



GENERATE
WELL-
BEING

A Scientific Leader Builds Purpose & Thrives through Networks at Work & Home

CASE CONTEXT

A driven scientist and developing leader intentionally builds networks that bring satisfaction and success. She understands what makes her effective—co-creating with people with similar values on work that has impact.



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.



Helene’s work as a scientist has taken several turns since completing her Ph.D. Thinking she would stay in academic

research, she changed courses and joined a global pharmaceutical firm. She’s held several technical roles, applying her skills in various research units until becoming a team leader in her current group. She manages a small team using a new approach to analyze cells to study disease and inform new therapeutics. The work is creative; she is building the process and developing systems that she sees as moving the science forward. “We look at digital images all day—I’m a very visual learner and I fell in love with this work ... It’s like art meets science.”

For Helene and many others, *being creative in work is a significant source of thriving and being fully engaged*. The nature of the work and the process of co-creation can be energizing. Helene’s favorite projects have involved discovery teams that work on exploratory or emerging projects. “There is excitement of starting from scratch, being first to work on something or make a discovery. And, for the team it allows opportunity for creativity that doesn’t exist in teams where the work is repetitive ... A lot of pharma is set up to be streamlined and the teams are like human robots, designed to follow protocol, so the analysis is very rigorous ... It helps people in science if they feel some ownership and being a part of creating something.”

Another factor that contributes to a sense of purpose for many people is *contributing to the broader good or bigger goals*. Part of this for Helene is the competitive aspect of the work, to move the research and products forward. “Keeping the pipeline full, having more drugs in the early stages of discovery, is the company’s lifeblood.” Another aspect of purpose: getting successful treatments to patients. “For many scientists, that idea that we might someday have impact on human lives is far away ... We always try to bring the patient close to us, but contributing to that purpose comes down to our responsibility to do good science and being part of teams that are having impact.” Helene’s satisfaction comes in terms of the patient impact and her contribution to the company’s overall mission and sustainability.

Interactions with others who care about the same things in the work also help people thrive. For Helene, the importance of impact was clear to her early in her career. “I felt it inherently that I wanted to have an impact ... I thought I’d go to medical school, then I got into a lab, then I fell into pain research—and that stuck with me as a place where I could have impact.” Some of that drive for Helene was personal, having given up a professional dance career due to severe pain. “Pain research was something that touched me ... So, being driven for that impact is who I am.”

Helene needs to work with others who share that drive for impact to be fully engaged in her work. Not long ago, she had an amazing opportunity to take a job rotation in an academic lab for a year. “My ability to see the translation of the work was diminished in academia ... I felt like I was doing more science for science and just spinning the wheels ... Maybe in industry you have less flexibility, but it came down to being sure I had impact somehow.”

Helene also cares deeply about how people work together: with self-awareness and authenticity and the ability to connect as people, not just on the science. “There are a lot of people who are driven. The ones that are more successful are the ones that are self-aware and recognize the importance of interactions with the team ... There is something to be said for the humanizing of people and knowing who plays well in the sandbox.”

Helene works to bring those humanizing elements to her team interactions. She is attentive to learn what motivates the members of her team, so they are energized and interested in giving discretionary effort, too. “I get energized by the building of things and the challenge of starting from nothing. My team is getting this, too. They are seeing now that the technology is bigger than us. What we are doing can be used across the company if we do this right.”

As she reflects on her life stages—changing careers, getting her Ph.D, leaving academia, taking on a leadership role for a new group—Helene notes her ability to reinvent herself. “I’m not afraid of change ... I throw myself in to the next thing.” Non-work relationships also add to her confidence to try new things and make changes. “The main one is my husband ... There is something about our relationship that keeps me grounded, that there are other things in life besides working crazy hours ... He keeps me open to other things and ideas.” They don’t have children—“which does allow for flexibility of what we choose to do as a team together. We support each other in what we do now and in our big dreams, too.” Helene also has a good support system of friendships she’s made and kept through her various reinventions. *Healthy relationships outside of work—and people who support your approach to work—bolster confidence in work, preventing an over-reliance on the job for identity.*

The ability to buffer from work—to find strategies to manage collaborative demands or pressure—is equally important to thriving at work. Self-awareness is key to doing this well, rather than being overrun by the structures and people around you.

“One of the themes of my life is that whatever I am going to do, I work really hard at it and dive into it. My tendency is to always be thinking about work.”

“I try to control it by where I physically work. I work at the company until I’m done. I rarely open my computer once I’m home.” Helene also intentionally added 45 minutes to her commute time by taking the train rather than driving. “It forces me to leave the office on time ... It lengthens my day but takes away the stress of driving in traffic and I can do what I want with that time—I can do work, read, talk with friends. I need that regimented schedule.”

Going forward Helene is looking to apply her drive in a more balanced way by getting more involved in community arts or dance organizations: “I’d like to find a better balance between creative artist and driven scientist, not one or the other.”

Network Insights

- **Structure time for interactions that enable co-creation and creativity.** For many people, a sense of purpose and impact comes from creative work. Build this time into your calendar by how you build your network, manage your work or run your meetings.
- **Ensure clarity of how efforts contribute to a broader goal.** Purpose gets built in collaborations where people know their work matters and has impact. Help people see how what they are doing aligns with the broader goals such as helping others, besting the competition or having impact on the field or industry.
- **Spend time with people who value similar processes and outcomes in the work.** Interact with people who care about similar aspects of the work. When you are in alignment with what you find meaningful and authentic, you bring yourself more fully to your work and are better able to perform and thrive over time.

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.