



GENERATE WELL-BEING

# How Personal Networks Inside & Outside of Work Enable Thriving at the Senior Executive Level

## CASE CONTEXT

A senior leader is at the top of her game professionally. Who she is at work and who she is as a person, wife and mother are aligned—and she is transparent about her priorities across all fronts. She has intentionally invested in relationships and networks to help her succeed and thrive.



FEMALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: TECHNOLOGY

Gail is a senior executive who never imagined she would spend 15 years with one company, moving from role to role.

But in that time, she became a versatile, seasoned leader. “I have really had five or six different careers within one company. My network has been incredibly influential on a personal level, but also professionally ... I have figured out over the years that you need to be really intentional about building the networks that help you move in the right direction.”

As a top executive, Gail faces enormous collaborative demands imposed by meetings, phone calls and emails. “All of those things are magnified in my job now ... And don’t forget the social media: I’m supposed to monitor Instagram, Twitter, Facebook ... There is no balance. In fact, we should quit using that word. The beauty of today is *integration*. My life is so much better because I can sit at a parent/teacher conference or a soccer game and my boss will call if he needs me. I can check email wherever I am.” *The ability to see the benefits and the opportunities of their 24/7, high-demand careers is a common thread among senior leaders who are truly thriving at work.* Our research has found that these leaders are aware and appreciative of what they have in life. “I was born being positive, but I’ve had some really crappy times in my life, too. I believe either *you get out of bed in the morning and make life what it is, or it gets made for you.*”

## 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.

Gail brings that same intentionality to creating a life that is aligned with her values, even as she has taken on roles of increasing scope. Like other high performers who are thriving, Gail has adopted practices that help her structure work around a clear set of values and priorities. For example, every Monday, she spends an hour with her staff scheduling the next four weeks. “If what is there does not align with people, purpose or passion, it gets moved ... I know where my priorities are and how I want each of my 24 hours to be spent. I am incredibly intentional about it. My kids and my husband sacrifice a lot for this job, but I don’t miss birthdays, soccer games, the stuff that matters to them. I don’t apologize for it.”

Gail’s clarity and confidence comes in part from a deep set of values around family and faith, shared by her husband and extended family. It also is tied up in her broad and boundary spanning professional network. This, too, is showing up in the research. People with strong, diverse networks are less likely to be caught up in the minutia or political currents of work. Rather than being defined by the environment or the systems, they chart their course and are confident in their options if they need to make a change. They are less reactive to challenges in one arena, because they are strengthened by something good or valued in another.



For Gail, several experiences stand out that have shaped her and solidified her clarity and purpose. “One of my bosses was falling apart at home and being wildly successful at work. I realized, *That could be me*. You have to be really grounded to do this job. For me, it came from very consciously saying, *If this costs me my career, I am OK with that. We’ll figure it out.*” She also gained perspective during a personally vulnerable time, when she was hospitalized for six weeks. “In the middle of an incredibly stressful job, my body shut down ... You start to look at things differently and make different choices ... I’ve been promoted three times since then.” She has seen other senior leaders operate with similar clarity and transparency. “That willingness to be transparent and honest, come to the table with who you are—not just life as depicted by Facebook—I respect and have tried to model, too.”

Gail’s husband and extended family are supporters of her work success—and also the strongest ties to pull her back into her larger identity. She and her husband have always spent a lot of time talking about the logistics of their lives, but more important, they regularly revisit whether they are living their lives in ways that reflect what matters most to them. Her mother and sisters, too, are trusted “truth tellers” and will call her out if she is messing up or missing something. “There’s just a ton of love and mutual respect in these relationships ... I am lucky I can have those gut-check conversations.”

Church and faith, too, pull Gail to what is most important. Whether praying on her drive to work or when her introspective husband says, *I’ve been thinking about what the pastor said*, Gail tries to listen. Older couples at church, too, have a way of helping Gail shift away from the pressures of work. After one particularly intense and exhausting time, one woman gently said, *You know this is not what it is all about, right?*

Gail knows her larger purpose makes her who she is—and makes her better at work. “Success is about being aligned with a higher purpose and power. It comes from knowing what that compass is ... The people I look up to the most are really good at that, even if they are not of the same faith ... It’s the higher purpose—they know it’s not just them.”

## Network Insights

- **Pay attention to the positive side of collaboration and connectivity of today’s mobile world.** There are challenges, but also benefits that come from flexibility.
- **Organize your calendar to focus on True North priorities.** Block in activities and interactions that allow you to live the values—let other things drop off.
- **Invest in networks that support your True North.** A broad network provides a sense of options and influence that give you the courage to chart your own course.
- **Stay engaged with family or friends outside of work.** They help you think through tradeoffs, hold you accountable and prevent you from being one-dimensional.
- **Have non-work ties and activities to keep current stressors in check.** People a generation or stage ahead of you in life are particularly good for perspective.

## Personal Network Dimensions to Successfully Transition into Senior Role

Gail was intentional about developing and using her network to avoid biased thinking and generate trust and followership:

1. “I leaned on my closest, most trusted people.” Find two or three confidantes who know you well, share your values and have a sense of the role you have stepped into. Leverage these people for perspective and to get brutally honest feedback. “You want people who won’t let you complain, who will call your bluff—but who will also tell you when you are right.”
2. “I called in the brain trust.” Tap into a range of trusted colleagues working in different spaces as you start to think about a problem. These are people who share similar values (e.g., doing what is best for company) but fill in gaps in your experience and expertise. “You’ve done your homework, but you need these people to see the white space, to see what you are missing.”
3. “I relied on the experts.” When a direction or challenge is more defined, seek out specific experts or a peer who has done similar work. “You need to have different options, depending on the problem you are trying to solve.”
4. “I defined success by whether I am making things better and bringing other people and teams with me.” Figure out how to involve and engage others in your purpose. Seek feedback, let people know you considered their opinion and why you made a different decision. “We all know people who have incredible business results and everybody hates working for them.”

### 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).