



GENERATE WELL-BEING

A Turnaround Specialist Engages Employees & Holds to His North Star Purpose



CASE CONTEXT

An experienced manager has learned to be effective and thrive in challenging settings. By aligning his management team and engaging employees around shared purpose, he builds trust. His personal sense of purpose keeps him positive and able to look to good outcomes 3-4 years in the future.



MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGER

Industry: CONSUMER PRODUCTS

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.



Aden was a manufacturing manager, running operations for truck and automotive suppliers and gaining experience and reputation as a turnaround specialist. He turned that skill toward another industry—medical devices manufacturing—eleven years ago. He is currently running a facility that had been acquired by his company 18 months ago. “Doing turnarounds is something I fell into. And I enjoy it. You get to make some big changes and you can really see the evolution and maturity of a site over three or four years.” *In a difficult role, Aden has found ways to find purpose and satisfaction in the work.*

When he moves into a new site, Aden focuses on aligning the operations leadership around a balanced scorecard of metrics. Very quickly he assesses who has the capability and desire to rapidly shift from their narrow lens to team accountability. Collaborative conversations establish goals and a shared perspective on the new direction. “This is the time to push back, give input and determine whether they can support it or not ... After that, if they second guess or continue to push back, it’s time to restructure or bring in new talent.” Just as important are the efforts Aden takes to begin to build trust and engagement from the full workforce. He emphasizes safety and quality metrics, “issues you can get a lot of employee engagement around.” *In a turnaround setting, there is often mistrust or historical gaps between what is said and what is done. “If you’re saying you’re going to do these things, but your leadership team isn’t acting that out, you lose trust, start looking hypocritical.” Aden insists on leaders closing that gap.*

Another part of building trust is through recognition of people doing the right thing. *Aden values informal, immediate recognition to reinforce and celebrate the actions that are valued in the new culture.* Employees who are proactive to address a potential safety problem have a chance to win a gift card to a local store. Managers also have \$5 lunch tickets to give to any employee who demonstrates key behaviors in terms of safety, compliance, collaboration, quality and performance. The on-the-spot recognition lets people know that Aden’s team is serious about walking the talk and creating an environment where everyone has a sense of purpose.

Aden’s personal sense of purpose carries through to others as well. “I have a North Star, a sense of purpose and mission. It’s about setting up our health care providers for success.” This clarity and commitment came for Aden out of a personal situation, when his newborn son required intensive care for two months. “I watched all these amazing health care providers take care of my son and help him ... When he had his first birthday and started to grow and thrive, I thought, *I need to go do something meaningful in life.*”

“Now I love medical devices. You can’t drag me out of this business!” Even when the work is tough, as it is in turnarounds, Aden’s passion for the larger purpose remains. “Every day, I picture myself and my son as the caregiver or the patient. I can’t demand anything other than perfection because it is so easy to put myself in that role.” Our research indicates that people who have suffered loss, come from modest backgrounds or, like Aden, experienced life-changing events tend to be clear about their purpose or have a North Star priority. This focus allows them to avoid getting lost in the day-to-day stress or letting others dictate what matters most.

In that context, Aden also gains a sense of purpose through accomplishments. “I love that this industry is hard ... I love the challenge of having every aspect of the business in audit-ready mode and having all the balanced scorecard metrics at a high level.” He sees obstacles as challenges he is confident they can solve rather than sources of negativity. Propagating this mindset in others is another factor in Aden’s sense of purpose. “I love when the light bulb goes on with the team. We had a guy who got an award for stopping the manufacturing line. He got tears in his eyes, and said, *If I had done that six months ago, I’d have gotten fired.* He said thank you for empowering me to stop the line and we’re thanking him for doing it ... I get more joy out of seeing my shop floor teams get empowered than when I see it in my knowledge workers ... I love when they evolve and become advocates for what we are trying to accomplish.”

While Aden is clear on his purpose and his specific leadership role, he is not immune to the complexities of working in a heavily matrixed organization. His engagement wavers if he senses lack of trust or support from his bosses or business partners working in other locations. He is frustrated by bureaucratic decisions that are counter-productive. The need to communicate broadly and manage multiple, competing priorities can lead to collaborative overload. “It can be a bit much. People want your time; folks schedule overlapping meetings and hope you’ll show up, because there is no other hole in the calendar they can find.” Aden counters this in two ways. The first is mindset: “We laugh a lot. You learn to laugh when you are in difficult circumstances.”

The second is prioritization: “For me, it goes safety, then quality, then customer service—I build my priorities around that ... Keeping that top of mind keeps me sane, and I can make decisions about where to focus.”

Because work can be all-absorbing, people do need strategies to buffer from the job. Many people set simple rules for times they don’t work or aren’t available, or they commit to activities and people that pull them into things beside work. Aden’s variation of this is to choose activities that are so compelling that he does not think about work. “I don’t have rules or boundaries to separate work and family. That’s not my coping mechanism. It’s pursuing things that I am passionate about in my down time ... *To recharge my batteries, I pick things where I can be singularly focused, where there is not opportunity for distractions to enter your mind.* If I am lifting weights, there’s 300 pounds sitting on my chest and I’m only thinking about getting it off, so there is no time to think about work.” His family is very active, often skiing, hiking or biking together. “*When your downtime from work is around a passion, you can become so focused on that and everything else fades into the background ... That’s how I get my relaxation.*”

Network Insights

- **Build trust and engagement from the full workforce.** Support a priority that others care about. Recognize when people are doing the right thing and reflecting the desired behaviors, culture and values.
- **Focus on your North Star rather than the negatives of your job or the demands of others.** Having clarity of purpose in work helps you see things more positively; obstacles are challenges to solve.
- **Find people you can laugh with at work.** It’s a needed stress reliever in difficult circumstances or when you get bad news.
- **Go all-in on non-work activities.** Commit to activities and interactions that require intensity or focus. Being fully drawn in creates a needed mental separation from work.

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.