



GENERATE
WELL-
BEING

Building Energizing Networks Promotes Purpose & Thriving in Early Career

CASE CONTEXT

An early-career professional has learned a lot about the interactions that drive her and those that drain her. She reaches out to people in her network and to activities that generate energy and purpose and help her thrive.



FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR

Industry:
MANUFACTURING

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.



Kelsey is a young engineer working on complicated systems in a global manufacturing company. In her role for just a few years, she is learning the importance of networks and daily interactions to keep her thriving and satisfied at work. Soon after she was hired, she began to reach out to people within her function and more broadly in the company. “I wanted to get involved, find my spot, figure out what I can do and make an impact ... I took the view, *I am the new person, I will ask questions*. I got connected to different people, learned about other parts of the company and got involved in things outside my day job.”

Very quickly, Kelsey had experiences and interactions that were positive, energizing and allowed her to find purpose and have impact. She also faced the opposite: negativity and being shut down. Leaders who are good at establishing the “why” in the work have helped Kelsey gain a sense of purpose and engagement in her work. “I think a good leader steers the ship by letting their people steer it. A good leader doesn’t tell people all the answers but asks good questions ... As soon as you put a bug in someone’s head, they enjoy owning it and going through the process of defining the problem and working through the solution.”

For Kelsey, a good leader is also someone who does not stifle enthusiasm and encourages others to offer ideas and work them through. “I think affirmation is so important in the work place ... Leaders should be slower to say *no*.” Too often, she sees leaders or team members quick to point out all the negatives or say *No* or *But that won’t work*. She much prefers working for a “Yes/And” leader. “When someone says, *Yes, I love your enthusiasm and go explore the idea*, I feel like they trust me and support me and believe in me. If they just say *No, that’s a bad idea*, I’m not going to come to them with another idea.”

Similarly, Kelsey has figured out what makes work energizing. To her this means people that care about same things, learning and co-creating solutions. “I would so much rather work with the hardest working person and the most passionate person rather than the smartest person ... One manager I work with will say, *What a great question, let’s figure that out together*... I gravitate toward him 90 percent of the time because of the interaction. He’s positive and builds me up by validating my question and by working through things together.”

Kelsey also enjoys interactions with people who are similar enough to her that they share context and can understand each other, but different enough that they offer new information or perspectives.

She'll often ask a more experienced person a specific question, which then evolves into a more in-depth discussion. "We start with one thing. It starts as a lecture. If I am able to ask more questions, we can talk about 10 different things that are related ... I feel more purpose, because I'm learning, and I can then help others and explain to them what I learned ... If I can explain it, that solidifies what I have learned and go and apply it." The ability to apply knowledge to a problem also builds a sense of purpose. Gaining greater mastery and getting results helps Kelsey feel like her work has value. "Purpose comes from success, being able to make a difference and say, *I did that*. Purpose come from ownership."

Kelsey also wants to make a difference in the organization outside of her official role and has become involved in various side projects, college recruiting efforts and employee engagement activities. "I thrive more when I do the other stuff ... I interact with people in different parts of the company and with people who are super into what they are doing and very encouraging." That positivity is in contrast to negative or narrow thinking that she sometimes encounters in the day-to-day. "I don't like when people make things a *me vs. them* issue: *My team didn't do this right ... The company always does things a dumb way ...* They separate themselves, but we *are* the company ... They are bringing themselves down, and also affecting people around them."

Sometimes these interactions have Kelsey questioning whether she should pursue a job elsewhere. "I have never had a bad enough day where I said, *I hate this job. I don't want to be here*. More like, *I wonder if I want to try something else ...* There are so many jobs here, but, part of me is swayed when I hear about how great other companies are, where everyone is happy and love what they do ... Sometimes you hear what friends are doing on social media and think you should be doing something else." But more often, she gets frustrated. "People think the grass is always greener on the other side. They idolize Facebook, Google, whoever is the flashy company ... It's not perfect at those places. People say, *Oh they have free food!* Well, they get free food because they work 100 hours a week and don't have time to eat or go home or go to the grocery store."

Kelsey is aware that social media pressure fuels Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and the need to move on to the next thing. She reminds herself that other benefits, like leaving work at a reasonable hour, have value to her, even if it's not a publicized benefit like free food and Xbox or flex hours and on-site day care. "When I am at work, I am working as hard as I can. But, when I leave, I leave. I go to the gym or go do whatever. That is something I value a ton—but it's not a flashy perk."

Kelsey's non-work interests have also given her a broader perspective that she applies to her work. "I grew up being involved in a lot of things—sports and clubs—and that has shaped how I balance things. Each separate thing is beneficial on its own but it can also bleed into other things. For example, sports take discipline and focus. I learned that and can apply it at work ... But it's important to do things that are going to make you happy and fulfilled. If you come to work and only do what you're told, but don't do other things that you really want to do, you are limiting yourself. Those are things that reenergize you and make you more productive in the work."

Network Insights

- **Identify people and types of interactions that generate purpose.** For Kelsey, this means leaders who are good at establishing *why* and don't jump to *no* first.
- **Work with energizers.** Figure out who cares about the same things (co-creating, asking questions, taking action, being positive) and work with them whenever you can.
- **Build relationships with people who have expertise adjacent to your own.** You will have common ground and gain different knowledge and perspectives.
- **Keep social media in check.** The portrayal of life on Facebook is not the whole story, but it reinforces what you are missing. Gain clarity about what is valuable to you.
- **Be involved in outside interactions and hobbies.** They provide perspective and the chance to bring lessons learned in one domain into another.

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.