



GENERATE
WELL-
BEING

A VP Thrives by Engaging Networks Around His Values & Sense of Purpose

CASE CONTEXT

A senior executive developed a leadership style that is dependent on building networks of respect, not hierarchy. He is clear about his personal non-negotiables and encourages others to do the same.



MALE

Level: SENIOR 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.



Brendan runs a division of a pharmaceutical company, an operation of about 600 people working in eight countries.

His role involves extensive travel and networking with company leaders and customers around the world. Brendan is comfortable in many diverse contexts, having lived in several countries as a child and taking posts in the U.S., U.K., Germany, the Netherlands and Japan shortly after earning his MBA. Often spending just six months to two years in any role, he now has a diverse and valued network across the company.

For Brendan, the ability to collaborate and influence without authority fosters both performance and well-being. *"I learned that if you find yourself having to fall back on your formal title or status or reporting line to get things done, that's a dangerous area to be in."* Brendan learned this most poignantly in his experiences leading in the Netherlands. "The organization was flat, no hierarchical structure. People listened to you, respected you, and did things for you because they think it's the right thing to do and they believe you and buy in—not because you are the boss. My natural style is that way and that experience really shaped my leadership."

People also thrive when they have some sense of autonomy and ability to influence direction. Brendan's default is to allow discussion, get input and genuinely listen and consider multiple points of view. "With my leadership team, I rarely have to say, this is the direction we are going, get on board ... *If people feel as if they have had a chance to discuss and have their voice heard, they will get on board, even if they disagree. What they will resent is not being asked their opinion.*" He claims to have only two non-negotiables when making decisions: "One, ethics and compliance and two, health and safety—everything else we can talk about ... I think if we set objectives for people's work that are tight enough, we should be agnostic about how they get it done. Try to be as firm on the *what*—what you want to see, what you want delivered—and as flexible on the *how* as you can." He also interacts with employees as if they are volunteers: "Give respect and realize that any given moment they can walk off the job."

Brendan's approach helps him to manage the demands and intensity of work, for himself and for his organization. "Work will consume your life if you allow it to ... I tell people to be clear in their own mind about their priorities. As much as I can, I allow people what they need to make the situation work for them." This includes flexible schedules, working from home and control over travel decisions. For Brendan, his personal non-negotiables are time to exercise four times a week and time with family. "If I am not traveling, I will be home in time to help with homework and

bedtime. If I'm traveling, I make it home by Friday at five to have pizza and movie night. I am very clear these are the things I need to do." In his role, travel can be demanding, but Brendan has clarity that staying healthy keeps him able to sustain his pace. "There are things I need to be mindful of when I travel: 1) water, 2) sleep, 3) exercise, 4) what I eat and 5) minimal alcohol. I am not perfect, but I try to do at least three of those five things consistently. If I don't, after a couple days I feel like hell."

Another way Brendan thrives at work is using technology on his terms, allowing it to support the rhythm of his work. He has learned what works well for him. "I actually like email, unless it's a hyper-urgent issue ... If it's terribly urgent send me a text or give me a call. But the nature of the questions I get on email tend to be more complex or touch on things that can be a bit more emotional ... It is better to not reply quickly and, instead, think about it and give a considered response." He has been proactive in managing expectations that he will take time to reply to email—it may be in a couple of hours or a couple of days. "I end up with a better response than if I tried to get back immediately."

Taking the time to appreciate people is also important. Brendan has turned this into a discipline, keeping notes during the week and spending an hour each Friday to thank and recognize people. "I think about who I need to thank or send an email to their boss or give a handwritten note ... It is important to set the time, so that isn't something that falls by the wayside." This practice at the end of a week is gratifying for Brendan, too. Giving and thinking of others always makes people feel better and enjoy work more. And, knowing that he is giving this kind of acknowledgement creates greater engagement and sense of purpose in interactions all week long.

For all the care Brendan gives to his job, he is equally clear about keeping it in perspective. *Time with family and friends is seen as an essential way to re-charge and shift perspective.* He has groups of friends scattered over the world who he meets for occasional golf trips. "These trips or weekends are a chance for me to completely disconnect from the job ... When work becomes such a large portion of your life, it shapes your worldview to such an extent that it's almost like you are living your own soap opera. It is easy to fall into a world where you only have

friends at work, you only talk about work, you only think about work ... It's hard to switch off. Going away with a different group of people for a week allows you to realize that's a bubble, there are other people doing different things ... You get exposure to the world around you and it grounds you in a way." Being connected to or anchored in worlds outside of work lets you know you have options. *"If you end up with over-dependence on the company, it invariably influences your decisions for the worst. You end up being needlessly cautious and not speaking up or sharing your views on issues that could be controversial ...* If you feel beholden to the company, I think that will affect your performance."

Brendan sees that purpose and thriving for him is fundamentally tied to his interactions with other people. "The work we do is important, and it complex and interesting. But the reason I am here is I like the people ... It's the nature of the interactions, where I've helped someone develop, or I've had a conversation which helped someone advance a project or initiative, or I've been part of something with others that really moved the business forward—that's what gets me out of bed in the morning."

Network Insights

- **Establish a leadership style that helps people thrive.** Create a context where people have the ability to learn and grow, a chance to show mastery, a sense of autonomy and a sense of purpose. Acknowledge and appreciate others.
- **Decide what is non-negotiable.** Be clear with others on *what* matters most (i.e., ethics or safety, specific outcomes or deadlines) and flexible on *how* work gets done. Be clear with yourself about priorities around family, friends, health and personal time.
- **Gain perspective through relationships and activities outside of work.** If you stay in the work bubble, you end up reactive, living in fear and overly cautious.
- **Seek satisfaction through interactions with others.** Thriving is not tied to the type of work, or things going well or having enough time. Thriving is about being connected to others and finding purpose in those interactions.

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.