Connected Commons

GENERATE WELL-BEING

CASE CONTEXT

A long-time manager is deeply engaged in his work due to trusted peer relationships, a personalized approach to his staff and a focus on personal growth and self awareness. A clear and shared sense of purpose helps him be effective and thrive.

MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

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.

INNOVATE

EXECUTE

SCALE

THRIVE

ADAPT

A North Star Priority, Purpose in Work & Valued Networks Help a Seasoned Leader Thrive

The first part of Oliver's 20-year career involved working for a diverse range of companies as he rose up the ranks of traditional marketing and advertising agencies. Driven to learn and succeed, he built strong relationships and a reputation for innovation. Nearly eight years ago, "I found myself hitting a wall and needed to recharge myself." He shifted gears and took on an in-house, senior management role for a pharmaceutical company. He leads a team overseeing the content, people and technology behind a large-scale patient support function, as part of the overall brand management team. Oliver's drive remains; he has shifted his sense of purpose. Now, "the patient is our North Star," and he is thriving in his role as both leader and team member.

Oliver sees both the structure of his work and the relationships as reasons he is doing well. "I look at what our team has done, and our success is because of the collaboration we have—each team interacts closely with the others by design. They all support each other." Rather than working in silos, Oliver and his peers focus on the larger, shared goals. They routinely ask for help and run ideas by each other. In a weekly meeting with their manager, they talk through immediate needs and long-term solutions, give updates and debrief projects. They have shaped their interactions over time in ways that allow them to feel part of something bigger than themselves *and* see their unique contributions. "We have that sense of community and collaboration, but each individual is empowered … Everyone has a voice and not only is that voice heard, but it is respected … There is no hesitation in the group to be able to have challenging conversations. There is no fear of looking foolish or fear of retribution … That's been built over this team working together for so long … They are an extension of your family. We trust each other."

Similarly, Oliver's leadership perspective informs his relationships with his staff, partners and vendors. He tells them: "You don't work *for* me. You work *with* me." He puts this into action by understanding people, getting to know the strengths, weaknesses and aspirations of each individual. "A leader who can do that is going to be 100 times more successful than a leader who takes a cookie-cutter approach. A lot of leaders say this, but don't do it well." *He implements three practices that allow him to prioritize this with his direct reports: weekly one-on-ones, quarterly reviews and ongoing feedback though ad-hoc talks.* "I'm a fan of the *walk and talk*. Just take 20 minutes, work it through on the spot."

Oliver has also invested in his role so that he continues to be personally engaged and motivated. He has been with the same group and job for seven years, choosing not to rotate out into other parts of the business. "When you stay and adapt the work and develop more people, you aren't stagnant. Plus, this is the most rewarding job I have ever had … On a daily basis, no matter what has happened or frustration I have felt, I can listen to a call or talk to a specialist supporting patients and I hear how what we are doing has helped someone. That is extremely rewarding and one reason why our leadership team stays—we know this is probably one of the best jobs we'll ever have."

The satisfaction tied to having a clear and shared sense of purpose is something Oliver has come to appreciate. *In his early career, he valued being an individual hero. He fell into a trap of getting his identity and sense of accomplishment by being central in the network*. "I was the go-to guy, the golden boy, the man." *He liked the attention and "rock-star status," but eventually experienced the downside*. Interpersonal skills were a challenge; he became less collaborative. "You lose visibility to the whole, to other ideas and your work product suffers because it is based on the input of one." He became a know-it-all and began to see himself as "the White Knight, the only person who can save the day." He placed his personal agenda and status above everything else, with the mindset of: "I am going to convince, persuade and manipulate people so they are on board with my plan versus the team plan."

Quantitatively, our research shows that being too-central in the network is often a career derailer due to overload. If a rising leader's ego is fueled by status and being needed, the problems also become interpersonal. Often, it takes a professional or personal crisis to see the pitfalls. For Oliver, "It didn't cost me my job, but it cost me my marriage … I didn't like the person I became and I made a change." He took time to see his behaviors and understand their impact. *He realized a pattern from childhood of wanting to make a mark. Accomplishments, not relationships, were valued*. "Now, I am very aware of the persona of being the golden boy, and I know I don't want to go back there … When you are in a leader role or known as someone who is respected, you get recognized a lot, there are accolades, people

are coming to you, feeding that ego. I am very aware of those triggers and actively monitor myself to make sure I am not going down that path … In my daily interactions, I try to share the attention. I talk about the team or point out other individuals who make things happen." These behaviors are a very conscious choice and authentically important to Oliver, not about being "fake humble."

While Oliver no longer gains his sense of identity from being the superhero at work, the pace and collaborative intensity of his role can easily make work all-consuming. During the work week, his hours are long, but he does prioritize time with his children on weekends. He relies on a handful of close friends, from different stages of his life, to provide both perspective and escape. "These are people who know me, know my story. They can keep me humbled—*hey, you're feeding the ego again*—and also provide me escape for that work-life balance." *His friends pull him away from thinking about work and into other interests and activities, which doesn't come easily to him*. "I am a work-in-progress when it comes to detaching. I have gotten OK at it, but have a lot of work to do."

Network Insights

- **Create a context where people feel part of something bigger than themselves *and* see their unique contributions.** Use regular meetings to reinforce a collective sense of purpose, allow everyone to have a voice and build trusted relationships. But be sure individuals are empowered to act without layers of approvals and over-collaboration.

- **Gain a deep knowledge of the strengths, weaknesses and aspirations of each individual.** Build this awareness though 1:1s, developmental quarterly reviews and serendipitous moments, including short "walk and talk" conversations.

- **Avoid building your identity and reputation around accolades or being the hero.** If you are too-central in networks, you may become a bottleneck or suffer overload. If you also believe you are the one who knows best or can save the day, you create relational problems that may derail your career or affect your personal life.

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.