



GENERATE
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BEING

Managing Collaborative Overload & Investing in Relationships at Work in Ways That Fuel Purpose

CASE CONTEXT

A high-level leader has adapted to increasingly collaborative demands by being clear in her role and delegating effectively. She develops her team and talent around her in a way that reduces collaborative demands and contributes to her sense of purpose at work.



FEMALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: RETAIL

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.



With 25 years in large-scale retail environments, Shamira knows the realities of 24/7, customer-driven work.

She's had roles both in the field and at headquarters, always interacting and staying connected to store-level employees and customers. Now, she is a senior executive with responsibility for the full customer experience for an innovative global retail chain. In a job where everything gets implemented through "an army of people" across hundreds of locations, collaboration can get out of hand and purpose can get lost.

Our research shows that the amount of time on phone, email, meetings and other types of collaborative interactions has increased 50 percent or more in the last ten years and the types of collaborative requests are more diverse and complex. Shamira says that as collaborative demands have increased for her, she has countered it with clarity of her role, thoughtful delegation and the ability to say no. These same things help her stay connected to her purpose and sense of impact.

Shamira pushes back on over-scheduling and large meetings. "It's almost become bad to do anything by yourself! But, some people work best when things are quiet and they can think and process ... I am one of those people." She is not effective without having that time and space to think, so she has created routines that support that. She gets into the office very early, using the first two hours of her day to do more complex work or planning. She also builds in additional "white space" on her calendar for thinking, marking it *DNS: Do Not Schedule*. "I also put that rule in for my team. They should have white space to think ... If that means they go to a room in another building or come in late one morning a week, then they do it. People weren't giving themselves a chance to organize their thoughts. I believe that's how we'll get the next great idea or better understanding of a challenge."

Shamira focuses her time where she has unique value to add, attending meetings or getting involved in decisions only when she has a clear contribution. She doesn't have an ego about being consulted or in-the-know. "Is someone else better suited to do it? Is there someone else on my team who can learn from the experience? If someone else on my team is in a meeting, can they just give me an FYI, or do I need to be there? How many of us do we need in any meeting? ... It's about respecting my time, but also everyone else's time. *I work with people who think I need to be in every meeting and I tell them, No, that's not going to happen.*"

Shamira's confidence in pulling back from constant involvement comes from two things. At this stage of her career, with the experience and network she has gained, she is not worried about protecting her image or playing politics. But more important, "I know who my people are. *They can make decisions. I have a good network and trusted relationships.* My team will tell me what I need to know or say, *Hey, I really do want your input.*"

That level of trust and awareness has been built over time. Shamira holds one-on-ones each week with her team, allowing time to inform and take care of business, but also to talk personally and off-task. She has a solid grasp of each person's strengths, interests and aspirations and is able to know how best to deploy the talent on her team. She is able to delegate in ways that are energizing to each person, building on strengths and providing opportunities to develop. This confident delegation keeps her from being overwhelmed and reactive, while fueling some of her own sense of a bigger purpose.

"At the end of the day, no matter what my position is, I love problem solving and I love making things better ... My joy is leadership and helping people develop and recognize their skill. I love to help people see what others see in them and celebrate and use their strengths."

Network Insights

- **Insist on time to think.** Reduce collaborative overload by building in reflective time. Shamira protects time on her calendar (*Do Not Schedule*) and has others do the same.
- **Invest in your immediate network.** Connect with direct reports through regular one-on-ones, where 50 percent or more time is off task—how are things going, personal interests, future plans and development. This has allowed Shamira to delegate in ways that engage others and to step out of the way with confidence in her team.
- **Seek interactions that reinforce your sense of purpose.** Shamira gains a sense of purpose when she sees the impact her stores have in communities. She also derives joy from helping others grow and gain confidence.
- **Create physical and mental space to turn off work.** Shamira takes time for a run in the morning before checking emails and commits to outside interests, including photography, art and music. Even short bursts of non-work activity can be rejuvenating.

Scaling Activities that Generate Purpose

A sense of purpose in work is largely created by the ways people engage each other. One way Shamira and her team foster purpose among a global workforce is through community involvement.

Each store has always had encouragement and discretion to volunteer in their local communities: in schools or nonprofits or community events that matter to them. Recently, they sought to elevate that community spirit by blending local flair with company-wide connection.

1. They crowd-sourced ideas for company-wide initiatives. "We want to give and create more than we take from our communities ... So, how to do that?" The company set a couple parameters and kicked off a global brainstorming site to solicit ideas for issues the entire organization could get involved in.
2. Ideas were grouped by theme and everyone voted on priorities and best ideas. Winning ideas were developed with support from Shamira's team, but every store was given leeway to choose how they got involved or implemented the idea in their own community.
3. They encouraged teams to tell their stories. Employees make and upload videos about an activity they worked on with co-workers or volunteer work in the community. Stores are partnered to share ideas or get input from co-workers far away and in very different communities.

A shared sense of purpose was created in a way that honored the individual personalities and local interests, while connecting dispersed teams to something bigger. Transparency of the process and the ability to influence and choose strengthened trust and generated enthusiasm.

Beyond the specific benefits within communities, Shamira sees that regional and local leaders have learned they can take a similar approach on a smaller scale to solve problems or generate ideas. Engagement is way up, especially among millennial employees. In addition to the volunteer work, employees are sharing stories of how they made a difference to a customer or how the work they do creates impact or a personal sense of purpose.

"People feel like we are giving back to the community. They are personally making a difference. It has a big impact on retention and how we take care of the customer every day."

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.