



GENERATE WELL- BEING

External Networks & Managing Collaborative Overload Allow a Leader to Thrive & Find Purpose in Work

CASE CONTEXT

A senior leader's external network gives her confidence and counteracts internal politics and pressure. Her energy and ideas are focused on what she can control to create value for the business, while thriving on a personal level.

Sofia is a C-level leader of a Fortune 500 company involved in a large-scale change. She is well aware that the pace and

complexity can be overwhelming. "We're giving the same level of energy to keeping the current running and developing something brand new at the same time ... It just saps your energy. You don't have time to reflect or think ahead when you are just dealing with the fires." Even with such intensity of work, Sofia operates with a clear sense of choice and confidence, gaining energy and perspective from her external networks and habits to counter collaborative overload.



FEMALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: HEALTHCARE

Sofia's default action is to delegate. While this helps her manage her workload, the larger value comes from extending her network and drawing on a wider pool of expertise. "By delegating, more people bring their networks to bear on all this thinking and doing." Because of her role, she knows people across the organization. She'll ask people to get involved in a project or join a team, telling them why their unique capabilities matter to the success of the work. She explains to the group her rationale for involving each person—a process skill, knowledge of a part of the business, prior experience, etc. "That helps them appreciate each other and see why all of them together will be more successful than any of them alone." She sets expectations, but then says she does not want or need to be involved. "They are conditioned to think I should be involved, so it's important that I tell them clearly, *You can tackle this*. They need permission to take the ownership. It's surprising how quickly they will un-involve you if you let them!"

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.

Sofia's ability to step back comes from clarity that she does not need to be part of every project or decision or conversation to be important. Her identity is not tied up in her current role and internal dynamics. Instead, she invests as much in her external networks and activities as the internal. Most people do not do this, and can become embroiled in and defined by the internal churn. "We all talk about politics and nonsense at different points, but to the extent you let yourself be a part of the nonsense, if you view it as important to your ability to be powerful or authoritative or promotable, it's stressful ... *A well-honed external network makes you feel very comfortable that if you need it, you have alternatives and options. So, I don't really worry about the internal politics and am not defined by it like some of my colleagues.*"

This sense of confidence in her external mobility allows Sofia to chart her own course. Her more balanced view of what matters also benefits the company. "If you're not wrapped up in worrying about yourself, you can get wrapped up in other things, like what is most important for us to be doing for the business."



Sofia sees that people get stuck when they become too focused on one unit or organization. They become defined by and subject to demands and politics of the system. “People say *yes* or *no* because they feel like they have to. Then, you’re always playing defense, never offense, and it’s a horrible feeling. You’re always stressed and your calendar starts to look like someone else’s idea of a good time, not your own ... *If you don’t free up enough time to craft the external network, it will always be like that and you will always feel afraid.*”

Making the time for her external network and outside activities requires diligent scheduling. “I look at calendar a week or two in advance. If I see a week is going to be particularly difficult because I have three or four difficult or de-energizing meetings, I try to organize things to have a number of offsetting positives—things that will make a positive difference to other people, even if I am overloaded. I know that I don’t want to be part of a week where everything is de-energizing. So, how I can personally change it?”

Sofia brings that sense of personal choice to how she handles negative situations as well. Common reactions to toxic or de-energizing interactions are to lash out or to take less risk. Instead, Sofia focuses on what she can do. For example, a decision was made to move a role to another function, leaving a high-performer without his primary assignment—a decision Sofia fought and lost. “*I tried to find the upside and move to higher ground.* I accepted the fact that I wasn’t able to change it. Then I gave my attention to making it better for this person. By helping him, I got my head in a better place.”

Like Sofia, people who are thriving as high performers do things to *buffer* their time and attention from the constant demands of work. They invest in groups that *anchor* them in something other than work. “All the people that I know who are most satisfied and are also viewed as being successful have really strong interests and passions outside of work. They formed great networks and were infused with different ways of thinking ... When you have this energizing outside life, you come in to work with a different point of view; people get refreshed by that and uplifted by working with you ... What started as a buffering or anchoring activity ends up being a powerful source of success.”

Network Insights

- **Invest externally.** Confidence and energy come from relationships, activities and ideas outside of work.
- **Create space internally.** Block out time for your priorities. Delegate and step away.
- **Focus on interactions, relationships and work that create purpose for you inside the organization.** Counteract negativity with energizing work and people.
- **Chart your own course.** A sense of greater influence over your life is tied to having a non-insular network.
- **Handle negatives by going to high ground.** Control what you can, look for solutions—and don’t allow de-energizing people and situations to define you.

How Investing in External Networks Lets You Chart Your Course & Create Followership

Quantitative research work has shown that people with less insular networks feel like they have greater influence in their organizations and lives. For example, one study we did showed that doctors’ willingness to voice concerns on treatment or safety was not tied to formal position in hierarchy of a hospital system but rather having a non-insular network rich with bridging ties. Other studies showed that people with more non-insular and externally focused networks felt a greater sense of autonomy and control over their lives than those who focus too much on internal interactions.

Sofia has experienced this personally. Her approach to create broad, but targeted networks has given her a sense of influence and confidence to chart her own course in life. Take a similar approach by doing these things:

1. Make time for external connections as a source of influence over your career and richness of new ideas and perspectives.
2. Bring value from external connections back into your organization via best practices and broader, more innovative thought processes.
3. Be wary of getting too caught up in internal, insular networks. Look to build bridging ties throughout your organization, as this also creates influence and value.
4. Choose not to let the system define you; instead take charge of your calendar, direction and network. “Stop trying to conform. People who have been most successful achieve what they want to achieve—but they’ve done it in a way that lets them be happy and healthy and thrive.”

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.