



GENERATE  
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# Structuring Interactions Inside & Outside of Team to Promote Thriving in a Demanding High-Tech Role

## CASE CONTEXT

A career-driven manager learns to build a network that helps his team succeed in an intense environment. He thrives through collaboration, co-creation and a clear sense of purpose. Changes to his approach and scheduling have helped him find needed personal time.



MALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL  
LEADER

Industry: TECHNOLOGY

## 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.



Noah spent his early career doing financial research and data analysis in consulting firms and banks, including roles in the

U.S. and China. He was recruited six years ago as a data analyst for a high-tech company with global presence. Today, he manages a small team of business analysts, contributing to routine operations and strategic efforts. No stranger to long hours and intense environments, he has learned to pursue projects and manage work in ways that allow him to thrive.

When he started at his current company, Noah quickly realized the importance of being proactive about getting to know people and build relationships. Work is largely project-based and networks provide the information and ideas that allow his team to do work that is valued and that they enjoy. “You have to build your network with the right people at the right level in the right places in the organization.” Meeting with people across the network is a strategic, carefully planned task. “You have to think of your lunch and coffee card as check boxes every week to be filled in. It’s like another job, but it’s one of the only ways you can find out bits of information.” During Noah’s first six months on the job, he met with people in his department to understand what they did, the type of work they were interested in and who else he should meet. His manager and another mentor also suggested people. From those initial meetings, he has cultivated relationships based on sharing information and mutual reciprocity. “You are going to them to learn, but it can’t be a one-way street. You are there to help each other.” *Through these periodic check-ins, Noah learns about the interests, perspectives and preferences of stakeholders outside his department—which is valuable in offering solutions in ways that address pain points and factor in related plans or groups. **The attention to the network allows him to co-create projects rather than letting the external context dictate his priorities and processes.***

Noah has also set a collaborative context for his team, which helps them thrive and stay engaged. He begins by screening new hires or team members for collaborative behaviors. “If I hear a lot of *I, I, I* not *we, we, we* in how they got stuff done, that’s a warning sign.” He tees up collaboration by mixing up the teams and functions based on the project or need. He holds a weekly team meeting to talk through all the projects, make decisions about who is leading what and whether they have the support and resources to get it done. The team’s workspace fosters collaboration, too, with a cluster of cubes and desks that are easily reconfigured for independent or group work. Proactively contributing and helping each other is expected. “People do step up; it’s part of the culture and part of performance evaluations.”

For people to thrive in a fluid and collaboration-heavy context, it helps to have clarity of purpose. This lets people identify what to focus on and what to let go—and help them fit their work into the broader context. “You want everybody to have something to rally around and say, *How am I, today, contributing to that North Star?* It lets each person see how they fit in, and that gives people purpose.” It prevents people from getting narrow or parochial in their view and proactive in helping others. “Because of that North Star, you are forced to think about your work as an end-to-end process. You don’t want to do something that’s going to impact somebody else, so you say, who else do I need to talk to, how can I work with them? ... It forces people to work together in a better way ... At times when we’ve lost that, nobody knows how they should be contributing to all the competing priorities and goals.”

*He loves to work in an environment where people can play with ideas and imagine what is possible, so he has fostered that within his team.* “I really love when my team has gotten things to a certain level and it’s time to demo to me ... We spend time playing, asking questions, trying stuff out.” His role in co-creation has also expanded to pitching ideas to others in the company. “I learned I like helping people sell their ideas—just by playing around we end up solving problems. Those things give me purpose.” A big perk of his job is working with smart, interesting people and seeing his team thrive. “When I get to support the innovative people on my team, I get excited and energized again. It keeps me interested in going to work every day.”

A drag on Noah’s enthusiasm is the collaborative overload that comes from the numerous demands to coordinate with and respond to other people. The company’s growth, a merger and a matrix structure have added to the volume and complexity of collaborative work over the past five years. “The bane of my existence is email and meetings ... For most managers, *all day is devoted to meetings with a few breaks for email and we do our work in the evenings.*” *A couple years ago, he hit a breaking point after going through a stretch of working 18 hours a day leading up to the birth of his first child. He made major changes to how he manages his schedule, including setting 30-minute blocks, three*

*times a day for email. He puts tasks on his calendar, rather than on a to-do list. He has color-coded calendar items according to whether they are priority work, movable items or things driven by “people who get to step on my calendar.” He reviews his schedule every Sunday night to update and block needed time. “Managing my calendar better has allowed me to get more work done in a day. The times that I need to stay up until one in the morning is a quarter of what it was.”*

The demands of Noah’s role are often consuming, but he is home by six each night to spend time with his wife and daughter. At this stage of parenting and career, Noah doesn’t have time and energy for much outside of work and family. Often, his social life includes co-workers, so he doesn’t turn off work easily. “It seems admirable to have more interests and activities—but I don’t have any!” This is a common reality for first-level leaders who are pinched by their role of doing and leading and often figuring out new family commitments.

## Network Insights

- **Initiate and cultivate relationships that help you co-create work.** Meet regularly with people to share information and insight into projects and people. This puts you in a proactive stance to pursue work that is compelling to you and your team and to anticipate and address needs of others.
- **Promote collaboration through hiring and team practices.** Screen candidates for “we” behaviors. Set the expectation of helping others and looking for success as a whole through regular team meetings, 1:1s and performance management.
- **Find the team’s North Star.** A shared sense of purpose helps people know what to focus on and what to let go. It highlights the interdependencies in the work.
- **Know what gives you purpose.** Seeing your team thrive, helping or developing others and co-creating solutions are common drivers of purpose and satisfaction.
- **Take control of your calendar.** Imposing rules and structures around meetings and availability (emails, texts, etc.) and setting aside blocks of time to think and produce help you to claw back needed time. You’ll get more done in the day and reduce late night and weekend work in the process.

## 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).