tasks, so that groups that use our services can do some of the work themselves. That frees up my team for other important or specialized projects.” Whitney has hired contract employees to manage periods of overload or supplement her most in-demand employees. A few roles are highly specialized; “These are the people I have to check in with the most to manage the burden.”



With one employee, Whitney was able to coach and support her to set boundaries. “I said, *Look, you can’t work 20 hour days; let’s work out what you can do and let customers know when they can expect results.* By coaching and helping her with that, we are realizing how much effort she had been giving to meet unnecessary deadlines.”

The members of her team who are more junior or in less-demanding roles are a group she hopes to give more attention to. “To be honest, I haven’t had the chance to think of people who are less connected or involved! I have been busy enough!” Engaging the fringe of the network is something effective leaders do, so providing them with more opportunities will help Whitney retain and develop good people.

To remain engaged and effective herself, Whitney is also learning to set boundaries. She is getting better at use of email and other virtual communication, even though, “I hate it! I know there are times you can’t avoid it, but it gets in the way of trust and connection.” She also stopped being so accessible on weekends or on vacation days. “I took six days off last year and three were ruined with interruptions ... Last month, I took a full week ... I needed it, my brain needed it. I let my team and my boss know I would not be available. I set expectations very clearly ... It worked great! I had no phone calls and texts, no urgent emails ... I was reminded that if you don’t tell people what your boundaries are, they can’t know.”

## Network Insights

- **Set short, regular meetings to understand collaborative demands.** This allows you to re-allocate workload, revisit priorities and step in to manage client relationships or project timelines when needed.
- **Flex your team through the network.** Hire contract help, cross-train staff, leverage talent or resources of customers or related functions. Coach team members to set boundaries and clarify expectations with customers.
- **Support the overloaded center *and* the network fringe.** Both need to be developed and engaged.
- **Set your own boundaries.** Use email and virtual communication in ways that work for you and allow you and your team to be effective. Find ways to buffer from 24/7 accessibility by clarifying expectations and roles with your boss and team. Setting boundaries is easier when you have already built trust.

## Team Network Practices of Successful Leaders

Use this checklist to gauge how effective you are at managing the network for you and your team.

### Manage the Center

- ✓ I make sure that people or roles within my group do not become so overloaded with collaborative demands that they are unable to support their colleagues in a timely fashion.
- ✓ I scan for, identify and reward employees who frequently engage in collaborative behaviors—such as offering resources, help, information and contacts—that make their colleagues more effective.

### Manage the Edge

- ✓ I ensure that newcomers—either new hires or those from other parts of the organization—are integrated rapidly into my group and know who to turn to for information, expertise, resources and decision approvals.
- ✓ I make sure that subject-matter experts and high performers in my group are available to help their colleagues in a timely manner on appropriate issues.

### Minimize Silos

- ✓ I facilitate effective collaboration at specific points in my group—across functional lines, physical distance, hierarchical levels, core projects or expertise domains—where informal networks are critical to performance and innovation.

### Build Adaptability

- ✓ I facilitate innovation and organizational change by engaging employees with significant relationships across functional lines, physical distance, expertise domains and demographic populations.
- ✓ I make sure that employees in my group are aware of one another’s expertise, contacts and resources and so know who to turn to for help when opportunities and problems arise.

### Minimize Insularity

- ✓ I make sure that my group collaborates effectively with appropriate functions/divisions within the organization and with relevant stakeholders outside of the organization (such as key customers, vendors and associations).

## 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).