



Connected  
Commons



LEADERSHIP



**INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING**

# Driving Personal Growth Through Relationships

For Personal Growth, Don't Build a Plan, Build Relationships

Rob Cross

Jean Singer

Karen Dillon

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## About the Connected Commons

The Connected Commons, a consortium of major employers and people leaders co-managed by renowned thought leader Rob Cross and human capital research firm Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp), applies organizational network research to impact business performance, workforce collaboration, and individual well-being.

For more information about Connected Commons, go to [connectedcommons.org](https://connectedcommons.org)

To learn more about i4cp, go to [i4cp.com](https://i4cp.com)



## About the Authors



**Rob Cross** is the Edward A. Madden Professor of Global Leadership at Babson College, co-founder and research director of the Connected Commons, and a coauthor of *The Hidden Power of Social Networks* (Harvard Business review Press, 2004).

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**Jean Singer** is a Principal with Collaborative Analytics and a co-editor of *The Organizational Network Field Book*.

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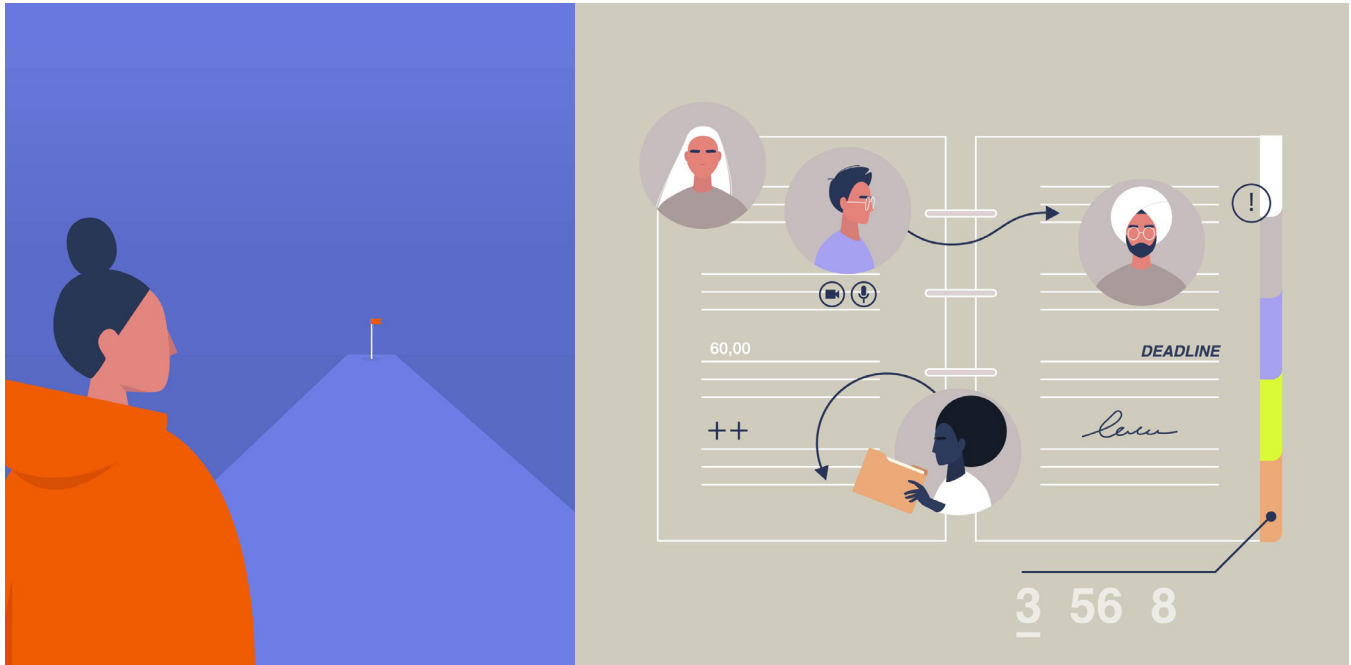


**Karen Dillon** is a former editor of *Harvard Business Review* and a co-author of three books with Clayton Christensen, including the New York Times best-seller *How Will You Measure Your Life?*

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# For Personal Growth, Don't Build a Plan, Build Relationships



**When was the last time you jumped out of bed, eager to get to your desk at work?** For some people, work can be a source of personal fulfillment, a place where they are making strides toward their full potential and becoming better in a personally meaningful way. However, for far too many of us, this is not how we would describe the countless hours we spend at work. According to a Gallup analysis of data across 100 million employees in 140 countries, only 40% of the global workforce say that they experience human development at work. This is not because people don't look to their workplaces for personal growth: Gallup's analysis found that employees *want development* more than anything else from their jobs.<sup>1</sup>

Why the gap? Conventional wisdom says that personal development requires us to make a plan. Sit down with pencil and paper, and write out where you want to be by the end of the year or five years from now. Companies do this all the time, with well-intentioned tools like personal development plans. Somehow, though, this is not translating into people feeling that they have opportunities to grow and develop. The same Gallup study, which asked whether people had "someone at work who encourages my development," indicates that, perhaps, the core of the problem is not with planning but has more to do with *relationships*. Indeed, our research shows that when people describe times of exceptional personal growth, they do not talk about executing a plan. Instead, **the trajectories of personal growth followed non-linear pathways, often held surprises and unexpected opportunities, and, importantly, arose from seeds of relationships that had been planted and nurtured with genuine interest and well-intentioned purpose over time.**

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**When did personal growth become so difficult?** When we're young, it's almost as though personal growth is ours for the taking. At school, we learn new subjects (whether we want to or not) and have opportunities laid out before us to, for example, try the debate club or the basketball team or any number of new experiences. At college, we may get thrown in with people from across the country or around the world, with different viewpoints that stimulate our thinking. However, as we settle down with a profession and perhaps a family, our sources of personal growth may change. They may become more concentrated in a workplace or neighborhood, with people more like ourselves in terms of background and interests. In middle age and late adulthood, we may become less concerned with striving toward gains and more oriented toward preventing losses.<sup>2</sup> In fact, research indicates that for most people, personal growth tends to decline with age.<sup>3,4</sup>

We can think of personal growth as a state in which we are continually advancing and developing toward full realization of our potential, a state in which we are open to new experiences that can challenge our views and contribute to self-improvement.<sup>4,5</sup> Personal growth has also been described, with a nod to Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, as "striving toward excellence based on one's unique potential."<sup>4</sup> While it might feel satisfying at first to achieve a long-sought-after goal, the adage about life being a journey turns out to be true, and people who continually seek new goals and keep growing in different dimensions of their lives tend to have greater well-being. Continued personal growth has been associated with greater levels of life satisfaction,<sup>6,7</sup> better resilience and ability to cope with life challenges,<sup>8</sup> and a greater sense of purpose in life.<sup>5,9</sup> People with higher levels of personal growth also tend to experience lower levels of depression.<sup>6</sup> Thus, our well-being is tied not so much to achieving a state where all our problems are solved and goals achieved but to the sense of continual growth toward an aspirational state of self-excellence.

**How can we continue to experience personal growth throughout our lives and avoid the declines we are susceptible to as we age and become more stable in our life circumstances?**

As part of a research program that involved dozens of top-tier companies and based on interviews with hundreds of people across industries such as technology, life science, finance, and manufacturing, we sought to understand the role that networks of relationships play in personal growth. What we discovered was that personal growth depends greatly on relationships that have been nurtured over time. These relationships pull us into new opportunities and enable us to push in the directions of growth we choose.

**Wanda's story**

*Consider Wanda, currently a senior executive in the financial services industry. She traces many of the growth opportunities she has had in her career to a few key relationships. For example, in her very first position in finance, she worked closely with Leanne, who was in a similar job but more senior. Leanne was a high-potential employee, rapidly moving up the corporate ladder. As Leanne advanced, she brought Wanda along, pulling her into opportunities that Wanda would never have imagined. After working closely with Wanda for a few years, Leanne told her that she should be in management and, in fact, could lead the entire group one day. Wanda came from a low-income community where just graduating from a four-year college was exceptional. Her reaction to the idea of being a manager was, "like I thought the world was flat and someone said to me, 'Well, it's round, by the way.'"*

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*However, Leanne believed in Wanda, felt she had the capabilities, and continued to pull her into new opportunities, including one that placed her at the head of the research department.*

*It wasn't just chance or being in the right place at the right time that found Wanda pulled into these opportunities. Over time, Wanda had built a reputation for being trustworthy. Leanne and others trusted her competence—that she had the requisite skills, or would let you know if she didn't. People also trusted her goodwill; they knew she listened well and looked out for the good of the team, not just her own advancement.*

*After a while, Wanda became more confident in her own capabilities as well. She didn't simply wait to be pulled into stretch opportunities, she also pushed of her own accord. On one occasion, she went to the CEO and proposed an idea for a new role: coordinating investment strategies across the firm, and she offered her own services to fill it. To some, this may have seemed self-serving. However, Wanda truly saw the need for this role in the firm, and her approach was not one of, "Give me this role because I'm great," but, "This role will help you to run the company more effectively, and I have the experience and relationships to pull it off." When she proposed the new role, she was able to situate her talents and experience within the CEO's needs. Her case was credible because Wanda had a longstanding relationship with the CEO, and he knew he could trust her abilities and intentions. She had met him years earlier when he was "just another guy on the other side of the business." In their working relationship, Wanda proved herself to be reliable and someone who was true to her word.*

*Wanda describes herself as "not a natural networker" or someone who is good in big groups. However, she has an authentic interest in others, and formed the relationships she had because she respected and looked up to these people, and genuinely liked them. Twelve years ago, Leanne retired from the firm, but she and Wanda still talk. In Wanda's view, her relationships with Leanne and the CEO made all the difference in the opportunities for growth that came her way. Her words of advice are, "If you find people like that, make sure you nurture those relationships and stick with them."*

