Connected Commons

GENERATE WELL-BEING

A Technical Leader Thrives Via Clear Personal Priorities & Broad, Authentic Networks

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced manager stays engaged by being clear on who he is and the type of work that has value for him. He builds his network and manages his time in ways that align with his passion for technology and support of business goals.

MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

Industry: AUTOMOTIVE

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

Marcelo has spent 25 years in the automotive industry, living through the highs and lows of the economy and the competitive environment. He's led engineering and manufacturing operations in the U.S., Europe and China, all with a focus on developing and implementing new technologies. Currently, he manages an R&D group— bridging highly technical work with strategic priorities of the business. Routinely, he collaborates with industry groups, universities and supply chain partners to enable improvements in technology or efficiency. Marcelo is clear on who he is and what he wants—and sets his priorities and focus accordingly. He is not interested in climbing the corporate ladder; rather, he is "*all about having impact through technology*."

When Marcelo is thriving most, he is excited by the work and collaborating with people who share his enthusiasm. Not long ago, he worked with a group outside of his company to move a new technology from the lab to industry. A team was created based on solid relationships with experts and innovators in a research center and among several suppliers. The business purpose was clear and compelling. "We all saw the benefits of seeing the technology in the market. We had a common goal. Everyone had something to gain from the collaboration." The project was incredibly successful and the effort was moved into production.

Trusted relationships and deep interest in the work enabled the group to work together without contracts or red tape. Looking back, Marcelo thinks their ability to collaborate well—and enjoy doing it—was largely because of common values around the work. "The key was to invite the right people to the project … We all liked each other and are all kind of geeks. We all like the technology. We had enthusiasm to learn, a thirst to know more and see the technology move forward." *The group also had shared values around* ***how*** *to work together*. "Everyone was self-motivated and hard working; they knew what needed to be done … You need everyone to pull their own weight in any collaboration." *Knowing what it means to work well together—shared values around both the nature of the work and how work gets done—helps people pursue collaborations that are energizing and shape interactions in ways that are rewarding*.

With this awareness, Marcelo has gotten very clear about which projects and which collaborations are important. In a time when requests, opportunities and projects are endless, Marcelo has learned to say *no* and set hard boundaries around what matters. "That is one thing that has really changed for me."

"My collaborations are very focused. Before, we used to do a lot of stuff … *Oh, this is cool. Sure, I can help*. I don't have time for that anymore. Now, I am always driven back to, *What is the technology need and how are we going to achieve it? How does this fit into what I am trying to accomplish now? What is the purpose or value in the bigger picture? What level of involvement on my part is truly needed?*"

The nature of Marcelo's work demands focus and sustained attention, but he also protects his work time in order to stay engaged and maintain his pace. "I'm kind of an all-or-nothing person. I'm really bad at setting a certain time to stop. If I'm doing something I'm all in. Then everything else is all out. I just focus—*I'm doing this now*—and turn everything else off. That keeps my sanity." Knowing what patterns work best for him has been critical, but so has setting the tone and context with others. "I am always accessible—if someone calls, I'm going to answer it. But, people don't abuse that. They know I'm busy. They also know I have their back; they don't need to check in with me all the time. They are only going to reach out if they really need me ... That's how we've built those relationships."

Marcelo's clarity about his personal purpose has driven his career choices and how he invests in his network. He pursues relationships based on his "North Star" of defining success by his role in developing technology. "I'm not a person looking to climb the ladder. If I was, I would focus all my relationships on the next step. That's not my goal, it's not my motivation. I really like what I do ... I need internal people to know who I am, be aware of what I do, make sure it's meeting a need and work with me to move the technology forward. I don't spend any more time than I have to on internal networking, because at the end of the day, what we do is really hard and I need to focus on solving those problems."

He does invest heavily in his external networks—driven, again, by his focus on knowing people who can advance the technologies of his field. Marcelo has confidence in his work and his future in ways that people without "North Star" clarity and a strong external network seem to lack. The non-insular network and broader perspective keep Marcelo from getting drawn into internal politics or overly concerned about shifts and changes of corporate life.

Another way Marcelo keeps himself grounded and satisfied at work is to focus on his team and developing his people. "For me, there is nothing better to see than to see my people grow … A lot of times, leaders are so controlling, or after their own goals or focused on making themselves look good … My style is opposite … The focus isn't on me or moving me forward. It is about growing the people. If you grow people and keep them motivated, they are going to carry you forward. Everyone's going to be successful and we are all better off."

Network Insights

- **Know what kind of work and relationships help you thrive.** What matters to you in terms of the goal, content and output of the work? And what is important to you in terms of ways of working? For Marcelo, the combination of a big goal, trusted partners and shared enthusiasm for the technology cannot be beat.

- **Set boundaries and set expectations.** Find mechanisms to keep you focused on the kinds of collaborations that have value. This includes blocking or buffering yourself from inefficient or unnecessary work and setting the context (right processes, right people, right projects) for satisfying and effective collaboration.

- **Invest deeply in external ties and boundary spanning networks.** Non-insular networks enable high performance over time—and they provide a greater sense of influence over your job and your career. Having a reputation and relationships outside of the current role or work environment allows you to keep political or business ups-and-downs in perspective.

- **Have a North Star**. If you do not have clarity about your direction or purpose, you will get pulled into projects, jobs and situations that waste your time. When your time and attention get diffused, it is difficult to maintain the energy and enthusiasm for important work or complex challenges. In contrast, having *agency*—a direction, choice and control—supports your ability to sustain and thrive over time.

- **Find satisfaction in the wins of others.** When you literally say, "YEAH! Whoo-hoo!" over a direct report who learned to appreciate a co-worker's expertise after fighting against it for months, you are on to something. Being a geek about developing others can be highly satisfying.

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.