Connected Commons

GENERATE WELL-BEING

Seasoned Expert Thrives, Drawing on Collaborative Relationships Inside & Outside His Team

CASE CONTEXT

A high-end contributor balances independent work with network interactions in ways that allow him to thrive. Over time, he has learned how to engage peers and business leaders in ways that fuel his learning, foster trust and maintain his engagement and enthusiasm.

MALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: CONSUMER PRODUCTS

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.

INNOVATE   EXECUTE   SCALE   THRIVE   ADAPT

Jerome is a computer systems engineer by education and a high-end marketing analytics expert by experience. He is part of a global team for a consumer-products company. Much of his work is independent problem-solving, but he loves the challenges of the work, finds colleagues and teammates to be interesting and talented, and feels supported by his leadership. "I have worked in a few different companies, from start-up to massive corporation … Now, I am working at my spiritual home. I've never had so much fun!"

Jerome's work involves identifying hidden patterns in massive amounts of complex data. Evolving technology and seemingly endless questions and challenges meet a core need for Jerome: continual learning. "The learning thing is number one for me … I enjoy big problems and being left to chew on them." His manager, skip-level manager and teammates all know this is Jerome's strength and, for the most part, encourage and leverage it. His boss creates the context for Jerome to do the work that he values by taking a coaching style: asking questions, showing trust, giving autonomy in how work is accomplished. Jerome feels ownership of work and enjoys a reputation based on his level of expertise and mastery. His boss also helps Jerome package his expertise and navigate the organization. "I have leeway to do stuff, but I'm also learning the bigger things as well: strategic thinking, positioning, who to connect to and how to sell my ideas."

Jerome's peer network adds to his sense of thriving at work in two ways: it helps him to solve technical challenges and to learn, co-create and explore ideas. "If I get stuck with the data or building something, I have six or seven people I can talk to … If the problem is more cerebral, more strategic, there are other people I reach out to … There are so many interesting, smart people, if I talk to them, I will get something out of it."

Jerome particularly enjoys interacting with the younger generation, who bring different education, experiences and perspectives to the work. "I was an arrogant little toad in my 20s—as I got older, I learned to be someone who is more approachable and open … I realized, I'm very good at the things I understand, but things are always evolving … We've gotten new people on the team, fresh out of college, and their ideas are exciting. *They have a different way of looking at things*." Jerome often taps this group for varied technical expertise, turning to them to learn new skills and ways to approach a problem. "I can talk to them about the way that they tackled something and *I get a completely different answer than what I would have done* … Their whole framework is different … I get such a kick out of that! … Everyone's got something to offer."

Jerome has also learned to gain different perspectives from experts or influencers in other pockets of the business—especially in the early stages of framing a problem. He recalls a time when he found a pattern in customer behavior, presented it to a product manager and it wasn't well received. "The way I thought about it was completely different than the way he did … If I had spent time at the start, talked to him or to others in his group, I could have done it another way." Systems in companies often promote connectivity of people that know similar things (e.g., communities of practice), but tapping into adjacent expertise is more challenging. Jerome has found that the natural cross-boundary interactions that would happen face-to-face earlier in his career (cafeteria, smoker's corner) don't happen readily, so he purposefully asks for referrals—*Who else might know something? Who else may care?*

Often, Jerome will take an iterative approach to a problem, which he says leads to better outcomes and also builds trust. "I will start with something small, prove that I can provide a solution. *Here's our first layer of thinking, let's talk about this, let's see what it prompts in you*. Then, I go do some more … We build up trust in layers." Of course, not all interactions are positive. Jerome handles these types of roadblocks by accepting that they happen and not taking it personally. He defuses or deflects negative energy by not getting defensive and taking time to draw others toward his way of thinking. Often, he'll do the work both in the way that is requested and in the way he thinks is better. "I will say, *Here's what you wanted, no problem. Let's talk about it. I also think this is another way to go* … Usually, they say, *Oh, that's great!* And, we can start to build off the alternatives and explore … I find it easier to get trust in my quality of the thinking than if I am confrontational … that gets me nowhere."

To be effective, Jerome also needs plenty of focused time. He blocks time for his priority work, not checking emails or taking calls during four- or six-hour periods. Only messages from his boss give him an alert. He even moved out of the open-space office to avoid distractions as people walked past or stopped to chat. "As soon as I am interrupted, I lose the frames of reference I am holding in my head. I have to pick them up again … It will easily be 20 minutes before I'm fully back where I was."

The flexibility to work in patterns and on projects that suit him keep Jerome happy in his role. "I feel spiritually enriched and am thriving in what I do." He doesn't worry about looking for the next job or a better financial offer. "They pay me enough. They have taken money away as a problem." He appreciates his situation and enjoys it. "I have problems to work on that I wouldn't get in other places. The people I work with, I respect and I enjoy talking to them. I learn stuff. I am treated like an adult—they don't care where I do my work as long as I get results." He is able to work from home, take children to school and manage family commitments. He and his wife, who has a similar job, flex their schedule and work rhythms as needed. "We both understand it's part of what works for us."

For Jerome, family is a powerful part of his sense of thriving in the job. His wife is a sounding board for work issues, as well as the person who helps him create a full life apart from work. His children, too, pull him into their worlds in a way that Jerome values deeply. "The kids bring me down to earth quickly—work has to stop for a bit … I only have them home for a short time, so I want to make the most of it."

Network Insights

- **Know what types of interactions help you bring your best to work.** For Jerome, relationships that create purpose include a boss who is supportive, peers who are energizing and a broad network of colleagues to brainstorm with.

- **Leverage adjacent expertise early in problem-solving.** Initial framing of a project or problem is often constrained by what we know and how we look at a problem. Bringing in adjacent expertise leads to better solutions and helps build trust.

- **Take the high road in negative situations.** Jerome finds ways to give people what they want *and* contribute his expertise—pulling people to his solutions rather than pushing with logic or mandate.

- **See and appreciate the value of non-work relationships and activities.** Family support and interests beyond the job provide a healthy balance to the pressures 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.