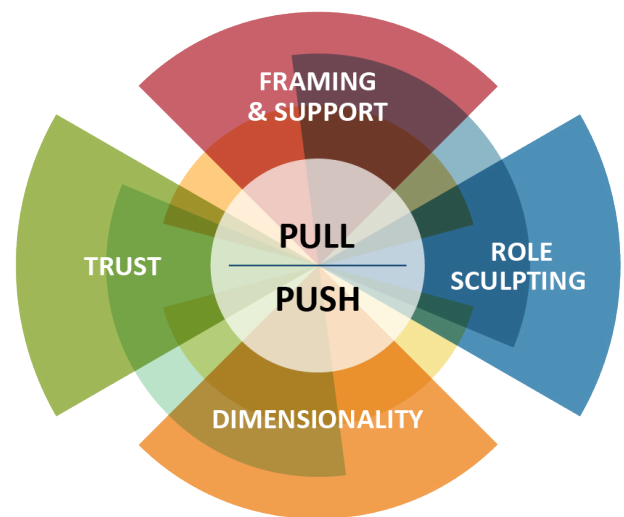
# Relationships Drive Growth With *Pull* and *Push*

When describing times of personal growth, our interviewees did not recount a linear process of defining personal goals and advancing methodically toward them. Instead, the experiences we heard were non-linear, sometimes unexpected, and even chaotic. Despite being unpredictable, growth experiences did not come out of the blue. As was true for Wanda, you could draw a clear line from the opportunities being offered to relationships that had been cultivated over time. These relationships enabled two dynamics: (1) *pull*—when others see your potential and pull you into a stretch opportunity, and (2) *push*—when you act on a vision you have for improvements that support the common good.

The dynamics of pull and push are not something we can activate overnight. Instead, they arise organically from previously established networks of relationships. Our interviewees got *pulled* into new positions or other growth opportunities because someone else knew of their accomplishments, capabilities, or character, and could see their potential, even when the interviewees themselves could not. Similarly, our interviewees were able to successfully *push* and advocate for a new opportunity because they had established relationships with people who believed in their capabilities and the sincerity of their motives and would support their efforts.

## ***We find that opportunities for PULL and PUSH are enabled by relationships in four ways:***

- 1 When others have **trust** in our competence, reliability, and authentic concern for their well-being, they are more likely to take the risk of offering us a stretch opportunity or supporting our interest in a new role.
- 2 **Framing and support** from family, friends, peers, and leaders gives us the confidence to take on risky endeavors and the encouragement to follow our own personally meaningful aspirations rather than society's dictates.
- 3 Relationships with others enable **role sculpting**, a way to proactively shape the nature of interactions and define new roles and expectations.
- 4 **Dimensionality** in our networks helps us to grow into more complete versions of ourselves, realizing our potential in spheres outside of work, such as family, community, and spirituality/aesthetics.





## The central mechanisms of PULL and PUSH

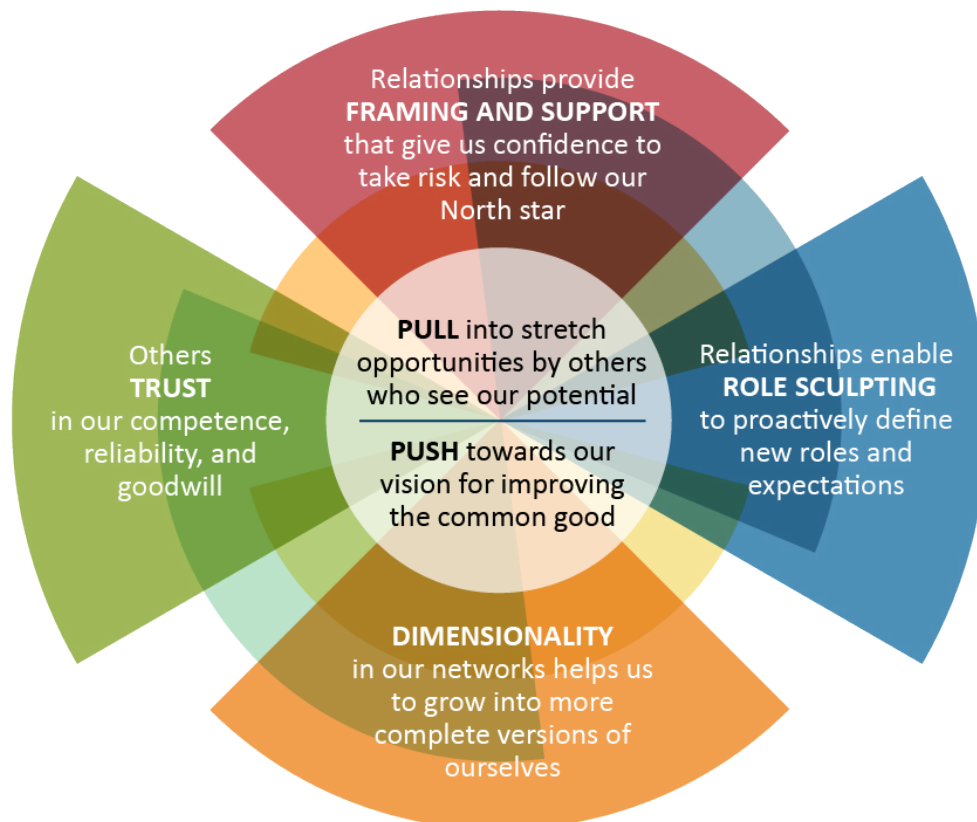
*Pull* occurs when you are offered a new role or opportunity that you had not asked for or actively pursued. The opportunity could be offered by someone who knows you well, such as your direct supervisor, or someone you have encountered only a handful of times, who has heard about you or had indirect experience with your work. To our interviewees, the experience of *pull* often came as a surprise. When presented with an opportunity, they often questioned, “Why me?”, doubted whether they had the skills or experience for the position, or were taken aback because the role was one they had never considered to be in the realm of possibilities. One interviewee described his reaction after being offered a managerial position: “I never asked to be a manager, I never wanted to be a manager, I never thought of being a manager. And one day I was in a meeting, and my boss at the time says, “So, we want to make you a manager. You’d be great. Is that okay?” And I was like, “What?”

*Pull* ended up being a major factor in the non-linear course of our interviewees’ careers, taking them in directions they would never have set for themselves, and fueling leaps into unfamiliar territory that resulted in sometimes intimidating and often exhilarating experiences of growth and learning.

However, *pull* is less surprising when you consider that:

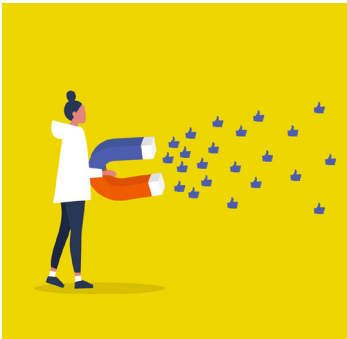
- a) Our interviewees had established relationships that laid the groundwork for the opportunities they were being offered. What seemingly turned them into an “overnight sensation” in fact resulted from a history of being someone who delivered the goods, who was trustworthy, and who aligned their abilities with others’ needs.
- b) Leaders were often able to see our interviewees’ potential for things like taking on a new challenge or transferring skills to a new domain, even when our interviewees could not see it themselves. Leaders might form these opinions through direct interaction with our interviewees, but, often, they relied on word of mouth. Thus, it was not just one-on-one relationships that were important but general reputation that mattered as well.

**Personal growth occurs through relationships that enable *pull* and *push* toward new opportunities**



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## PULL — Sonja's Story

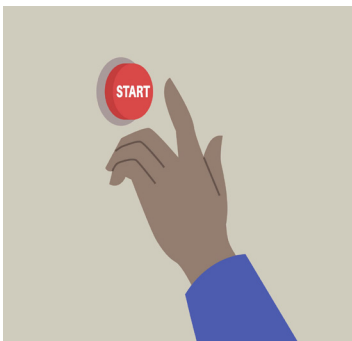


Consider Sonja, who had spent her career in business operations and was approached by her company's Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO), with an offer to be the organization's Chief Diversity Officer. The job was newly established and so far off her radar that, according to Sonja, "I didn't understand the role because I'd never even heard of the role." She was a little shocked and, although it would be a promotion, she needed time to think about it and determine whether she could do a good job for the company. One of the first things she wanted to know was why the CHRO—who had met her only twice—thought she was the person for the job. It turned out that Sonja's reputation had preceded her. The CHRO said, "You've done some great things, and you're passionate about this space. You can relate to employees and get them down to earth, get to the heart of what people are feeling.

You have a good way of talking about it." Sonja's reaction was, "How do you know all this?" The CHRO had heard from Sonja's customers, from the junior employees who worked for her, and from her peers, who had all spoken with respect and admiration for Sonja's ability to relate to others. The seeds of trust that Sonja had planted in the course of her career, and the reputation she had established through her relationships with others, had paved the way for a job experience that she would never have anticipated.

Despite the role that *pull* played in their career trajectories, neither Sonja nor our other interviewees simply built relationships and waited around for someone to make them an offer. Instead, they might see inefficiencies in how departments were working together and reach out with a proposal for better aligning workstreams; or they might step into a void of leadership where no one else was willing to take the risk; or they might be driven by a passion to see the organization improve the lives of its employees or customers and suggest a new initiative. Sometimes, our interviewees just felt a sense of having reached a plateau and sought a fresh set of challenges. By stepping up and filling a gap, often without knowing where their ideas would lead, they would create a *push* that resulted in a whole new stage of growth.

