



GENERATE
WELL-
BEING

Developing Networks that Foster Confidence, Growth & Sense of Well-being

CASE CONTEXT

An early-career professional learns to build networks that give her confidence, energy and experience. She has found a mindset and network that keeps her appreciative of her work and growing in her job. Yet, she sets clear boundaries at work because she is comfortable in her identity and options apart from her current role (due largely to her external networks).



FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR

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.



Elaine is a specialist, working on a long-term client project for a global consulting firm. She joined the firm shortly

after earning her Ph.D. Over two years, she has been navigating the work—and the networks—in ways that have been effective and have given her a sense of confidence and well-being. She has established herself within her core work team, been asked to contribute to additional short-term projects and gained personal clarity about what it means to thrive and feel balanced. She views networks and relationships as something she has paid attention to from day one—a focus that is paying off.

Within her client team, Elaine works with a small group of people who have similar expertise and background—but with significantly more experience in consulting and applying her specialty to a specific client need. Early on, she sought to meet people who could help her learn. “I went into the job with the expectation there would be challenges and things I don’t know. I didn’t think I had skills to excel 100 percent. I took advantage of being new and made sure I found resources and got connected to people who could fill in those blanks for me ... People are responsive to answering questions, more than you might think.” Elaine had strong mentorship in the role from her teammates and her manager. She felt fortunate that her contacts within the client organization were also very approachable. She appreciated getting input and feedback regularly, not just on the content of the work, but also on her dependability and work style. Within that first year, Elaine found she genuinely liked her co-workers and began to contribute to the team as a peer.

The emotional tone within her team may be unusual, she suspects, but it has been a large part of feeling committed and engaged in the work. “Everyone is pretty aware of one another’s emotional needs ... In our calls we check in: *How is your workload? What is your stress level? Do you feel you have too much to do?* Things like that help you feel equipped to do the things you are being asked to do.” When things go wrong or she gets no feedback or is asked to change something she has done, Elaine does not take it personally. “These things are not a personal commentary, not a reflection of my worth or who I am. It’s just about the work or the environment ... I am careful not to go down a path of negativity in my thinking or in conversations with my co-workers.”

Elaine has also established good contacts within the firm, but outside her group and location, by attending networking or social events when she is visiting company headquarters or larger offices.

Connecting with a variety of people has resulted in Elaine being called on as a resource or to steer people to other resources that could be useful. “Having that personal contact or name recognition has been the reason I have been tapped for projects outside my immediate team.”

Those “extra” projects have given Elaine greater confidence and have been energizing in a way that is different from her core work. “I always hope that what I am spending my time on is something that has impact and will help other people in some way ... One of these side projects in particular was exciting because it was a chance to be innovative and creative using my expertise to solve an important problem. It was also a chance to work with people I wouldn’t work with normally ... I liked the diversity of interaction so will look for opportunities to do more things like that.”

Elaine’s sense of purpose is also tied to learning. Her interactions with people who are also excited by learning and applying new knowledge are among the most energizing. Similarly, some of her networks outside of the job are tied to learning. She’s found surprisingly rich connections with fellow students taking an online class, and she takes advantage of various learning opportunities through a community group and her church.

Elaine is clear that she always wants to make time for people and activities outside of work. She has a tight network of friends and family, and she is very involved in her faith community. “I do have a variety of other groups that are equally important to me as work. *I don’t think that my work and my job is the most important thing I am a part of ... I have seen too many people place a high value on being busy and then they are really unhappy.* That has made me appreciate the balance that I have.”

That appreciation of the benefits of her current job—good co-workers, interesting projects, flexibility to work remotely and an expanding set of connections and experiences—keeps her positive. She has considered work that pays more or would be a step up with another company, but she reminds herself of the positives and why she chose to do what she is doing. “I stay aware what else is going on in the company, or projects that could be interesting. I like that feeling of having options.”

“Whether talking to my manager or finding a new project to be staffed on or looking outside the company, I know that if something were no longer working for me that I have the ability to change it ... I just don’t feel like I am stuck in a position. That is something that my coworkers have talked about ... They feel like they don’t have a lot of options, but I don’t think there is any reason to not enjoy what you are doing for eight or ten hours every day. I think that perspective has helped me and is actually one of my strengths.”

Network Insights

Different types of networks contribute to a sense of well-being in different ways:

- **External networks build career confidence and security.** Investing in broad networks provides a sense of balance and confidence to chart your own path. Broad networks help you see how your skill and experience can be adapted to other organizations and people. They ensure your identity is not wrapped up in one network. This gives you the confidence to say *no* and provides some immunity to workplace politics. Look to professional groups, technical forums and community organizations for opportunities to connect to new people and nurture relationships with colleagues in your field or in related fields.
- **Personal networks bring balance and perspective.** Having strong and meaningful connections outside of work let you be more than your job. Friends and family can provide respite, support and perspective on work. Joining in activities with others allows you to show and develop other aspects of yourself and have a mental break from whatever is going on at work. Be sure to schedule your time with others—dinner with a friend every other week, a book club, a volunteer activity. This helps you feel committed and less likely to cancel when work is busy—work is always busy.
- **Internal networks pull you into opportunities.** Engaging with people at work who are not in your group or area will help you apply or morph your expertise in new ways and with new people. When you connect with people by active listening, asking about their work and relating to them in some way, you create natural “pull.” You are more likely to be sought out and drawn in, either to contribute directly or to connect people to other resources that might be useful.

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.