



GENERATE
WELL-
BEING

A Senior Leader Cultivates Networks for a Sense of Purpose & Work/Life Integration

CASE CONTEXT

A senior leader with a global role finds ways to thrive professionally and personally. By setting boundaries on her time and making commitments outside of work, she counters overload. She also makes time for interactions that fuel her sense of purpose.



FEMALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: HEALTHCARE

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.



A biologist by training and a manager by experience, Marcy is in the prime of her 25-year career with one company.

Beginning in a technical role, she learned the operations aspect of pharmaceutical manufacturing. Marcy gained experience across product lines and system processes before finding her niche in quality. She took on varying roles of increasing responsibility, first locally and then regionally and with external partners. She gained a reputation as being someone who is a firefighter, able to solve problems in a crisis. Currently, Marcy leads global quality for one of the company's largest divisions.

Reflecting on her career progression, Marcy is acutely aware of the benefits she has gained from her company, as well as the tradeoffs. "I have had all these experiences and opportunities ... *I accept that as you progress and are promoted, you reach a point where you are going to have to make sacrifices. At a certain level, I lose some of my free time. I don't get irritated by that. I am getting something, too, in terms of career achievement, development and financial rewards.* Part of managing the demands is the mental framework; I don't think I am being infringed upon. I know this is part of the job." Like Marcy, everyone makes tradeoffs, so coming to an acceptance of those is a way to thrive and maintain a busy career and life. Even so, there are other things people can and should do.

Paying attention to the types of interactions at work that provide a sense of purpose or sense of impact is one strategy. Leaders, for example, can embed practices around recognition, appreciation and celebration into the culture. Marcy found that showing gratitude and celebrating small wins was especially important for employees working through times of crisis. "My group is so decentralized, but I encourage local celebrations and thank-you's. One of my sites was struggling, going through a lot of change. As they were making progress, I would say, *How are you pausing to celebrate?* Have a BBQ, bring in bagels every Friday, find ways to recognize and appreciate each other." With these experiences people become invested and the number of negative interactions are reduced.

More broadly, leaders should find ways to connect peoples' work to a broader sense of purpose. Marcy's company has powerful stories to tell about life-saving medical treatments and prevention of disease. "We bring in speakers who benefitted from our products to tell about the impact it had on their lives or on the lives of their families ... At one site, every month they put up a new poster of a baby or a child whose parent works for the company and recently got a vaccine we made, with the message: *If you helped make Lot Number X, you are making me healthy.*"

Beyond general efforts to create a culture with purpose, Marcy is aware of the collaborative work she finds personally gratifying. “I get the most gratification from my job when I am connecting with people and helping them to be successful. With my own team, the more I work with them, the more I see them excelling. I put a lot of energy into helping people think about navigating their career.” Helping others develop, make new connections and gain new experiences can be done in many ways, including: elevating conversations with direct reports beyond the short-term and becoming a mentor to people within the organization. Or, find mentoring opportunities in your local or professional networks.

Another aspect of work that fuels Marcy is problem solving. Often, that work is tied to a crisis, such as a quality problem or a contractor whose processes need to be fixed. “Some people love being in the mix, in the stress of the firefighting, but I don’t ... I love that I’m good at it, but every time I go through it, I always think, *This is the time I won’t do it, this time I’m going to fail*. I get stomach pains; I can’t sleep ... Given a choice, I wouldn’t take those projects ... But, I love when it’s done and everything works well.” A sense of accomplishment and purpose often comes at the end of a challenge. Leaders need people in their network who push them and hold them accountable.

Leaders also need to create rules and systems to buffer constant work demands and collaborative overload. “*People will infringe on your time if you let them. You have to be the one setting the boundaries ... I absolutely carve out time*. I am at work at 7, but my administrative assistant knows not to schedule a meeting before 8:30. I need that time in the morning to get myself organized and oriented, to do my thinking.” Marcy routinely chooses to work on evenings and weekends to manage the realities of a global workforce—and to help her balance her stress load. “I tell my teams, just because I’m emailing on the weekend, or at night, I don’t expect you to respond. I’m doing it to manage my own anxiety and stress.” For Marcy, a standing appointment twice a week with a personal trainer is also a commitment to her health. She rarely cancels, even though she leaves work at 4:30 to be on time. Finding anchors outside of work—commitments to activities and people—creates pull into other spheres and new networks, which helps leaders thrive.

Network Insights

- **Maintain perspective and see positive aspects of life.** The more senior you become the more work takes over. It is easy to focus on what is wrong, but don’t overlook the privileges. Find people and practices (i.e. gratitude journal) to reinforce perspective.
- **Invest in relationships and interactions at work that help you derive a sense of purpose.** Think about how to shape your work to preserve time for interactions and experiences you value.
- **Set rules and boundaries to keep other people from structuring your day and life.** Block time at work to give you space to do what you need to (e.g., get organized, build calendar or some activity to regroup). Employ rules at home to manage the degree to which work bleeds into home life in a way that works for you.
- **Invest in activities and people that pull you into other spheres.** It could be anything that interests you: physical activities, hobbies, philanthropic efforts, arts, book clubs, etc. Do these activities with other people so you obligated to show up. You’ll start to value things other than work through the interactions.

5 Types of Interactions Can Create Purpose

“Purpose and a sense of thriving are built for me much more through the interactions I have with people than the exact work.” For Marcy, five aspects of interactions with others create a sense of purpose and thriving through work:

1. **Interactions that clarify the “why” of work.** Leaders, peers and subordinates can all help define and reinforce a bigger sense of purpose or clarity around the impact employees have. For Marcy, this comes from connecting with the stories of customers and having impact on people she leads.
2. **Interactions that appreciate and celebrate.** This can have a substantial impact on people’s engagement and can come from peers, subordinates and clients as well as bosses. Often appreciation comes from surprising places in a network.
3. **Interactions that help others.** Stepping outside of your own self-interest is energizing. Marcy gains a sense of purpose from spending time with her direct reports on career and development discussions. She mentors a dozen others and routinely talks with people about possibilities and next steps.
4. **Interactions that yield a sense of collective accomplishment.** A sense of purpose and impact comes from both the way people work together and the actual outcomes.
5. **Interactions that create a sense of mastery.** People like to spend time doing what they are good at. Engaging in this work with others is a chance to be seen and acknowledged for your unique contributions.

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.