## PUSH — Patrick's Story



Patrick, for example, was frustrated with how his company, a global manufacturer, had no global HR information systems. While working as a mid-level HR employee, he would manually compile talent analytics for each team every quarter, sitting by the printer to pull out thousands of pages and insert them into 5-inch binders. By the time he could summarize the information, it was out of date. To Patrick, who wanted his company to be the most efficient, data driven, and best in class it could be, this made no sense. His prior employer had an HRIS system, so he knew it could work. He approached the Chief HR Officer and said, "This is a gap. I'm interested in filling this gap." At every opportunity in staff meetings, Patrick made it a point to explain how much better they could serve the business with an HRIS. He was doing the job manually, so he knew the processes and the parties involved. He would have been satisfied

being an associate on the team and taking the project forward, but the CHRO saw it differently. According to Patrick, "My passion for this and for getting it right resulted in my pretty much being jumped two levels to manage the HRIS system." Patrick had followed his desire to see more efficient systems at work, and the result was a dream-come-true opportunity for him to grow in his career.

Patrick's successful push was characterized by several features we see often in stories of this type of growth. He saw a gap where the company could do better and stepped up to fill it. By sharing his vision, he discovered that others saw the need as well; what was lacking was a leader who was willing to take it on. Although Patrick benefited from the project, his motives were not self-serving. Rather, he was driven by an authentic motive to create a best-in-class system. He was seeking to fix a system that was unnecessarily cumbersome and inefficient, and, by doing so, he served the common good. Finally, Patrick was willing to take the risk. He was unexpectedly given two more departments to manage in addition to the HRIS team, and, although he had never overseen that large a workforce, he was willing to undertake it.



## Networks are essential to creating PULL/PUSH

Networks of relationships are the foundation for pull/push and enable it in four key ways: through the **trust** we build with others, in the **framing and support** we get from people who know us, by facilitating our efforts to **sculpt new roles** to fit our aspirations, and through the **dimensionality** of relationships that helps us to realize our potential in varied spheres within and beyond the workplace. Below, we discuss each of these four factors in depth and provide ways for you to assess how well your network supports your personal growth.

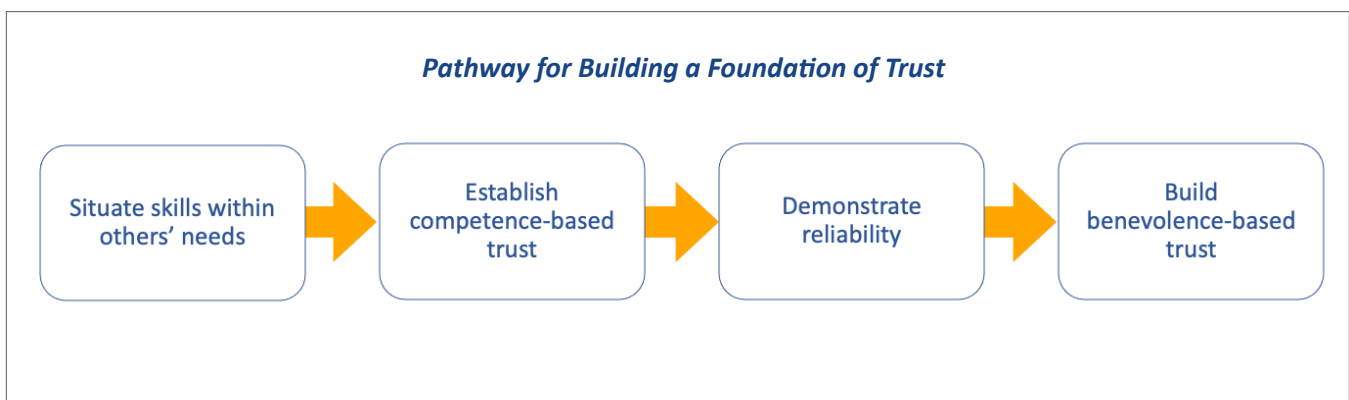
### 1 Relationships with TRUST enable personal growth

When others trust us, they are more willing to take risks on our behalf; they will engage in honest debate with us, confident that we share a commitment to advancing a common good; and they are likely to spread the good word about who we are and what we have accomplished. Our interviewees' experiences of personal growth, and their ability to apply their skills and interests in ways that suited their values and aspirations, relied heavily on the base of trust they had cultivated with others. In fact, sometimes people were offered new opportunities simply on the basis of the leader's feeling that, "I need someone I can trust."

In many cases, our interviewees were given opportunities due to *indirect trust*—not direct experience that leaders had with them but the endorsements those leaders heard from others. A case in point is our example of Sonja, who was offered the position of Chief Diversity Officer based on the buzz created by customers, subordinates, and peers rather than any direct experience that the CHRO had with her.

***We find that people who have developed a foundation of trust in their relationships do so in four ways:***

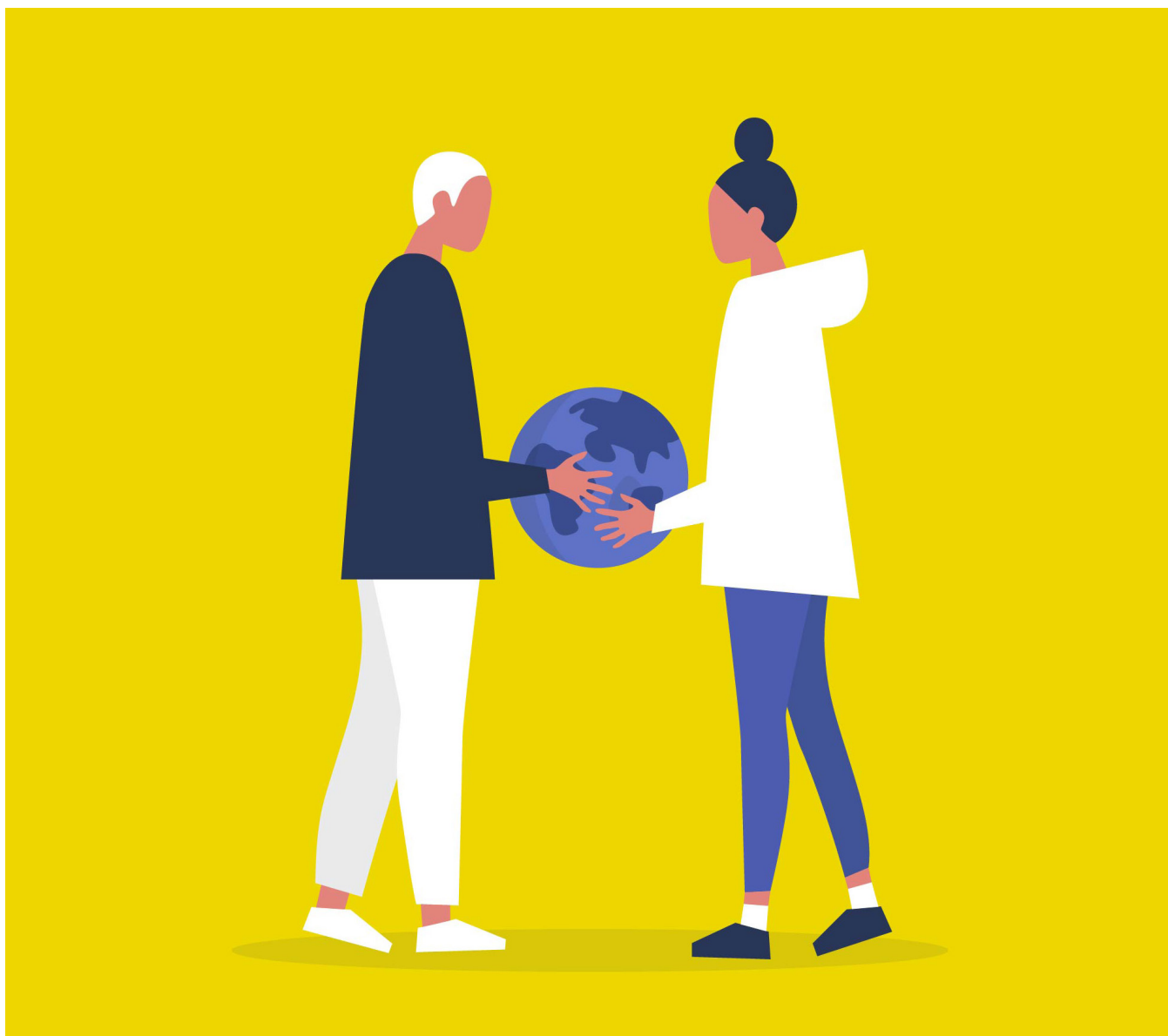
1. Rather than proclaiming their expertise to all who will listen, people establish trust by **situating their capabilities in the context of other people's needs**. They set up exploratory meetings, ask a lot of questions, and find ways they can be useful in helping others to meet their goals. Further, they create mutual wins and give status to others for shared accomplishments.
2. They establish **competence-based** trust, the belief that they know what they are talking about and have the skills to get the job done. This happens, in part, when they display their capabilities and perform well in the context of projects and assignments. Beyond displaying what they know, however, they create trust by highlighting their knowledge boundaries, that is, being clear about what they don't know, admitting mistakes, and not being afraid to ask when they don't know something.
3. They demonstrate **reliability** by **delivering on what they promise and being realistic when setting expectations**. They can also be relied upon to be honest, even when it means pushing back or telling a senior leader something they don't necessarily want to hear.
4. They build **benevolence-based trust**, the belief that they have a genuine concern for the well-being of others. When working with colleagues or customers, they get to know the whole person—not just the side of someone that delivers on tasks—by periodically stepping out of their roles and connecting on non-work subjects, such as hobbies, interests, or aspirations.



