



GENERATE
WELL-
BEING

Key People Fuel Project Leader's Clarity, Energy & Results

CASE CONTEXT

A career change leads a creative project manager to ask questions of identity and purpose. By connecting with others in ways that create a sense of purpose for her in her work, she begins to thrive at on the job and as a person.



FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: HEALTHCARE

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.



After two decades working in a high-pressure, always-on technology job, Georgette was burned out. She made a

major career change. With time—and by seeking and cultivating key relationships—she is now thriving personally and professionally.

Thriving at work when it isn't a "fit"

When Georgette took an individual contributor job at a healthcare company, she floundered at first. She was adjusting to a different kind of role and had no network to help her navigate. But, she was especially challenged by the gap between who she was and the culture of the group.

"I was having a hard time finding creative partners in this setting. The group is really good at the academic, the execution ... but I get excited and I think I add a lot of value when I creatively solve problems, or find new solutions to old problems, or see challenges differently. I think that's one of my big strengths. Being in an execution role, I was underutilized. And it wasn't that exciting to come to work every day."

A chance connection with a like-minded person in another department opened the door to a new project, and, importantly, set off a shift in Georgette's approach to work. "That guy is now my innovation buddy ... He piqued my curiosity and interest in doing weird stuff. So, I call him when I want to try things. It really expanded my network within the company and generated a few more partners who spark creativity for me."

Similarly, she could feed that curiosity—and become more valuable to the company—by learning from others. When the structure of her department changed, Georgette volunteered to work with a peer who would challenge her. "She has a different mindset from me. She doesn't accept no for answer. She's gonna make things happen. She inspires me a lot because I am too empathetic and nice—if someone says *No*, I say, *OK*. I knew by engaging with her my work would get better. I would learn."

She began to find her place and her motivation. Her creativity and skill sets complemented her peers, and she found she could fill a void and help with their projects. "I would jump in and help peers ... I picked areas to work on largely because of relationships, because they are people I think are great. I like their energy and thought process."

By reaching out to help, Georgette gained energy and found satisfaction in unexpected ways. For example, she got involved with an internal career coaching practice. No longer a people manager, by choice, she “was surprised how gratifying I found it to have people tell me you changed my life, or career, or helped me see possibilities. I had pushed down how much deep satisfaction I got in the past out of helping my employees grow in their careers.”

In another case, she set up weekly calls with a new coworker, remembering how isolated she was as a newcomer. “Now almost daily we have a chat. It’s made me more excited to be at work. She’s given me so many ideas. We start talking and riff off of each other. We come up with things I wouldn’t have done by myself. I’ve gotten so much from that relationship in such a short period of time. She has really jump-started my performance. I feel like I’m unstoppable!”

“The more people I met who sparked innovation and curiosity in me, the more I started to have impact. And it’s been noticed.”

Finding identity through ties outside of work

Georgette’s journey of success, identity and well-being at work was hard won—and was deeply influenced by her connections and experiences outside of work. After 18 years at a software company, Georgette had something of an existential crisis when she left. “I didn’t know who I was anymore. It was the strangest thing ... I used to be a very strong Type A personality. I had some control issues and a hero complex. I worked all the time. I always felt I had to do more, I had to go further, I had to save the day.”

“Yoga—and the embarrassment of not being very good at it, but being OK with that—changed my life.”

Going to a yoga class almost daily introduced Georgette to a group of women who were supportive, not competitive. “It was so freeing to be in an environment where it was not only OK to be imperfect, but where we recognized the beauty in the failure ... Thanks to yoga, I am more balanced now. I’m pretty good at saying, *I can’t* or *I won’t*. I’m OK with my own imperfections and limits.”

Network Insights

- **Identify people inside and outside of work who energize you.** Often people with similar values (i.e., what is important) and approaches (i.e., creativity) and similar or complementary expertise will feed a sense of purpose.
- **Create a constellation of relationships that provide purpose and energy.** Identify spheres that matter to you (e.g., service, personal growth, physical activity, creativity, etc.) and seek out activities that will slingshot you into new networks.
- **Build in time for energizing people and activities at points that align with how you work.** When in the week or during the day are you most creative? Or need a boost of energy?
- **Don’t give up on new activities too quickly.** If you are experimenting with new activities or patterns, give it time. And build connections early—they keep you engaged and help you learn to care about new things.

3 Ways to Grow When You Are Trying Something New

Georgette committed to attending three yoga classes. The first class she silently made fun of the teacher. The second class she tried to be open.

The third class was transformative. “There was something profoundly cathartic about going there ... for me to be around other people, to recognize that I don’t have to be perfect, to laugh together.”

Georgette’s experience of trying yoga, resisting it and then being deeply changed by it teaches several lessons:

1. Commit to try at least three times. Be present and meet at least one new person each time.
2. Maintain openness to experience and to people. Accept—even embrace—the discomfort of newness. Learn to be OK as an outsider.
3. Don’t try to be an expert. Take risks and learn to fail. Stepping out of a role and way of acting that you or others have imposed on you can be transformative.

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.