



GENERATE  
WELL-  
BEING

# A Senior Leader Thrives Through Decades of Change in a High-Pressure Business

## CASE CONTEXT

A long-time tech leader and executive creates a context for team members to find purpose and be engaged. He has learned what energizes him and how to be resilient in tough times.



MALE

Level: SENIOR 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.



Zachary has seen a lot of change over more than 35 years in the high-tech world. As an early employee of a company that

became a global powerhouse, he has seen operations at his site grow from a small team of six to a campus of 6,000 people. Zachary has managed numerous engineering teams and currently leads a function of 270 people, as well as being the site director. He thrives in his work—showing his commitment to the technology, the company and the local community.

As the site director, Zachary (along with 11 functional vice presidents) drives the culture for the diverse and distinct groups that are housed on the sprawling campus. In the early days, it was easy to maintain a cohesive culture, but now it is a complex job. “It was a simple job when everybody knew everybody. We were like a small town ... *People don’t have that daily interaction any longer, but we brought back that cohesion through the work we do in the community.*” Regardless of function or which building people work in, they spend time together through volunteering. Groups support local schools, a food bank and Habitat for Humanity. “A diverse group of people who aren’t normally day-to-day with each other come together. They get to know each other and what’s happening on the rest of the campus and do some fantastic things for the community.” Zachary appreciates the shared purpose these activities create for employees and also gains personal satisfaction. “It is so cool to go out and represent us. I am the face of the company and that is very energizing. I get to recharge when I’m out talking to people and out in the community.”

In his role as functional leader, he gives attention to the interactions that help team members stay engaged. He has always held one-on-ones with his direct reports, and a new team tool has allowed him to take the pulse of everyone on the extended team. “It’s a quick weekly survey, a check-in, between the managers and their teams: *what was I excited about this week, what did I hate this week, what do I need from you to help in the coming week.* It used to be I’d walk down the hallway to do that—and I still do—but now, we make sure those conversations are happening at scale throughout the organization.” The systematic process allows Zachary to see patterns and every manager keeps up with what’s going on with people.

Often, purpose in work is built through interactions that enable accomplishment. For Zachary, the biggest trigger of thriving is making something happen that wouldn’t have happened otherwise. For example, his group recently developed a product feature that was technically superior and then orchestrated process changes so that teams and functions across the business could use the same innovation, rather than each creating separate solutions.

Most products now ship with that common module created from that team. “We have the highest quality, the best possible solution and all kinds of cost savings, too ... We saw there was a problem, and we created something that wasn’t there before. We made it happen.”

Also linked to Zachary’s sense of purpose is the energy and outcomes he gets from bringing in diversity of opinions and personal styles. He creates an environment where people are expected to challenge and be challenged to get to the best plan or and to develop personally. “If we’re all just patting each other on the back, that’s not sustainable over time. Bringing the person in who’s going to poke holes in everything may not be as much fun, but the choices we will make are going to be better or longer lasting.” He even held this out as a benefit during a controversial re-org: “We had a chance to mix things up and that has brought a lot of energy in.” He factors diversity into his thinking about talent development, too. “I’ve got two senior directors with completely different personalities ... Their strengths and weaknesses are exactly opposite and it is really cool to help both of those people, to see them take from each other and both be better.”

Zachary’s biggest challenges are when budgets are cut and he has to let people go. “That rips the life out of you; you never get used to it ... One thing I learned that helps me is it’s not something to do and get over with. You have to really put your heart into it and do it the best way you can.” For Zachary, that means being clear, recognizing the impact, trying to help them find a job and offering to be a reference. “I’ve had conversations with some of those employees a year or two later and that recharges me a little bit. I’ll hear, *I know it was tough times, I appreciate what you did and look at the good things that have happened*. That makes you do it right the next time.”

Over the years, Zachary has also experienced an increase in collaborative intensity, which our research shows has exploded over the past decade. Time spent on calls, emails and meetings—and the effort to schedule those interactions—can dramatically get in the way of collaboration. “By the time you figure out when you can get everyone together, set the meeting, create an agenda and take the time to meet, you lose energy.” The company

recently spent millions creating an open space environment, which can flex so that people working on the same thing are physically sitting together. “They can get input or ask a question ... It’s more collaborative when you can just talk through something and resolve it in the moment.”

Zachary laughs that he “works all the time” as his personal solution to the intensity and collaborative demands of his job. He does turn off work for two things: “The only things I have found that will totally distract me from work are the grandkids and car racing! For both, if you don’t think about what you are doing, you’ll end up in a lot of trouble!” He commits time during the week to pick up the grandchildren after school and then goes back to work at 6 or 7 pm. Weekends, too, blend time for family and work.

For Zachary, thriving at work is part of thriving overall. “You’ve got to find what your passion is so that you’re having fun ... We work really hard; we work all the time. If we have fun while doing that, things are going to naturally happen in a positive way.”

## Network Insights

- **Create ways for people to interact outside their functions or physical spaces.** Volunteer work in the local community, for example, helps employees who don’t work together get to know each other, have a shared purpose and connect as “one company.”
- **Build purpose via systematic check-ins with direct reports and teams.** Focus weekly “pulse checks” and 1:1s on the employee experience: What were you excited about or frustrated by this week? What kind of help do you need?
- **Know what fuels your sense of purpose.** For many leaders, purpose is built through interactions that enable accomplishment—success of the team is rewarding. Engaging in co-creation, pulling in diverse perspectives and developing other people are other common sources.
- **Counter 24/7 leadership demands with non-work activities and relationships.** Choose a few people and activities that will draw you from work, hold your focus and keep you from thinking about the job—even if for short bursts. You will go back to work refreshed and with new perspective.

## 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).