Monroe, an executive in the finance industry, depended on all four types of trust for his rise through the ranks. Early on, he became known as the “fix-it guy.” If a client wanted something unusual that nobody knew how to do, they could give it to Monroe, and he would figure it out. Eventually, the firm’s partners sent him to off to client meetings by himself to understand what the client wanted. Monroe had his own approach to building relationships in those meetings. “I may say that I want to get to a particular point of view, but being honest and helping people navigate their own path to it, they come to realize that you have their best interest in mind. And the trust and loyalty you get from that is tremendous.” Over time, one of the senior partners started to travel with him, and it solidified Monroe’s reputation. The partner witnessed how he operated and heard positive feedback from the clients. Monroe was an introvert and had little interest in small talk,

but, with all the time he spent on the road with the senior partner, a relationship developed. They had time to get to know each other personally on plane rides and over meals and to see what they each were made of during long days of pulling together proposals. When Monroe would periodically disagree with the partner, giving his honest opinion even when it meant challenging the senior partner’s views, the level of trust deepened. Monroe’s reputation for honesty and trust spread, and, when he introduced himself to people, it was not unusual for them to say, “I’ve heard your name before. Let’s talk.”

By building trust in our abilities, reliability, and genuine concern for others’ interests, we establish a foundation for our own personal growth. Others are more likely to want to pull us in to opportunities or support our ideas and proposals when we have relationships characterized by these kinds of trust.



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## ACTIVITY: BUILDING TRUST IN YOUR COMPETENCE, RELIABILITY, AND GOODWILL

How can you ensure that you are building trust in relationships? Use the chart below to map a path for building trust through four key actions: situating your skills within others' needs, establishing your competence, demonstrating reliability, and building confidence in your goodwill.

**Identify three key relationships** you have where it is especially important that you build trust. These can be any type of relationships, whether at work, at home, with friends, or in the community. For each relationship, go through the four steps in the pathway and list actions you can take or behaviors you can alter to strengthen trust.

### IDENTIFY THREE CORE RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK OR BEYOND TO FOCUS ON BUILDING TRUST

For each, identify steps you can take or behaviors you can demonstrate more consistently to build trust.

**Relationship 1**

**Relationship 2**

**Relationship 3**

**Situate your capabilities in the context in the context of other people's needs.** For example, set up exploratory meetings, ask a lot of questions, and find ways you can be useful in helping others meet their goals. Create mutual wins.

**Establish competence-based trust** that you know what you're talking about and have the skills to get the job done. For example, highlight your knowledge boundaries, being clear about what you don't know, admitting mistakes, and not being afraid to ask when you don't know something.

**Demonstrate reliability.** For example, set realistic expectations and then come through on your commitments. Be honest, even when it means pushing back or telling people (tactfully) what they might not want to hear.

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**Build benevolence-based trust**, with genuine concern for the well-being of others. When working with colleagues or customers, get to know the whole person by periodically connecting on non-work subjects, such as hobbies, interests, or aspirations. Give status to others for shared accomplishments. Demonstrate that you stand for principles larger than yourself.

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### Example:

Hugh had just moved into a new position, managing a team in a different product group, and wanted to be sure he took the right steps to build trust. In the trust-building grid, he listed the team as one of his three core relationships and identified three steps in the pathway where he had room to improve: acting with discretion, highlighting his knowledge boundaries, and setting realistic expectations.

When it came to acting with discretion, Hugh knew that he would never deliberately betray a confidence but had a tendency to over-share; it was just part of his natural, extraverted personality. He thought hard about people he admired for their discretion and remembered a conversation with his old college basketball coach. At their last reunion, Hugh had been asking about the team's star player and where he had ended up. The coach simply answered, "I'll let him share that with you if he'd like." Hugh was struck by the coach's decision not to share information that perhaps was personal. He stored that phrase in his mind—"I'll let him share that with you if he'd like"—and resolved to use it the next time he had sensitive information that perhaps would not be appropriate to share.

Hugh had always been a quick study and didn't hesitate to let people know when he had the answers. So, it was a new experience for him, leading a group outside of his mainstream, where the technology and the jargon were all new to him. He knew that faking it was not going to fly, and, to establish trust, he had to be open about his knowledge boundaries. Hugh bought himself a Moleskine notebook, and every time he sat in a meeting where people tossed around terms he didn't understand, he jotted them down in the notebook. It made him nervous to show weakness and not be the most knowledgeable person in the room, but every week at their team meeting, Hugh took out his notebook and asked the group to explain the terms to him. Hugh's honesty paid dividends: The team knew they could trust him to be open about his limitations, and they eased into a convivial relationship, ribbing him about the book.

The third trust-building behavior—setting realistic expectations—was a tough one for Hugh. He came of age in a business environment where saying "yes" and pulling out all the stops to get it done was a sign of dedication and capability. However, it became wearing over time as the demands grew, and his ability to deliver everything to everyone started to slip. Hugh thought about a few recent times when he hadn't set realistic expectations about what he could deliver and when. He realized that it tended to happen when he felt rushed and didn't have time to scope out a project or engage in a dialogue around a request. He would say "yes" because it was quicker and easier and let him move on to the next thing on his plate—but he inevitably paid the price later on. Now that he was aware of this behavior, Hugh committed himself to taking the time to fully understand and scope out requests, pushing back when it was more than he could deliver.

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## 2 FRAMING AND SUPPORT from others help us to take risk

Paths to personal growth can appear daunting at first and may not be obvious or easy choices. They often involve the risk of failure, concerns about whether our skills are sufficient for the task, worries that we will pay a price in terms of stress or time with family, or generalized discomfort with the unknowns that lay ahead. Our interviewees found help in overcoming the hurdles of doubt and indecision through their networks of relationships, which provided them with four types of framing and support:

- **Reframing of risk** in ways that cut it down to size
- Advice that kept them **on track with their personally meaningful** values and aspirations
- **Emotional support** that boosted their confidence
- **Practical support** that facilitated taking on a challenge

These types of framing and support can help us to feel *supported*—surrounded by caring, affection, and help when we need it—which helps us to feel that we can step into uncertain or challenging situations.

Consider Juliana, an attorney who discovered early in her career that litigation was not for her. She credits her ability to change course to a relationship she developed with a staffing agency recruiter. The recruiter told her, “Maybe you hate litigation because it’s not for you. Maybe you want to think about doing something else.” From that point on, the recruiter became a sounding board and a source of advice and support, helping Juliana to ultimately find the role that fit with her personality and world view. Juliana made a series of moves from a legal staffing agency to a small company in-house attorney and, finally, to an in-house counsel for a large agricultural firm. Along the way, the recruiter-turned-mentor helped her with advice on things like career choices, transitioning to new positions, and conflict resolution. Importantly, during this time, Juliana came to realize that she did, in fact, want to be a lawyer; she just didn’t want to be a litigator. To be a great litigator, you have to be competitive at your core, and that just wasn’t her personality. Her style was better suited to being an in-house lawyer, where the role is more preventative, and there is an opportunity to counsel people and avert problems rather than fix them afterward. Advice from the recruiter as well as managers who supported her along the way helped Juliana to *keep on track with her personally meaningful aspirations*, which turned out to be working as an in-house counsel.

Juliana’s boss at the agricultural firm also played a key role in her professional growth. She learned from his management style and his ability to build teams; she used to joke that, if he ever left, she would leave the company because she never wanted to report to anyone else. Then, he announced that he was leaving the law department to take on a business unit role. Rather than replace him, the company was splitting his role, and a big part of it would fall to Juliana. She faced the double

whammy of losing her most solid supporter and taking on the responsibilities of an associate general counsel, which she felt were well beyond her capabilities and experience. At the same time, she had a lot going on in her personal life and would have to face pressure on both fronts. She feared, however, that, if she said no to the position, it would be a career-ending move.

Her boss stepped in to give her the *emotional support* she needed. He assured her, “You can do it. You’re just going to need to be patient with how it works out. You’ve sort of had this role, but you’re going to be expected to perform it at a higher level. Maybe you don’t feel ready and maybe you’re not, but you will make yourself ready.” He also *reframed the risk* for her, emphasizing that there were fundamental skills and abilities she had that would compensate for her lack of experience. “You have an uncanny ability to talk to clients in a way they understand, that makes them feel comfortable. It’s like your bedside manner. You never say no; instead, you always come up with a solution. You’re a true business partner that way, and they always appreciate it.” In that light, Juliana could envision herself being successful and feel confident that, even if she didn’t have all the skills, she had the essential ones. Her boss gave her a dose of reality as well, with *practical advice* about the challenges she was likely to face. He warned her that she knew more about the business unit than the person to whom she would report. This would be threatening to the manager, and Juliana should be prepared for some defensive behaviors. That is exactly what happened, but Juliana was able to anticipate and prepare herself for it. Juliana ended up taking the position, and, indeed, it launched her into a new phase of growth. In retrospect, Juliana considers her secret to success to be the relationships she built with managers and mentors and the support she ultimately received from them.

### **Reframing of risk that cuts it down to size or offers a safety net.**

Risk is subjective. While some risk, such as an insurance company’s risk of covering our car, can be objectively assessed with mathematical models, for the most part, we as individuals gauge risk based on our past experiences, gut feelings, and intuition. One person’s view of risk can differ markedly from another’s, based on their vantage point. As a result, we might be willing to take greater risks when we have other people in our lives who “open the aperture” so we can see framings larger or different than our own.

