Effectively Managing Transitions | ENGAGE

An Early-career Engineer Engages Networks that Get Results & Become a Source for Purpose

POSITION YOUR EXPERTISE TO CONTRIBUTE TO OTHERS' GOALS

Position your expertise to align with others' goals and objectives, rather than pushing your knowledge or experience out of context of their needs. Often, people do not care how smart you are but will engage if what you know can help them. Ask questions; morph what you know to their needs; give status, generate energy and help first.

MALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: MANUFACTURING

MANAGING TRANSITIONS

Entry into a new organization, changing roles, new responsibilities and promotion all place demands on you that can most efficiently be met by leveraging networks. Make transitions successful by investing in networks in three ways:

Initiate
Jumpstart productivity and inclusion by cultivating essential connections broadly and before you need help from others.

Engage
Energize people in your network and pull colleagues to you and your ideas when engaging with new groups.

Refine
Re-calibrate networks and collaborative practices for long-term effectiveness and well-being.

Barry is an engineer and project manager five years into his career. After struggling to engage teams early on, he learned that building trust and connecting to the "why" in work—for himself and others—reduced frustration and improved outcomes. Plus, he found that creating a broader network, both within the business and outside, has been a powerful source of engagement and well-being.

About a year ago, Barry moved into a different function. "I was walking into a completely new environment. I knew nobody and nobody knew me." He took advantage of the new situation to adjust and do some things differently than he did in his previous job. "The first thing I decided to do was to ask questions, listen intently and learn from the others around me. Anyone can teach me something new. *Why is that the way it is? What was the reason that was set up that way?* In the past, I ran straight into driving change. I learned if I spend more time asking questions, I am more successful in building the relationships … I see where I can help, or how to match what I know to the situation. I am not stuck fighting battles I shouldn't have fought in the first place. I have less frustration, and I see more results than I did in the past."

The second big change Barry made to engage more productively with teammates and on projects is to communicate the "why" in the work. "I realized we just give or get tasks and don't communicate the why. For example, we put a job on rush and everybody just knows we're going to be working really hard. One time I went back and said, *What's the real reason we're rushing this?* And I was able to go back to the techs working on it and explain why. They understood and bought in. It also built more trust in me over time … People seem to have a bigger sense of purpose and more positive outlook when they understand what's going on, so I try to be more proactive about that." Efficiency and results have come as Barry has built relationships and trust with those teams, which has also strengthened Barry's sense of himself and his personal purpose.

Other contributors to Barry's sense of purpose and thriving at work are the relationships he has built elsewhere in the organization. "I gained a lot of sanity reaching out to other parts of the organization and understanding how I fit in." At the encouragement of his first manager, he joined an affinity group and got involved in company-wide volunteer projects. Not an extrovert or a natural networker, that gentle push early on let him see the value of reaching out. In these groups and interactions, he asked questions, showed curiosity and learned more about the company and peoples' challenges.

"I meet people who know things I don't know, so they can give advice or show me a tool or tell me who to talk to. Plus, these groups help me to see the broader purpose or connect to people who are making bigger decisions … When you're in your bubble on a day-to-day basis, you don't see *why* or understand the strategies." By expanding his network outside his group, level and expertise, Barry was better able to see how his work fits in and the rationale behind decisions or processes that from a distance might not make sense.

Barry still makes it a priority to connect outside of his comfort zone. "People get caught up in their local bubble, rather than stepping outside. Once you are so drawn in, you say, *Oh, I don't have time for that extra stuff*. Then, if you've never put yourself out there you are less likely to do it as time progresses." Barry's broad, boundary spanning collaborations help him build skills and proactively solve problems, which make him feel good about his work and his place in the company. Having a broad network also lets him know he has other job options within the company. That security gives him confidence to structure his work and make decisions that suit him in terms of his schedule and what he says *yes* and *no* to. "I have seen what works and what doesn't. I have peers or role models who have balanced work, family and performance. When I see that, it gives me a clear understanding I can have that too if I take actions to make it happen."

Barry believes that work/life balance is not something the company provides you. It is something you control yourself. He sets the boundary of leaving work at a certain time to avoid a longer commute, willing to check in with calls or emails in the evenings if it means he isn't delayed in the car. He and his wife have learned to communicate to address the pace and demands of work as it flows over into their evenings and weekends. They agree on no phone calls over dinner, but otherwise have no firm rules. He tries to keep the laptop shut over weekends, but may work at unpredictable times to manage emergencies. Due to the demands of her job, his wife will routinely take late calls. "We try to be clear with each other on the demands and figure it out … We work out what is best for us as a team."

During the day, that connection with his wife helps him to stay in tune with life outside work. They text off and on: *How is your day going?* Or, *Long day. I'm fading*. This allows Barry to think ahead to the after-work needs, but more important, "It helps remind me there is life outside of work."

Life outside of work also includes a volunteer commitment to a local charter school. Now, he's on the board. "At first, it was something that fit my interests and would challenge my mind in a totally different way … Over time it has grown to an opportunity to give back to people through education, to give back something that was given to me." Interestingly, Barry has had many surprised reactions from people at work about his commitment to the school. "I've had people say, *I can't believe you have the time! Why are you so involved?* … It's like people are surprise that you have a willingness to focus on something different, something more than work." Unlike Barry, people with these responses have not allowed themselves to have priorities outside of work to pull them into new networks. Instead, they have let work structure their life choices and limit their options.

Network Insights

- **Engage others with curiosity and to understand the *why in work*.** This helps you gain insight that prevents moving in the wrong direction and begins to build trust.

- **Build a broad network within your company.** This helps you learn new skills and puts your work and role within a larger context. Plus, it gives you confidence that you have other resources or options beyond your immediate role.

- **Be transparent with others about demands and priorities.** Regular conversations to re-group as well as small check-ins (like texts throughout the day) help you make choices and be accountable to your priorities.

- **Commit to a group outside of work.** Being with people that care about other things and think in different ways keeps you from being one-dimensional.

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, Edward A. Madden Professor of Global Leadership, Babson College. 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.