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BEING

# Networks Help Manage through a Life Transition to a Sense of Purpose

## CASE CONTEXT

A financial manager's career setback turns into a gift when she gains equilibrium, sense of purpose and a better job. A network of friends and family spurs reflection, self-discovery and assertion of choice after a decade of "survival mode."



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.



Kelly knows hardship and hard work. She also knows joy. But for a decade, she sacrificed the joy to build security for

herself and her son. Later, she could see why she stayed in a role and in an industry that was a terrible fit; at the time it was just what had to be done.

As a young, single mom, Kelly gave up her plans to be a psychologist and held on to her job at a bank. She moved from an administrative role to a financial services role, taking every opportunity. She gravitated to investments and was a licensed investment broker within several years. Her heart was never in it—but it was how she took care of her family, even as her circumstances changed. "It was a matter of survival. I literally knew what it was like to go hungry, and I never wanted to go back there. I found myself working nonstop ... I was miserable. My body showed signs of shutting down from the stress ... but I stayed for the paycheck."

It turned out that the security of a steady job was an illusion. A few years ago, she was laid off in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. "The day I was let go, I thought I was going to throw up in the parking lot. And by the time I got home, I was laughing and joking. When my husband got home—prepared for the worst—he's like, *What is happening? There is a peace that has come over you.* At that moment I said, *I will not go back to finance. It's not who I am.*"

Kelly spent 11 months away from work and with her family. "I reflected on what really drove me in investments. It's not what I went to school for, so why did I stay there? It was a cutthroat, toxic situation. When you're in that, you are in an *I-want-to-keep-my-paycheck* mentality. There was no sense of purpose; it was just a need ... I was stuck in survival mode, and I didn't see it until I was removed from it."

Looking back, Kelly also saw the relationships she established as a reason she stayed. "I developed close relationships with people I worked with for such a long time. I didn't want to let go of that either—even if part of me knew I should leave."

"After the layoff, I fully realized the toll it took on me and my family. But that was a hard time, too." Kelly questioned her purpose and value. She knew she didn't want to go back to who she was and what she did before, but she was filled with uncertainty.

A moment with an acquaintance was a pivot point for her. “We weren’t close, but she saw me and asked if I wanted to go for a walk. We did. That conversation really invited me to explore who I was as a person and who I wanted to become. I started reevaluating what I really wanted out of life. To *choose* what I wanted.”

That friendship grew in a way that allowed Kelly to be herself and ask questions she had not considered. It nudged her toward meditation—to be OK to spend time alone thinking and feeling. She began to reach out to other people, too. She was curious about who was happy or had a sense of purpose in their work. “I found that people who were the happiest had chosen their path. People who were doing something they didn’t go to school for, or fell into, like me—they felt stuck and miserable ... And I remembered my aunt saying, *When your job becomes just a paycheck then you need to find something you are passionate about and live into it* ... It wasn’t until after I lost my job that it made sense to me.”

Kelly thought about the satisfaction and joy she got from taking care of people and from being needed and knowing she can help. She approached her relationships with her husband, son and step-daughter in new ways. She recalled the volunteer work she had done over the years and her long-ago desire to help others learn and grow—and that shaped her next career move.

“These things are at my core and led me to different work in a very different company. I do believe, in this role, I am having an impact on others ... In my team, I try to create a sense of purpose in the work that we do. And, over time, I believe, our work will make a difference in people’s lives, personally and professionally ... I have a better work-life balance. I have a good leader now—a manager who encourages me and supports me. It’s not all perfect, and there are times of overload at work, but if my family needs something I will be there, too.”

Kelly is now more clear and confident in who she is and what she will and won’t do. She sets boundaries to protect what is important. She’s instituted no-work weekends and says *no* to social events or commitments that are draining or distracting. She is choosing, rather than being trapped.

## Network Insights

- **Inertia and relationships can enable you to persist in a setting even when you know it is not healthy.** Pay attention to being “stuck” and explore what could change.
- **In transition (whether forced or voluntary), new connections and practices will help you re-center and make new choices.** Be open to new relationships and find activities (e.g., meditation, exercise groups, volunteer work) to gain a new take on what matters to you.
- **Invest in a broader set of relationships to explore aspects of work that others enjoy.** Think broadly not just about the content of the work but about the nature of the interactions and sense of purpose you receive from the work.
- **Keep true to what enables you to be centered.** Unapologetically put up boundaries that keep you from getting pulled into too many things that do not give you needed space.

## Managing Network Boundaries for Well-Being

Collaborative overload at work plus increasing commitments on the personal front can lead to problems with health, relationships and effectiveness—even when you are involved in things you value. Kelly’s sense of purpose came from giving and helping with family and in school and volunteer activities. She didn’t want to turn people down. This created a trap of over-committing, increasing stress and resentment.

To manage network boundaries when she started her new job, Kelly did two things:

1. **Set clear boundaries.** Decide what are acceptable times and ways for interaction with others. Be clear about this for yourself and so that others will respect your boundaries. For Kelly, this meant not working on weekends and not responding to work email after 6 pm.
2. **Clarify needs and priorities.** Learn what you need for your own well-being and be unapologetic about allocating time in those directions. Kelly needed downtime on Saturdays in order to feel balanced and energetic for the rest of the week. She learned how to say *no* to extra requests and events—guilt-free.

## 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](http://www.connectedcommons.com) or email Rob at [rlcrossjr@gmail.com](mailto:rlcrossjr@gmail.com).