Connected Commons

GENERATE WELL-BEING

A High Performer Sculpts Networks to Help Her Thrive & Find Purpose in Her Work

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced project manager invests in her current team and maintains connections in her field to build a satisfying career. She has learned to adapt and shape her role in ways that help her thrive and avoid collaborative overload.

FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

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

Michelle has spent nearly 20 years building her expertise and her network working as a software developer and business process consultant primarily for government organizations. Right out of college, she was hired by a consulting firm, where she learned the fluidity of working contract-to-contract. She followed the work, sometimes moving from one firm to another as a contract changed hands—and even moving back again a few years later. Currently, Michelle manages a project that involves 30 staff and collaboration with a federal agency. "My career is definitely a result of the networks that I created … If you get into a niche, you tend to work with the same people over your career." She always factors in the relationship and reputation when making a career move or adding to a project team. "When you find good people, people you work well with, who value what you bring to the table and also know there are things you want to improve on, that has a big impact on the connections you maintain. Those are the people that I stick with."

In addition to placing a high value on her relationships and network, Michelle gains deep satisfaction through shared purpose. *In her line of work, teams include employees, subcontractors and client staff; when they are aligned around the program rather than the company they work for, Michelle thrives*. "Right now, the folks we work with have not put up the traditional consultant/client wall … That has faded away, we work as partners, and our program has been successful … The mindset shift to a collaborative, shared perspective has been huge." Part of Michelle's role is facilitating that collaboration, lowering barriers, and ensuring information flows and interactions reinforce that larger sense of purpose.

Michelle also encourages the team to learn and grow in terms of needed technical knowledge, leadership skills and personal interests. She takes the perspective of everyone having "T-shaped" skills: breadth in some areas along with depth in a core area. "This helps everybody be able to expand, use their full potential and find they really like something or want to learn more." This also cross-trains and builds resilience within the team and helps people feel connected to each other and to the work as a whole. Michelle also will pair people to push new perspectives and experiences. In one case, she partnered two people who could not have been more different. "One guy was formal and rigid and the other was at the opposite end of spectrum—they couldn't stand each other. I brought them together and said, *It is so obvious in a meeting that you are not on the same page—you don't have to like each other but you have to work together*. I challenged them both to adapt their style … We started to see a change, and they both begrudgingly said they learned from the other guy."

Over time, *Michelle has learned how to get a sense of purpose from helping others*—whether steering others to learn or to tee something up so another teammate can solve a problem. "I have always been a perfectionist, a do-er. So letting go or not being overly prescriptive about something I know how to do has been a hard thing for me ... But, as I have bigger projects and more experience, seeing other people do their own thing, seeing people run with it, I found I really enjoy that." By giving autonomy and diffusing ownership, Michelle helps create a context where others thrive and find purpose.

The project team has other practices that create connection and a context where Michelle and her co-workers thrive. During a daily stand-up meeting, they start with a question of the day, unrelated to work, such as, *What's your favorite vacation spot?* or *How many brothers and sisters do you have?* This bit of fun adds some energy when work is challenging and connecting off task builds understanding and rapport. (They also ask the question of the day to potential new hires to the team to gauge how they will interact with the team). "That friendship, or social aspect, is so important to team dynamics. You tend to be more respectful of people when you know a little about them." Getting to know each other creates a safe context, which is especially important when work is difficult. "It's knowing that I can make a mistake and not get chewed out for it. It's knowing, if I'm trying to push something, or take a risk, I have that safety in the team to be open, to ask for help. I won't be judged for it ... That is a big deal for me."

The context in which Michelle thrives also has downsides. Our research shows that in the last eight or ten years, the demands on people to be involved and responsive through meetings, phone calls, e-mails and other types of collaboration have risen more than 50 percent in most forms of work. "Because we are a collaborative team, we all try to be available to ask questions and work together—interruptions can be a big challenge." With the on-site team, an open space office environment contributes to the challenge. When Michelle needs time to focus or if she is on a deadline, she'll put up a sign saying, "Don't interrupt. Working on deadline," but often it is not noticed or is ignored. "We need better norms or options to help us manage interruptions and protect our calendar."

The ability to manage demands and create rules to buffer from work also has an impact on well-being. For Michelle, this realization came several years into her career, when her child had a severe illness. As many people do in crisis, the intensity of that time forced Michelle and her husband to set boundaries and find new ways to accommodate work. "It crystallized what is really important in life ... I try hard not to bring work home. I put the phone away when I come home and don't look at messages until our kids go to bed. I rarely work weekends ... I am cognizant of not setting that expectation for the team."

Another approach to prevent work from being all-consuming is to have relationships and activities that pull people into non-work roles and networks. Michelle's outside relationships revolve around her children's soccer games. She also is on the board of a local nonprofit and is a photographer. These activities are things she is passionate about, plus they are absorbing and completely separate from her work role and relationships—allowing her to set aside work, define herself more broadly and gain perspective from being part of different groups.

Network Insights

- **Play offense by building your network and shaping the work.** Never have people had more autonomy to create a context to thrive. Take advantage: sculpt your role and engage with others in ways you find purposeful and positive.

- **Find ways to have fun and connect off task.** Learn about your colleagues, partners and clients. It fosters openness and respect and allows for a better match of people to purpose.

- **Counter collaborative overload.** Delegate and shift work if you are becoming a bottleneck for information or decisions. Set norms with teams around interruptions and availability.

- **Create habits to buffer you from the demands of work.** Leave work on time or put down the phone at key points in the day. Don't wait until a crisis hits to take more control.

- **Commit to relationships or activities that pull you in and absorb your attention.** A non-work network helps you gain different perspectives and define yourself more broadly.

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.