GENERATE WELL-BEING

Personal Networks Help a Technical Project Leader Thrive

CASE CONTEXT

A skilled project manager grows in her job by taking on new challenges and being dedicated to the work. Importantly, she has developed relationships that support her professional success and contribute to her sense of identity and well-being.

FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL 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.

With a PhD in applied mathematics and experience in algorithm development for several top-tier, global firms

Courtney has the option to change jobs readily. Her technical and managerial skill set are in demand; however, she has stayed with her current company and has no plans to leave. She has found a combination of challenging work and solid relationships that help her to thrive. Plus, she has found effective ways to pursue professional success while also (mostly) protecting the time she wants to give to her life outside of work.

Currently, Courtney leads the methodology and analytics of a long-term project; a colleague leads the software side of the work. Together, they work to create a way to analyze patterns and develop a predictive tool for human interaction and engagement. The work is complex and involves multiple work streams and close client interaction. For Courtney, the work has always been interesting, but it is the quality of her work relationships that are fueling her current sense of satisfaction. "Right now, I feel like I'm in a period where I'm thriving and things are going well—ironically, even though neither my boss nor I are convinced that one of our projects is going to be successful! … The collaboration that I have with this group is really good and my co-leader and I have an amazing working relationship."

Courtney and her co-leader bring different perspectives to every problem: "There are so many times when I say, *Wow, I wouldn't have come up with that or thought about it that way*." But, they agree on ways to manage the client and on what's important in *how* they work: "We think the same way and a have lot of the same opinions about the things we think matter." The two easily talk about non-work things—their children are close in age—and commiserate over the ups-and-downs of work. "It makes me feel like I have a friend at work … We don't see each other away from work, but I definitely call him a good friend." Humor, too, is part of the friendship and it helps Courtney feel like herself at work. "We joke around all the time; we laugh a lot … Laughing together helps you share other things. Being able to laugh even though you are frustrated helps me like my job more. I can step out of the role of the job and just be who I am."

Courtney also has a good relationship with her manager, who has played a mentoring role. "From day one, I've felt comfortable talking to him. He has helped me with my confidence, letting me know, *Hey, this outcome is because of you and you need to believe that*." Courtney's skip-level manager, too, is supportive. "It's encouraging when he acknowledges that I am doing a good job. Now, he's bringing me into more things, so I know he's starting to have confidence in me."

Courtney is also on-site with the client several days a week, which has allowed her to develop trusted relationships there as well. "Being there makes a huge difference in them having trust in me. They see how I react to things. People drop in and ask questions and chat—it's no longer a formal client relationship." The client leader has learned to work with Courtney as an equal. "We've gotten to the point where she's not always involved. I go to their internal meetings and represent her. In the technical aspects of the work, I take the lead." That level of respect increased her sense of mastery of the work, along with her satisfaction. "Having people around me to develop my confidence and having a client who is not afraid to say, *We love you, don't go anywhere* … Those things make me happy to be where I am."

Through the cycles of work, including project setbacks and personal challenges, Courtney has been grounded by an overall sense that she is in a role where she can thrive for the long term. In fact, experiencing challenges has given her depth as a manager and increased her sense of purpose in the work. "For example, when I first became a manager, I struggled with a couple difficult personalities on one team. Having to work through that actually helps me thrive, too—it's the feeling that I am able to figure things out, that I am successful in doing my job." Of course, she still goes through periods where she is overwhelmed, burned out or bored. She relies heavily on her boss—unless he is going through a similar phase. "If he's not doing great, it impacts how I think about my job … That's where my co-leader has been a huge lifesaver for me."

In difficult times, Courtney does disengage more. She finds that some kind of a "recovery period" helps her regain her footing: taking a few days off, working from home or setting a clear boundary to not work on weekends. She also has routines that give her needed time and mental space week-to-week. She has a hard-and-fast rule that everybody knows and everybody respects: from the minute she gets home to the minute her son goes to sleep, she does not work. She does not check email; she will not respond to anyone. She also has a strict leave time three days a week, no exceptions, so she can be prompt to pick up her son from daycare. She put these rules in place after a spell where she was feeling burned out and taken advantage of. "My days kept stretching out

and I felt like it was a fight to be at home and take care of my family … My manager told me to be firm on the daycare thing, even if it was possible to be flexible some days … Being a stickler about those things becomes so important to avoid being overwhelmed." Courtney had worried that there would be negative consequences of her new rules. She was surprised. "*I set down the rules and people respect them! The world didn't fall apart … Why didn't I do this before?* It's made a huge difference in my life and being happy and being at home."

Courtney also nurtures close friendships, which help her to not become overly identified by the job. She has dinner with one friend every other week and keeps up with a large group of friends from graduate school. "We are all at same stages with our career and with our families … It's so nice to talk candidly about our lives and how we feel."

Network Insights

- **Find at least one trusted work friend.** This person can anchor you and provide support. Good work friends tend to be people who share similar values in work. These relationships often emerge through humor and connecting off task, behaviors that are shown to be precursors to trust.
- **Focus early efforts on building mastery.** As others see and respect what you know and do in your area or niche, your network interactions build around that mastery and contribute to a sense of purpose.
- **Don't shy away from challenging situations if you have a supportive context.** Often the growth and sense of accomplishment that come from taking on a challenge or stretch will fuel a sense of purpose and thriving.
- **Create rules that help to buffer you from work demands.** Prevent work from taking an unhealthy and unsustainable level of time and attention. Figure out what you need to protect and create systems to help you do it. People will respect your rules more readily than you might expect.
- **Commit to groups outside of work.** People who are at similar stations in life or who share similar values can be particularly good anchoring points to increase balance, confidence and a sense of thriving 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.