Jared, for example, now considers himself lucky when he has the opportunity to fail. He used to feel that he should be completely confident in his ability to succeed before taking on a challenge. Then, he faced an opportunity on a big project that he wanted, wasn’t sure he could deliver, and considered backing out—until a good friend gave him a “nice bucket of cold water in the face.” She said, “The people who are great

at their jobs go into everything not knowing if they're going to succeed, and they figure out how to pull it off. The people who are good at their jobs know they'll succeed ahead of time, and they execute against it. So, you have to decide if you're going to be good or great." That changed the whole calculus for Jared. From that point on, he considered risk to be an integral part of accomplishment and was willing to step up because he now saw it as the way that great things get done.

Feeling that we have a safety net can also make risk taking more acceptable. Miranda, a tech executive, often turned to her brother for advice when she was unsure whether she was making the right move. He had a way of cutting risk down to size. When Miranda doubted her ability to take on a completely different role, heading a new ventures group, he said, "Look, if your CEO, who's an expert in this area, believes in you, who are you to say, 'I'm not worthy?' And you've been successful your whole career; you can do anything you want. So you get fired. Big deal. This will give you new energy." Hearing these words from her brother, who knew her better than just about anyone in the world and was a respected professional in his own right, helped Miranda to feel secure in her ability to land on her feet, no matter what. Her experience and expertise as well as the breadth of relationships she had formed were her safety net and would help her land another position if this one didn't work out.

Risky ventures often feel less daunting when we have someone who takes the plunge along with us. Managers help to mitigate risk when they consider themselves a partner in the gamble. For example, Erik, a leader in a growing technology company, had a manager who would say, "Look, if you fail, you and I both fail because I put you in this spot. I trust that you're a good person to do this, so I'll live with the outcome of it. And I'll back you up." Knowing that his manager would stand behind him removed some of the fear and enabled Erik to focus on the possibilities rather than the downsides. Even if he did not succeed, he had the opportunity to grow as a professional and take the experience forward.

### **Advice that keeps us on track with our personally meaningful values and aspirations**

Societally defined values for status and money can lure us away from our personally meaningful values and aspirations, and we often hear how people depended on a spouse, friends, or parents to keep them on track with what truly mattered. Eliza, for example, relied on numerous conversations with a broad network of friends and colleagues to see that leaving her comfortable corporate position to start her own business was the right path for her. Because Eliza had developed longstanding relationships of trust and respect, people were willing to take time and talk with her about what was best for her future. She





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trusted their advice and, as a result, was able to see that her purpose and passion lay in creating holistic wellness programs. These conversations gave her the confidence to set a high bar and not undersell herself. Because she had stayed in touch with others who had left the corporate world and were a few steps ahead of her on their journey, she was able to learn from them what to expect, the things to forgive herself on, and what to not obsess over because it would all work out. Eliza's network gave her the courage she needed to take a risky step, confident that she was following the right path for herself.

People who are further along in their own developmental journey often enable us to see where we want to go or whom we want to be. As one interviewee described it, "He's six years older than I am, and I see where he is, and I want to be in a similar situation five or six years from now. So, I ask myself, how do I model that?" One of our interviewees had a group of people she considered her "board of advisors"—people she admired because they showed up in the world the way she wanted to. These were people who had families, as she did; who had a dimension of their professional life that focused on societal impact, as she wanted to; and who had made interesting career moves, done with a style and values that she respected. They included someone who was retired after a successful career and someone younger than her with a different generational perspective. The key was, "I want to surround myself with people who make me better."

### **Emotional support that boosts our confidence**

Feeling as though we are emotionally supported by family, friends, or colleagues can give us greater confidence to take on challenges. Spouses or partners and family are often central to this role. Especially powerful is when the family has a sense that one member's growth is everyone's growth. Knowing that the family is all in, even if the opportunity may require some sacrifices, can create an entirely different mindset around a stretch opportunity. As one biotech leader described it, "I would bounce things off of them, like 'Hey, they're offering me this,' and the family would say, 'Yeah, Dad, go for it.' You have to have those discussions, especially when it means I'll have to take more trips and be away from home. Even when my wife says, 'I don't like it, but we'll support it.' That makes a giant difference. Now you can approach the role from a foundation of, 'I'm going to make it happen. I'm supported.'"

Often, a spouse/partner, friend, or colleague will see things in us that we don't see ourselves. Our interviewees often said, "My spouse knows me better than I do." For example, when Mei, a head of strategic planning, was debating whether she should take on a higher-level role that would place additional household burdens on her husband, he said to her, "I can see that you're not growing now, and you're happiest when you are. I think you should take this new role." She hadn't realized that she was coasting, not really engaged or rising to a challenge, but her husband could see that and knew how important it was to her

well-being. He knew that, for the family as a whole to be happy, Mei had to be happy, and he was willing to take on additional responsibilities to make that happen.

### **Practical support that facilitates taking on a challenge**

Emotional support and confidence building are important, but when the rubber hits the road and we are faced with a group that we are not sure how to manage, a new technology to learn, or an impossible schedule of getting the kids to their activities, it helps to have practical support as well. It is nice to hear, "You can do this; you're so much better than you think you are," but even better to have that reinforced with advice on what to expect in a new position and how, as a practical matter, we can ramp up to new responsibilities.

Sonja, for example, who decided to take the position of Chief Diversity Officer with little to no experience in the field, was fortunate that her boss, the CHRO, stepped in to help while Sonja was ramping up her skills. As part of her new position, Sonja would need to meet with stakeholders who wanted a progress report with a full explanation of diversity metrics. At first, Sonja felt that she had no idea how to speak effectively to the metrics, and never would. Her boss stepped in to handle the initial presentations, demonstrating for Sonja how to interpret the data and handle challenging conversations. Despite Sonja's doubts, the CHRO assured her, "Watch, in six to eight months, you'll be doing this like a pro." In fact, she was, thanks to the grace period her boss allowed and the opportunity to learn from someone willing to share how it's done. Sonja's ability to succeed was strengthened not only by words of support but by the very practical steps the CHRO took to help her to learn in her new role.

Support at home often makes a key difference in leaders' ability to pursue opportunities. It's one thing for a spouse to say, "Honey, you're great, you can do it" and another for that spouse to recognize how we might be stretched to the limit between work and home responsibilities, and offer to pitch in. As one leader described it, "I would say my husband has always had more faith in me than I do in myself. And there is no way I would have been able to do ANY of these leadership jobs without him. Not only did he support me psychologically and bolster me, but he rolled up his sleeves with the family." He took on more of the household work in terms of making lunches, getting the kids to school, and driving them to activities, all of which took a substantial amount of time, planning, and coordination.

Sometimes, we face a unique challenge, and it takes a concerted effort to reach out and find the few people who have experienced something similar. Doris, a rising star in the automotive industry, had the opportunity for a foreign assignment to Venezuela. It promised to be a huge transition, and the prospect of moving her whole family to a new country sent her blood pressure soaring. As Doris described it, "One of the things that I did proactively before moving down there was trying to find women who had taken their

families overseas. Not men, because I could find the men a dime a dozen. They're everywhere, right? But if you need a woman who has actually taken her husband out of his career to a new country, those are hard to find." She did find three, and the hours-long discussions she had with each of them turned out to be life-saving for her family. Doris and her husband were able to anticipate and head off the stresses they would face with him home, caring for the family, and not speaking the language. They were able to immerse

themselves in the foreign culture rather than wishing things were the same as back home. In the end, her husband was even happy to stay if they got an extension. This was all thanks to the advice of women who had been there before, made the mistakes, and passed on their learning. "If we didn't know about the stresses that were heading our way, it would have gone a whole lot differently; but we were prepared to handle them when they did come."

### ***Different People Know Us Differently***

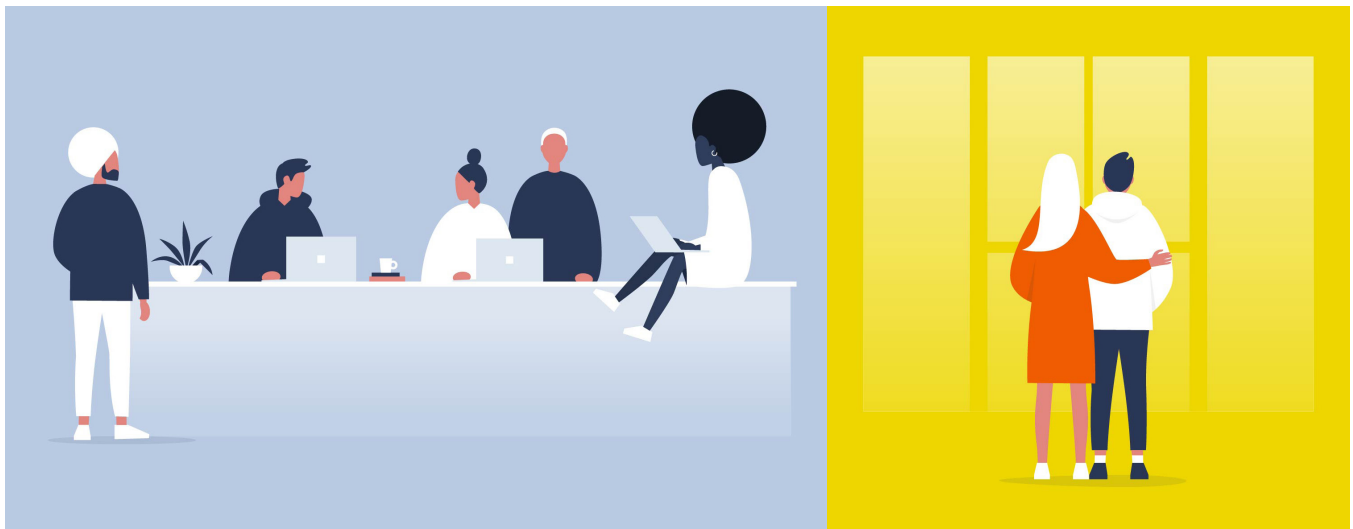
Some people know us personally: our quirks and vulnerabilities, what makes us tick, the hobbies we enjoy, and the person we aspire to be. They may have known us as a kid or when we were young and starry-eyed. Others know our work environment, the challenges it poses, and the opportunities it offers. They may have seen us operate under pressure, put our all behind a team effort, or find clever solutions to problems. If we're lucky, we have a few people in our network who know us across these dimensions and can see more of the whole person we are.

