



GENERATE
WELL-
BEING

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced manager knows what she needs to be valued at work—and to earn that value in a way that does not compromise her personal well-being. She pursues projects that are energizing and develops teams that thrive together. She keeps perspective by investing deeply in people and networks outside of work.



FEMALE

Level: MANAGER OF
MANAGERS

Industry: PROFESSIONAL
SERVICES

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.



Thriving at Work as a Product of Networks Inside & Outside the Organization

Ariana's career has spanned a range of HR, talent management and organizational development roles, including 25 years

in her current company. Now, she manages a function whose teams and projects support the core work of the business through strategic capacity building. As a seasoned leader, she has learned how to perform at a high level, stay engaged and thrive both personally and professionally. Over time, she learned how she thrives in the work: *Being part of teams where trust and friendship are established. Collaborating with others who have shared values and a common approach. Knowing what kind of work suits her and having the ability to contribute in a meaningful way.* She also looks outside of work for her sense of purpose and identity: *Family, friends and a consistent commitment to volunteering in her community.* Together, the combination of work and non-work relationships and experiences give her validation and satisfaction that no single element could provide.

When Ariana's teams and projects have been most energizing—and successful—an element of friendship emerges alongside the knowledge that their efforts are important. "You don't have to be friends in the sense that you want to go out on Friday night with each other, but that they are trusted people and you feel they respect you and care about your well-being. You feel valued, that you have a unique role and your contribution is important." She also notes how the interactions within groups and the progress of the work is energizing when people have the same goals—around the purpose of the work, but also in terms of *how* they work together. For example, expectations around response times or approvals can undermine that process of building trust and friendships. "If you expect people to get back to you within 24 hours and that isn't how they work, collaboration can go poorly. People need to have matched expectations of the ebb and flow of their work ... In one team, everybody got excited about being efficient and improving our processes. It was like a game. We all got a kick out of making things better and faster; no one was offended."

Ariana also says that knowing what kind of work makes you happy or engaged is important, and she seeks it for herself and for other people. "People don't thrive if they aren't doing things they enjoy ... I don't personally thrive in groups that don't care about the detail. I find it unsatisfying. I also don't want to be on teams that are only focused on execution. I like being on teams that come up with ideas, too." Ariana recalls working with a team that was struggling and she realized there was a direct link between the parts of the project that were not going well and the lack of interest and ownership the team members had.

“We talked though their skills and interests and people said, *Yeah, I hate that part. It’s not my thing.* Those were the areas where they were doing badly.” This insight led to changing roles and the addition of new team members.

Ariana notes that thriving later in her career is different than it was in earlier days. “I am always trying to seek out things that will add the most value and have the most impact. And then I ask, *What relationships do I have that will help me engage in that and do that?* ... I also know there are some things I’m not interested in anymore because I’ve done a lot of it. It is personally unsatisfying and also unpopular with other people to say, *Here’s how we did it then. You should do it like that now.* I think, as senior staff, I need to allow people to do the discovery themselves.”

Ariana’s ability to pull back is tied to a value of helping others and doing what is best for the company. Also, her sense of identity and self-worth is not determined by her work life. “I find that when people have other pursuits—important things outside of work—they are better employees ... I think you have to have a self-concept that is validated from multiple perspectives: your own personal one—*Do you like yourself? Do you know who you are? What you are willing to do and what you are not willing to do?*—but also from other people in different ways. If you really feel that work is the most important aspect of who you are, it puts too much importance on the work environment or on one organization ... The times I don’t feel fully engaged or fully utilized, I have stayed balanced because I have other things going on—friends, family, church, volunteering. If anything is amiss in one of the areas, the others keep me grounded.”

Volunteering has always played a central role in keeping Ariana grounded. She has consistently been involved on boards and used her professional skills to support community organizations. “I’ve told my kids they always have to do volunteer things. I believe you thrive when other people need you and appreciate you. It can’t only be family; it can’t only be the workplace. If you have a more dimensions, you’ll see yourself through many people’s eyes and it will make you feel good about yourself.”

“Volunteerism is really wonderful because it’s not reciprocal. A job is reciprocal. Every payday you and your company are even. You don’t work for free. When you volunteer, the people for whom you are providing a service, they don’t owe you anything. They are just accepting you and what you do at face value ... You find out things about yourself, and you’re relaxed because it’s a lower-risk thing than work. You get a better attitude because you see a broader perspective. It just makes you feel good, and it keeps you healthy and grounded because no single role is so critical anymore.”

Rather than being overwhelmed by her multiple roles, Ariana views them with gratitude. She appreciates what she has and what she gains alongside what she gives. “I sometimes step back and ask myself: *Am I using my life in a way that matches who I say I want to be?* I don’t always get it right; I violate it all the time! But, I do think about it and try to be that person.”

Network Insights

- **Engage in interactions that generate purpose for you at work.** Learn what you like about work and what kinds of interactions give you energy and a sense of being valued—then seek more of those opportunities. This requires having a good sense of the networks around you. Who can you enroll in your work to support that purpose? Who can you reach out to and provide value and contribution?
- **Buffer yourself from the demands of work.** Create some boundaries so that work is not all-consuming. These may be tangible practices, such as rules for when you will or won’t work late or putting the phone down when you walk in the door and not picking it up again until the kids are in bed. They may also be practices or commitments that build your self-identity beyond who you are in your current job.
- **Anchor yourself in non-work relationships.** Invest in things that pull you away from work. Make commitments that require you to show up and engage with other people. It may be family, church, a softball league, a poetry group, a dinner club. Volunteering regularly can be a particularly valuable way to put work demands in perspective and strengthen (or find) a sense of purpose outside of 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.