GENERATE WELL-BEING

A Senior Leader Engages Her Team to Build Purpose & Thrive in a Numbers-Driven Role During a Downturn

CASE CONTEXT

A senior leader thrives in a demanding role in a tough business context with significant revenue pressure. She builds trust through clarity and transparency in the value she brings and by helping her team find alignment and purpose.

FEMALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: TECHNOLOGY

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.

INNOVATE
EXECUTE
SCALE
THRIVE
ADAPT

Deena has spent most of her 20-year career at a single technology company, working in sales and expanding her role as the company has grown. Now a vice president, her most recent move was to take over sales for a business segment with 150 people, more than 2,000 customers and over a billion dollars in revenue. But the group was struggling with revolving-door leadership in prior years, layoffs and a downturn in earnings. Coming in with little technical knowledge of the products, Deena saw her role as building for the long term and establishing purpose for the team. "My goal is to deliver profitable growth to the company and create a culture where the team can perform at their best to ensure customer success. When I came in a year ago, that was missing."

Although she was a seasoned leader, Deena admits the transition was a challenge. Initially, she immersed herself in the technical aspects of the business, but realized that was not her skill set and where she should focus. "I struggled with what is my value to the team, the customer, the company … I've had to say, *I'm not a technical expert* and I *don't understand this, can you educate me more? …* I was very transparent and vulnerable in where I was at." Many leaders are unable to be open about the perspectives and skills they bring to a situation, or adapt their approach in a new role or context. By being authentic and not trying to force herself into the team as an expert, Deena began to earn trust—and, importantly, gain her footing and personal sense of purpose and value. "When I came in, we had to quickly get to trust as a leadership team. It's about showing vulnerability. That's where you get that commitment and accountability to get to the best outcomes."

Deena began to focus on her passion around building high-performing teams. She used her strengths in specific ways to build the team: framing up issues, clarifying objectives and keeping people focused on purpose; listening before giving an opinion or answer; facilitating meetings so that ideas are brought out and people feel valued. She held regular one-on-ones and directly addressed how people interacted with each other: "I give the feedback sandwich: the good, the thing to work on and the good again … Mostly, they appreciate the feedback."

She also created ways to pull the team together, to see themselves as part of a community. "I did a workshop so they could align to something bigger, not just going after a revenue number week after week … We listed adjectives that describe our customers and our team, and you could see the shift in terms of people being very guarded to a team that came together." Even in a tough, numbers-driven business and under a lot of pressure, she set a context that that valued purpose and meaningful interactions at work.

Deena felt the pressure and was highly scrutinized in her new role, but she did not want to create an environment of fear or negativity. "I worked to create a culture that is not accusatory. No one has to have all the answers. We can't be afraid of saying a bad idea. We will figure it out together." She also injected some levity and fun into the group, including a city-wide scavenger hunt and other team events, to get people connecting and collaborating in different contexts. Her highly analytical group was skeptical at first, but her efforts paid off. "In my mind, if people don't enjoy what they are doing and aren't having some fun, you are not getting the best out of them." The team began to trust in each other, which gave them a greater ability to move ahead in ambiguity.

This approach was especially important in the wake of layoffs, tough decisions and a downturn in the business. Deena was honest about the pressure and business realities and pushed accountability, but she kept the attention on what the team could do. Leaders and teams can get overly negative in difficult times, but Deena reframed the work more positively, focusing on how to move ahead over time.

For Deena, seeing her team come together—even in a competitive, difficult context—has been gratifying. Although she's been stretched and challenged as a leader in her role, she thrives on learning new things and is even having fun. She sees many of her peers and colleagues getting boxed in to their role. They set expectations that they have the answers, or that everything needs to go through them, or assume they have to be tough and analytical all the time. "Why is it as we get older, we have to be so serious all the time? We mature, sure, but that doesn't mean you can't still have fun."

Leaders like Deena have more choice than they realize to define themselves and their work—and they are more likely to thrive when they are proactive about it as they progress into more senior, complex roles. "*Every layer you go up is a bit lonelier ... People start to put the wall up; let's not be vulnerable.*" She counters that isolation and the demands of her job by knowing what gives her energy and satisfaction. Validation is rare, so she notices and appreciates positive comments when they come. Co-creating ideas and seeing her input

make a difference or drive outcomes is still important—but, she has learned to take pride in the wins of her team. She also gains a sense of purpose and validation by mentoring and helping others outside her team.

Deena's role can be consuming. Like many at her level, she has found strategies to maintain perspective on the intensity and demands of work. She accepts she's in a culture of 24/7 availability. Still, she carves out time for personal priorities, fitting in time for a workout with friends during the day or to attend a child's school activity—no guilt, no apologies. After the initial push into her new job, she has regained a bit more time and balance for herself, family and friends. "As high as the stress is, with the accountability and responsibility, I still feel like I have flexibility in my job. For that, I'm grateful."

Network Insights

- **Seek clarity in your role and the capacity of the team.** Deena was effective—and happier—when she let go of the need to keep up with the technical experts. She and her team defined her role as leader to set the context for the team to develop, perform and thrive.

- **Create purpose and positivity alongside the challenges and pressure.** Even in difficult times, leaders have the ability to build a context that promotes thriving for themselves and their team. Purpose and energy comes from interacting with others who care about the same things. Reframe the story or take a broader view so people can find a way to move ahead.

- **Build trust by being authentic and vulnerable and allowing others to do the same.** In team meetings and one-on-ones, allow ideas to be shared, give honest feedback and solve problems together. Avoid creating a context of fear.

- **Don't let your identity be defined by the role.** When people are aware of what makes them thrive and build those experiences it into their work, they are more engaged and satisfied.

- **Don't forget people and activities outside of work.** You may accept long hours and 24/7 connectivity, but find pockets of time to let it go. Fitting in an hour at the gym, time with kids or a dinner out with friends are critical activities that help prevent burnout and allow you to re-engage at 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.