Emotional support often comes from a family member or friend who knows us well on a personal level, but those closest to us can also produce "false positives." A spouse may say to us, "Of course you can do this. You're the best," but they may be biased by their affection and not fully grasp just how big the business challenges are or the reality of how our abilities stack up against them. People who know us *and* know the work environment can often provide the most objectively reassuring support.

For example, Corrine and her husband are both physicians, and she can turn to him for a broad range of advice and support. When Corrine was facing a decision of whether to step into a role as department head, her husband could grasp the implications for her personal growth and fulfillment and her odds of success, and he advised, "You can do this, and you need to be able to shape what the department looks like." It was all the more credible because he knew what would make her happy and could also anticipate the political and personnel-related challenges she would face.

Likewise, having a work colleague who shares a similar situation or values for life outside of work can provide perspective on not just your work capabilities but how different opportunities fit with the whole of who you are. Adrienne, a financial executive, described one of the most important people she talked to when considering whether to take on a role in a different business unit: "Colleague has become friend. She is a diverse female like me, about the same number of years in the profession, with kids about the same age. We think very similarly about our values, our role in our families, and how we raise our kids." Other colleagues were able to give Adrienne good advice, but, "They have no idea what I have to manage when I get home, the other roles I play in life." They also weren't able to factor in both Adrienne's capability to do the job and whether the job was a good fit for her values and aspirations.

Given the many dimensions in our lives that contribute to personal growth, having a broad range of family, friends, peers, and managers in our network can be helpful because they will each know us differently.



## ACTIVITY: ASSESSING YOUR NETWORK FOR RELATIONSHIPS THAT PROVIDE FRAMING AND SUPPORT

Looking at the chart below, do you have people who know you personally, know your work environment, or both, in ways that support your personal growth? For each type of framing and support, see whether you can list one to three people who know you personally or know your business environment. Where you have blanks, identify steps you can take to fill in the gaps.

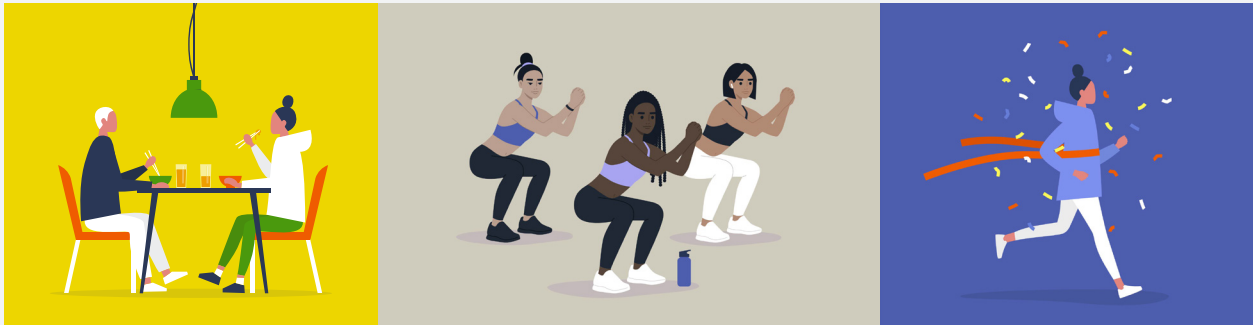
IDENTIFY PEOPLE WHO SUPPORT YOUR PERSONAL GROWTH			
Types of Framing and Support	People who know you personally	People who know your business environment	Steps to fill in network gaps
<b>Reframing of risk</b> in ways that cut it down to size			
Advice that keeps us <b>on track with our personally meaningful</b> values and aspirations			
<b>Emotional support</b> that boosts our confidence			
<b>Practical support</b> that facilitates taking on a challenge			

**Some examples of steps you can take to connect with people who can provide framing and support are:**

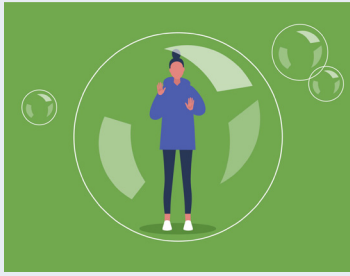
- Reach out to people who have gone through similar life challenges. This is what Doris did in the story above when she reached out to other women who had relocated their families internationally. You may not know these people well but are likely to connect over shared experiences.
- The people who tend to know us best on a personal level are family and long-time friends; yet, we sometimes take them for granted and don't prioritize time with them. One way to ensure that we carve out time for family and friends is to create structures that connect us with them on a regular basis, for example, an annual outing with college friends, Friday phone calls to extended family members, and date night with your spouse.
- Take deliberate steps to retain workplace relationships, even when you move on. Many of the people we interviewed obtained emotional and practical support from former bosses or other mentors from earlier in their careers. Ways to stay in touch include stopping by when you're in town, passing on information or connections they would find helpful, or cards on special occasions.
- Engage in workplace activities that enable you to connect with colleagues on a personal level, such as boot camp in the company fitness center, affinity groups, or company-sponsored volunteering in the community.

**Example:**

After filling out the grid, Samantha could see that she had a strong network of people who could provide her with emotional support and keep her on track with her personally meaningful values and aspirations. She had a supportive spouse and close friends who knew her well and with whom she could share her hopes and fears. However, they would all tell her she was a superstar and could accomplish anything and didn't really understand the realities of her workplace. Samantha saw that she had gaps in her network when it came to people who knew both her work environment and her personally. She decided to take two steps. One was to reach out and reconnect with people she had worked with early in her career, whom she had enjoyed knowing but had gradually lost touch with. On business trips, she set up lunches or dinners with former bosses and colleagues who were thrilled to hear from her. The other step she took was to sign up for the company team, running a local 10K race. The team trained together, spending two evenings a week pushing each to go faster and farther, and letting down the work personas they presented during the day. Samantha grew close with a couple of colleagues who ran at about her pace, and they would talk about joys and challenges in their personal and professional lives. Between the renewed connections with former mentors and colleagues and the new connections with runners at her workplace, Samantha developed relationships that could help her to frame things in a positive yet practical light.



## AVOID THE “ECHO CHAMBERS” THAT CAN DERAIL PERSONAL GROWTH



As we progress in our careers, it's easy to get caught in echo chambers that recirculate and reinforce certain behaviors or beliefs, limiting our ability to consider other possibilities. We hear stories of how people get caught up in the prevalent thinking and feel like they were succeeding in life—until one day, something happens that shakes it all up, and they wake up and say, "Why am I doing this? I'm not who I want to be." One successful Silicon Valley executive told us about how she had spent seven years working non-stop, pushing hard, generating revenue, and thinking that she had great friends at work. Then, her mother passed away, and none of her colleagues came to the funeral. It was her wake-up moment to consider whether she was working in the right environment.

Another technology leader who was a round-the-clock worker described how he suddenly had a day off and realized he had no friends or hobbies, but had given himself over to what the corporate world defined as success rather than thinking about his own aspirations. The more we have a single-minded focus on work, the more susceptible we become to letting the system define our worth by its own standards and cutting us off from more broad-based opportunities for development and growth.

Raphael, for example, was on his way to climbing the ladder in financial services. Having grown up in a low-income household, he was eager to live the American dream, pulling himself out of poverty and becoming a Wall Street hotshot. Early in his career, he was laser focused on his career, making good money, buying expensive cars, and, in his own words, “falling into the trap of ‘No amount is ever enough.’” His life-changing moment came when he was in London, participating in a management training program, where each evening the trainees would have dinner and drinks with company executives. During those evening conversations, Raphael heard a consistent theme, along the lines of: "My wife is in Singapore while I'm here in London. My kids are in boarding school in South Africa. And you're going to meet my girlfriend later tonight." It dumbfounded him. To Raphael, these executives were living the millionaire's version of a broken household, something he would never want to do. After the training program, Raphael was offered an international manager role, but he said, “No,” returned to the United States, and took a corporate job that let him build the type of family life that was important to him.

Raphael created a tool that helps him to avoid the echo chamber of the corporate world: a simple four-block plan focused on the financial, physical, family, and mind/soul areas of life. Each New Year's Day, he reflects on the four blocks and challenges himself to define what is important and what he is trying to build. Because he invests time up front to set his priorities, it is easier to say “no” and avoid temptations that would lead him astray. When faced with a lucrative opportunity that would put him on an airplane most weeks, the structure helps him to say, “No. Actually, what's more important to me is being at the dinner table and making sure that every night I can read and say bedtime prayers with the kids. And the sacrifices I'm going to make for that are minuscule in comparison, so I can continue to drive by that billboard that will show me the brand-new Cadillac Escalade. I can continue to see on social media these great weekends in Bali and Tahiti that couples are having and just say to myself, ‘Nope, not for me.’”

