



GENERATE
WELL-
BEING

A High-Performing Leader Thrives Due to Purpose-Driven Collaborations & Effective Work/Life Integration

CASE CONTEXT

A skilled operations manager drives a major product launch, giving most of 3 years to high-priority work and long hours. She manages the network of teams—and her personal energy—in ways that helped her thrive and grow.



FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL
LEADER

Industry:
PHARMACEUTICAL

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.



Amara has been an operations leader for a pharmaceutical company for six years, in roles touching manufacturing,

quality, supply chain and regulation. A recent assignment was her biggest challenge, but also a time where she thrived. For nearly three years, she “lived and breathed” a product launch—essentially managing all the collaboration, across functions, to ensure the company physically delivered the new product to market. Within one year of launch, the product was placed in 70 countries and earned more than \$1 billion in sales.

The scale and the importance of the work created pressure to succeed, but the work was fairly straightforward. “It was pretty easy to get people moving in the right direction because it was clear what our goal was—hitting a delivery date. There was a burning platform and the expectation that we could not fail.” The process for launch was detailed, but also clear. “There are a lot details behind it, but how you go about doing it was also relatively black and white.” For Amara, having that clarity of purpose and process was energizing, even though execution was not simple. “I struggle when you get too many cooks in the kitchen or senior leadership is pulling in different directions ... That’s where I’ve floundered, without clear roles and responsibilities and direction.”

The clear goal was compelling, but so was the bigger purpose. “Inspiration was easy on two fronts: one, providing an innovative therapy to patients, and, two, trying to be first to market.” A lot of Amara’s job was to motivate others. “I did a lot of speeches on why what we were doing was important. The focus was on patients ... The other part was the real business need. People knew the money side of it, but it was more about the impact on the company in terms of competition and reputation.”

The team’s commitment to the end goal and shared motivation led them to work really well together. Each person knew how their piece of the work fit in and contributed to the overall success, so there was a drive not to let anyone else down. “Every single person on this team was committed. They worked around the clock, not just for months, but over a couple years ... There was a sense of, *I don’t want to be the slacker on the team ... I don’t want to let my team members down.*” The team mentality to support each other was strong from the beginning. “This was a global team and during that time, I didn’t meet half the people I worked with in person ... We built relationships out of urgency and feeling that we had to make this work.” Looking back, she says getting to know people on a more personal level would have been nice, but, “We didn’t need it ... I think if you don’t have a clear purpose or clear path, more of that fluffy stuff matters.”

Those years were intense, but Amara was energized by accomplishment: “Forward motion, seeing how we were making progress ... and then to see the outcomes: over \$1 billion in the first year, that’s not common.” That period is in contrast to her current work, which involves process improvement across functions. “I don’t have a burning platform ... It’s working OK, but I’m struggling with not improving or advancing at that pace and to get people engaged, without that urgency and clear goal.”

During the launch, one of her biggest challenges was collaborative overload, particularly around meetings. Much of her job was integrative work and sharing information to keep the project on track, which drove her meeting-heavy calendar. Yet, meetings could get bloated due to a sense that anyone who could be involved should be involved. “I was aware of how much time people are in meetings, so I tried to encourage people to push back ... But, I have found people get offended if they are not included. So, I opened up a lot of my meetings, but let it be a personal choice if it’s a valuable use of your time.” In an overly inclusive culture, too many meetings with too many people are big drivers of overload. Amara worked to be more efficient and good about the mechanics of meetings: set the objective and agenda, good meeting notes and clarity around who is needed for which topics.

Another driver of overload is email—“my personal black hole.” The all-day flurry of emails is distracting and disruptive. Time is lost orienting and reorienting to work after interruptions. To keep email in check, Amara looks at emails just three times a day—on her morning commute, mid-day and at night. While evening work is convenient for her, she does wonder if she’s contributing to the problem: “If I’m sending an email at 10 at night, am I just increasing the churn of work that needs to be done?” Her teams also follow specific formats for email, which helps filter the work: clear subject lines; due dates; tagged *action, question or information*. People put her name in the subject line if they need something directly versus just keeping her in the loop.

The intensity and connectivity of work makes buffering from it very important for thriving. For Amara, this is largely about being clear about structures and rhythms that allow her to work best.

“For me flexibility is key.” She works from home two or three days a week. She’ll work through the morning, take a mid-afternoon break, then get back online later in the day to connect with colleagues in Asia or do planning. “I need that to be most effective at my job ... With a long commute and global colleagues, my performance isn’t as good if I’m in the office all week long. I get less sleep, I don’t work out, I don’t give as much focused attention.”

Tying flexibility to performance—whether it helps manage work style or meet family needs—makes sense to Amara, who agreed to take a promotion several years ago only if she could work from home two days a week. “People said, *How did you get that?* I told them, *I asked. Have you ever asked?*” Often, people don’t take control in ways that would benefit them personally and may even help performance. “We work in corporate America; the pace is the way it is. But, they don’t care that I gave up three years of my life for them. You need to have balance and ways to recharge your batteries. We have to be honest that you need a life outside of work.”

Network Insights

- **Structure interactions that yield a sense of purpose in your work.** Being clear on what aspects of collaborations generate purpose (accomplishment, helping, creativity, etc.) and building these interactions into weekly calendars allows you to thrive in contexts that you might not naturally find engaging.
- **Buffer from work via rules and relationships that help you keep work from taking over.** Have a couple of hard rules that keep work from taking over. Examples include: Don’t check phone until kids are in bed, do not keep it with you when at home. Be where you are. Leave work at a pre-determined time at least once a week.
- **Anchor in relationships outside of work to create balance.** Have at least one and ideally two groups that you invest time in that are focused on things separate from work. These interactions help broaden perspective on what is important and teach you that there are a lot of ways to live your life.

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.