We can avoid echo chambers by being wary of the dynamics that keep us tethered to work to the exclusion of other spheres of life. Dynamics to look out for include:

- Wanting to please others.** When we are not clear about our own identity and aspirations, we can end up trying to mold ourselves according to how others define worth. For example, one of our interviewees held on to a legal career that didn't fit her because her parents found it a source of pride to have a daughter who was an attorney.
- Short-term satisfaction** from climbing the ladder and day-to-day successes that are rewarded but not necessarily in alignment with our values. We then lose sight of the larger direction our career is taking us.
- Comfort and complacency** that can set in when we become good at something and start to operate on autopilot. It then takes energy to try something new that we may initially not be as good at.
- Fatigue.** When we come home flat-out tired, we may lack the energy to engage with others at points where we have the ability to move into new spheres.

The key to avoiding the echo chamber is to ensure that we build dimensionality in our lives and engage in a diversity of relationships that keep us open to different perspectives and challenge our thinking. These relationships can come from any sphere of life, such as family, community, spiritual, or athletic. They enable us to “play offense” against prevailing beliefs and help us to define our self-worth and pursue our aspirations for growth according to our personal values.

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### 3 ROLE SCULPTING aligns roles and expectations with growth opportunities

Often, our interviewees found themselves launched into situations where their role had little definition or didn't quite fit with their past experience or their established inventory of skills. The mismatch between what they had done in the past and what they were expected to accomplish in the future often caused stress and raised doubts about whether they were the right person for the job. Alternatively, they might feel as though the role as it was defined did not maximize opportunities for the company, and they could make more out of it than others had in the past. Bridging the gap from past to future was important to their success, and many of them accomplished this through *role sculpting*.

Role sculpting involves individuals reflecting on their work environment and taking actions to structure their role so they can draw upon their strengths, contribute where they have the most value to add, focus on the more fulfilling tasks that align with their interests, or find better meaning and purpose in their work.<sup>11</sup> It is important as a path to personal growth because it helps us to allocate our time to activities that expand our learning and capabilities rather than getting bogged down with more trivial or tedious tasks; enables us to contribute our talents without getting overwhelmed by the details that are better left to the technical experts; and lets us draw bright lines that help preserve the lifestyle important to our health and well-being. Role sculpting is a deliberate activity that depends on effective communication, negotiation, and interactions with others to establish boundaries for the role. As a result, relationships play a major role in our ability to sculpt roles the way we want.

#### ***We found that our interviewees sculpted their roles in four key ways:***

- To focus on their unique value-add
- For expanded impact
- To shed responsibilities and transition to higher level work
- To live their desired lifestyle and values

#### **Role sculpting around a unique value-add**

It can be intimidating to walk into a new role where everyone else knows the product line, technology, or business environment better than we do, or is just more immersed in the field than we are. Our interviewees were able to succeed in these situations by recognizing the core abilities they had to offer and shaping the role around the unique ways they could add value that others couldn't—not trying to force-fit themselves into the mold of the people around them.

Lokesh, for example, was interviewing for a senior IT position at a premier research institute, feeling a bit intimidated by the number of people on the board with Nobel prizes and the similarly awe-inspiring accomplishments of the scientific staff. In one of his first conversations with colleagues, the scientist who would be his main partner introduced himself by saying:

"I was Yale mathematics. I went to Oxford and took a first in maths, decided I wanted to study medicine, so I went to Harvard Medical School. Then I got a PhD in machine learning and on Thursdays, I run my cardiology practice." At this point, Lokesh laughed and said, "What am I supposed to say? I enjoy long walks on the beach and woodworking?" The conversation was so over-the-top that trying to compete became a non-issue for Lokesh, and he was able to envision his place, not in trying to have great biological insights or even understand half of what the PhD scientists were talking about, but in acting as the person who could take a different approach to IT, challenging the way existing systems were developed and run. In fact, that's exactly what the institute needed and wanted.

At the same time, Lokesh figured out where it was worth going deep into an area of expertise not his own and how to engage with a colleague who would train him. Lokesh found out that the chargebacks that the institute levied for the use of large-scale computing were an ongoing source of frustration for scientists. The charges were governed by an arcane process that none of his predecessors had chosen to tackle. Lokesh found a colleague on his team with a finance background, and time and time again, Lokesh would sit down with him and say, "I know you've told me this nine times already, but we have to do that again from the beginning," until he understood where the problems and solutions lay. Sticking to his main value-add but armed with allies who helped him to understand as much of the process as he needed to know, Lokesh was able to challenge and revamp the system.

Other interviewees similarly sculpted new roles around their own core abilities, often in areas such as managing relationships, building teams, and getting people to see what they're capable of doing and motivating them—without getting drawn into trying to match technical expertise with the specialists. Key to their success was the ability to form relationships with others who could complement their skills with technical expertise of their own.

#### **Role sculpting for expanded impact**

Sometimes, our interviewees found themselves in a role that felt too constrained relative to the opportunities they saw, problems they wanted to solve, or the voice they wanted to have. However, they recognized that a role is what you make it and, with the support and encouragement of colleagues and mentors, were able to expand the bounds of their authority or initiate programs they felt strongly about.

Frieda had been raised to respect the adults in charge and defer to people at the top. She carried these rules with her into the business world, often assuming that, if someone in a more senior position held an opinion, it should supersede her own. This began to change as she herself rose through the ranks with a leading healthcare organization and with help from mentors



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who gave her confidence and reset her expectations of the role she should be playing. One of these mentors helped to boost her confidence, reminding Frieda of her talents and encouraging her to be bolder in bringing her ideas forward. She began to see that she had a voice and that her voice mattered. She had been approaching her role as that of a highly competent order-taker when, in fact, she had the capability to see business implications beyond her own area and argue for more productive strategies. When Frieda discovered that competitors were offering services that her firm was not, she took it to the executive leadership team. She came prepared to lay out the competitive landscape and explain why the firm needed to reconsider its position, presenting factual evidence from the research. Against pushback from other executives who were hesitant, Frieda reported what competitors were doing and the risk to her firm if they didn't respond. As Frieda described it, "My peers would say, 'We need to know the guardrails,' and I would surprise myself by saying, 'No, we need to set the guardrails.'" In essence, Frieda had set a new bar for herself and her role, sculpting it from one in which she followed the lead of others to one in which she was the person who broke through the inertia to get things done.

Other interviewees likewise expanded their roles in ways that better situated them to address the needs of internal or external clients, to reach out across functions and engage with their peers, or to act as agents of change.

### **Role sculpting to *shed past responsibilities and transition to higher-level work***

A trap that rising stars often fall into is they fail to let go of the transactional responsibilities associated with their former position, creating a strain on their ability to fully transition to a more strategic role. This is especially true for people who become known for always saying "yes." Others may continue to solicit their help, and the challenge becomes changing others' expectations and delegating tasks so that time is freed up for the higher-level responsibilities of the new role.

Max had been promoted to a more senior position in his firm's procurement division. His goal was to work on projects that would drive value for the company by revamping the structure of their purchasing relationships. Creating relationships, conducting successful negotiations, and setting the tone for the future were the areas where he could contribute at a higher level, but he struggled to convert his former transactional relationships to strategic ones. Part of the problem was his own reluctance to let go and trust that someone else could do the work to his level of satisfaction while maintaining the relationships that he had built over time. As a result, he struggled to find the time for the exciting aspects of the job, the ones that would more fully utilize his talents.

Max had a close relationship with his father, a retired engineer with 40 years of business experience, whom he often visited and would turn to for business advice. He would ask such questions as, "How you identify that certain people

are ready and primed for delegation, and for the people who aren't, how do you get them to that spot? How do you get people to take the leap?" Max's conversations with his father helped him to figure out how to delegate work to the right people. He was able to create win-win situations by identifying people who were interested in taking on the work and for whom it presented an opportunity to grow and spotlight their talents. Consequently, Max saw an increase in his capacity to work on the projects that drove business value. The conversations with his father were essential to helping him see how he could comfortably let go of past responsibilities.

Other interviewees, citing similar challenges to changing people's expectations, addressed them through delegation, hiring, and having frank conversations with people about the responsibilities they would take on versus the ones they would not.

### **Role sculpting to *desired lifestyle and values***

We might aspire to a role and find that it fits our talents and offers us stimulation and learning, but then discover that it overwhelms our ability to have the personal life we want. We spoke with interviewees who came to a point of reckoning with their jobs, took time off to reflect, and returned with plans to better carve out roles that would accommodate the lifestyle they wanted.

Inez, who had risen to an executive position in a leading healthcare company, felt that she had reached a breaking point. She was getting sick way too often, not sleeping, and suffering with migraines. She was losing weight and was constantly stressed out. Although her job gave her a sense of fulfillment and purpose, it had taken over her life. After long conversations with her husband, they concluded that it was best for her to take a break. She took a two-month leave from her job and went back to her native Argentina, where she could spend time with friends and family, reflect on what was important, and reenergize herself. With the help of her husband and friends, she decided how to reconfigure her work life. She would return to work gradually, at first part-time, and then slowly build up to being a full-time employee. Importantly, she altered her international travel schedule. Instead of the grueling routine where she would spend eight hours on a plane, stay for a day and then fly back, she negotiated a deal where, on international trips, she would stay for three to four weeks. The change was dramatic, but it enabled her to come back reenergized.

People often approach Inez and want to know how she pulled it off, how she had the courage to live her own life and make sure that work didn't become the be-all and end-all for her—because they themselves feel trapped. According to Inez, the answer was taking a break and relying on the support of her husband and a close group of friends to figure out a plan. They gave her the courage to sculpt her job to fit the life she wanted.

## ACTIVITY: SCULPTING YOUR ROLE FOR GREATER PERSONAL GROWTH

Are there ways that sculpting your role would help you to focus more on your unique value-add, to have greater impact, to shed the more tedious or trivial tasks, or to live your desired lifestyle? In the first column of the chart below, describe how you would like to sculpt your role. Then in the second column, identify how you can draw on relationships with others to help you make those changes.

ROLE-SCULPTING GOALS	How would you like to sculpt your role?	How can you draw upon relationships with others to help you make the change?
	<i>Describe specifically what you would like to change.</i>	<i>For example, advice, collaborations, delegation, resources, political support</i>
<b>To focus on my unique value-add</b> <i>Example: Take a team approach to projects or presentations, partnering with colleagues who can fill in your knowledge gaps.</i>		
<b>For expanded impact</b> <i>Example: Engage others in your vision by demonstrating how it benefits them and the company at large</i>		
<b>To shed past responsibilities and transition to higher level work</b> <i>Example: Delegate to people who will see the responsibilities as an opportunity for growth and learning at their existing level.</i>		
<b>To live my desired lifestyle and values</b> <i>Example: Brainstorm with people who know you and know your work environment about how your role could be altered.</i>		

### Example:

Arthur knew that he wasn't much good at focusing on details. As a leader in a financial services firm, he had often struggled to keep track of short-term deliverables and execute on technically oriented tasks. When it came to managing teams, however, he was a star. His core skillset was being able to connect with people, managing relationships, and turning dysfunctional groups into smoothly operating teams. After looking at the chart on role sculpting, Arthur knew he had to shape his role to focus on people management as his unique value-add. As a result, he staffed his team with people who were technically proficient so that they didn't need to come to him for details and who could run project timelines and deliver without a lot of supervision. In ongoing conversations, he shaped their expectations that he was available to guide them on high-level strategy, but they needed to keep track of the execution. The arrangement gave his subordinates the opportunity to shine as project managers and Arthur the ability to do what he did best.

## CONSIDER MOVING AT YOUR PEAK, NOT JUST WHEN THINGS GET DIFFICULT

Unhappiness in our jobs, conflict on the home front, or other stressful circumstances can serve as natural prompts to think about how we can change things for the better. How often, though, do we think about making a change when things are going well? When we're at the top of our game or have mastered what it takes to be successful in a position, it's easy to keep going in the same direction and miss opportunities to learn and grow. Many of our interviewees, however found ways to keep moving, even at their peak—and the prompts often came from the people around them. For example, Dylan, an executive at a food products company, knows he doesn't want to stagnate in his skills, so he relies on relationships to keep sending challenges his way. "At each step, I have tried to get as much time and build relationships with leaders at all levels of the company. This is a mechanism for me to understand the true pulse of the firm and identify the true problems. It enables me to walk into the CHRO's office or the CFO's office and say, 'Here's a problem I see in the company. Here's how I see I can fix it. Give me a chance.'" Dylan also schedules time with a range of people within and outside his company to test ideas about where he might go next. One summer, he had contacted 17 people whom he respected from all walks of life to talk informally about whether he should start a company, write a book, go into venture capital, or continue to do good work where he was. With their advice, he was able to continue to learn and grow without becoming complacent in his success.



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## 4 DIMENSIONALITY

As life gets busy, we run the risk of falling out of groups and passions that once engaged us and letting work become the sole focus of our lives. The consequence for personal growth is that we become narrower versions of ourselves, with limited opportunities to realize our full potential, whether at work or in our personal lives. However, if we can add dimensionality to our networks—connecting with a diversity of people or groups who expand our horizons—we realize greater opportunities for growth.

### ***Our interviewees found dimensionality important to personal growth in four key ways:***

- The alternative philosophies and viewpoints we hear from people outside our mainstream helps us to **discover or reinforce our values**. We may find different ways to measure ourselves that don't necessarily conform to prevailing societal norms but that help us to understand and pursue what is truly important in our lives.
- Investing in diverse spheres of life **moderates risk** because our eggs are not all in one basket. If we are struggling at work, for example, our sense of worth can still be bolstered by the role we play with family or the sense of accomplishment we might get from helping out at the local food pantry.
- When we expand the dimensionality of our networks, we enhance our ability to **develop our skills and abilities in different contexts**. For example, volunteering to help manage a non-profit may help us to grow as a contributor to the betterment of society and as a manager.
- Engaging in activities outside of work helps us to see broader possibilities to pursue and to **become a more complete version of ourselves**, realizing our potential as more than a worker, perhaps as an artist, an activist, or an athlete, or in our role as a friend or family member.

Consider Simon, who spent years as a successful marketing manager in a large technology company, but found that the more he worked, the more miserable he became. The business was run in a top-down manner, giving him little leeway to explore new ideas, and success was narrowly defined as an ability to hit the numbers. Quarterly business reviews focused strictly on economic measures, with little to no discussion of how they could improve efficiency for customers or career opportunities for employees. When Simon came home in the evening, his family knew they had to be hands-off for an hour so he could decompress. Feeling deflated by work, Simon took six months off and then joined a small company, where he thought his values would better align.

The move turned out to be a pivotal growth opportunity for Simon, but not in the way he expected. The CEO of the company was a big believer in community involvement. He encouraged Simon to join local boards, even if it meant that he would need to take time during the workday. It was not something Simon would have thought of himself but, rather, a “pull” from the CEO to get him involved outside of the narrow sphere to which he would otherwise have defaulted. Granted, there were business advantages to being involved in the community, but the main benefit Simon realized was personal. He grew as a role model for his children, as a professional, and, in his own eyes, as a contributor to the good of society. With the more expansive network he developed, connecting with volunteers from all walks of life, “It helped me to see that there are other things to measure myself by than just how well I’m doing in my particular career.” Simon was proud to show his children the work he was doing for charity. In fact, he said, “It feels good when my kids see me spending time, even though I’m not at home. When I’m gone on a Saturday at a fundraising event for a particular board, that sets a good example for them.” Simon was also gratified to see how his skills applied beyond the technology industry. It gave him a greater sense of security, knowing that his skills were portable should he ever need to make a move. Even more so, he felt a great deal of satisfaction in being able to have an impact on these organizations. Simon found that his volunteer activities made him a more complete version of himself: as someone who gives generously to others, as a devoted father, and as a skilled professional who could make a difference.

The pull of work can be all-consuming, and it often takes purposeful steps to ensure that we are connecting with a diverse set of people and groups. Our interviewees added dimensionality to their lives through four main channels:

- **Friends/Community:** Often forged through collective activities, such as athletic endeavors or book or dinner clubs.
- **Civic/Volunteer:** Contributing to meaningful groups that create purpose and bring us in contact with diverse but like-minded people.
- **Family:** Through actions like caring for family, modeling valued behaviors, and living traditions and values with extended family.
- **Spiritual/Artistic:** Interactions around religion, music, art, poetry, and other aesthetic spheres of life that put work in a broader context.

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## ACTIVITY: HOW MULTI-DIMENSIONAL IS YOUR NETWORK?

Use the chart below to see whether you connect with others on at least two or three dimensions outside of work. In the first column, identify whether/how you connect with others in each of the four spheres. In the second column, identify ways you can engage in activities and groups in each sphere and reallocate your time to make these connections a priority. As you do so, consider two strategies that our interviewees often found successful:

**Reach back to *activities from your past*.** Many of our interviewees had dropped out of pursuits they had enjoyed in their younger days, but the foundations remained for them to easily re-engage in activities such as a community basketball team, the local church choir, or fishing on weekends with a group of friends.

**Reach back to *relationships from your past*.** Our interviewees were able to renew relationships that had been neglected over time and maintain them with structured activities, such as monthly dinners at people’s homes, an ongoing virtual Monopoly game, or annual outings with college friends.

### FOUR DIMENSIONS OF YOUR PERSONAL NETWORK

#### How do you connect with others along this dimension?

#### What steps can you take to build connection in this sphere?

**1. Friends/Community:** Often forged through collective activities, such as athletic endeavors or book or dinner clubs.

*Example: Join the basketball team at the local community center.*

**2. Civic/Volunteer:** Contributing to meaningful groups that create purpose and bring us in contact with diverse but like-minded people.

*Example: Volunteer your skills and experience to teach financial literacy to inner-city kids.*

**3. Family:** Through actions like caring for family, modeling valued behaviors, and living traditions and values with extended family.

*Example: Prioritize family traditions, such as dinnertime together and cooking recipes handed down through the generations.*

**4. Spiritual/Artistic:** Interactions around religion, music, art, poetry, and other aesthetic spheres of life that put work in a broader context.

*Example: Re-ignite your passion for classical music by dusting off your violin and joining a local chamber music group.*

### Example:

Lorena felt that she had no spare time between her work responsibilities as a senior leader in a healthcare organization and raising two school-age children. In looking at the dimensionality chart, she could see that her only sphere of engagement outside of work was family, but she wished she could do more to feel like the athlete she used to be. In college, she had played soccer, but that activity had dropped off as responsibilities for work and family escalated. Trying to figure out how she could re-engage with sports, yet not encroach on family time, Lorena reached out to some of the moms at her kids’ school. They decided to start a parent/kid soccer team and play informal games every Sunday afternoon, followed by pizza dinner for the families. Lorena realized a triple bonus from the games: She was able to engage in sports again, made new friendships in the neighborhood with other athletic-minded parents, and spent more time with her family.

# Conclusion

While it might seem as though personal growth requires us to sit down and draft a five-year plan, we find that growth trajectories are far from that orderly. More so than planning, personal growth relies on relationships that open our worlds up to new opportunities. As we build relationships characterized by trust and dimensionality, we gain emotional and practical support and the ability to sculpt roles in ways that help us to realize our full potential





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