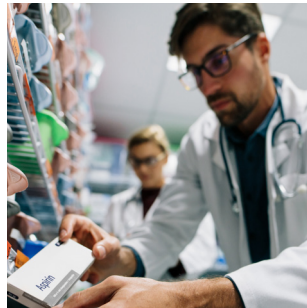


NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS



Execute Work Efficiently
**Cultivate Influence Without
Authority Through Network Roles**



INNOVATION RESOURCE CENTER for HUMAN RESOURCES

This lesson is one in a series of twelve case-study learning modules that emerged from IRC4HR™ sponsored research on the networking behaviors of successful people; those in their organizations' high-performance category who also score higher on measures of career satisfaction, well-being, and engagement. Each module explores a different dimension of how these people build, maintain, and leverage personal networks in ways that help them produce innovative solutions, execute work, and thrive in their careers. It also captures what they do as leaders to bring others along with them.

Rob Cross has mapped networks and individual (and collective) performance in 300+ organizations to identify the network strategies of high performers. With funding from IRC4HR, these strategies (captured in a white paper, "[The Invisible Network Strategies of Successful People](#)," and a series of personal case-study learning modules) can now be shared and adopted by individuals and organizations interested in building and nurturing successful, high-performing, and personally fulfilling networks at work and beyond.

IRC4HR was founded in 1926 as IRC, a non-profit organization designed to promote positive employment relationships and advances in human resources management through consulting, research, and education.

More than 90 years later, the organization continues to bring together employers, academics, and other stakeholder communities to fund action research and share insights on a wide range of topics, including a current focus on the implications of technology and digital disruption on the future of work, organizations, leadership, and the workforce.



EXECUTE WORK EFFICIENTLY

PRINCIPLE

Successful people know how to drive execution without authority through a network approach to influence. By identifying, enrolling and aligning network opinion leaders, they gain access to information, expertise and support needed for plans and projects to be implemented successfully.



“Once I got the informal influencers talking about the work, we were able to make it part of our story and into our work with clients.”

3 STEPS TO LEVERAGE OPINION LEADERS FOR BETTER OUTCOMES

1. Understand the informal network roles that dictate success and identify key influencers related to your goals.
2. Enroll influencers early by being transparent, diffusing ownership and understanding barriers.
3. Align influencers to get networks pulling in the same direction.

We gratefully acknowledge the support and funding for this project from Innovation Resource Center for Human Resources (IRC4HR™).

Cultivate Influence Without Authority Through Network Roles

“If you can identify the right one or two people and get them on board, the odds of getting the rest of the group on board are higher than if you had tried to get to them all directly.”

“There was clearly not consensus on everything, so I had to figure out who are the people who matter most and be sure they don’t have cold feet.”

“If people can be sold on why something is important to the business and to our customers, they will go on a journey with you. They will go through the pain of doing things differently if they can point back to why it’s important. The key is to find the right people that will bring the most others along.”

Managing influence without authority has become critical in today’s matrixed and highly collaborative organizations—and a staple in most business schools and leadership development programs. But the common understanding of influence is tied to behaviors that people deploy to influence others—such as formal leaders or stakeholders—without considering network position. What we have learned in this research is that the more successful people often go a step further by focusing on the informal—and often unnoticed—opinion leaders in a network.

By virtue of identifying and engaging both positive and negative key opinion leaders, successful people create a groundswell of support for their work. Involving informal influencers improves the chances that information and expertise will be accessible when it its needed, efforts will be supported, and plans and projects will be implemented successfully.

Understand the informal network roles that dictate success and identify key influencers related to your goals. Network influencers and formal sponsors both add legitimacy. But the influencers also bring people on board because they are personally respected, are seen as competent and/or are closer to the people that are involved with an issue, change or a project.

From a network perspective, four kinds opinion leaders have a significant impact on success: connectors, boundary spanners, energizers and resisters [see sidebar, next page]. Knowledge of these network roles allows people to extend their influence and become more effective by working through the natural, existing patterns of relationship in organizations.

Organizational network analysis (ONA) can identify network patterns and the four types of influencers analytically. By conducting an ONA, hidden network patterns can be seen, then leveraged or changed. But as a practical matter, people need to find influencers project-to-project and day-to-day, to gain buy-in and desired results. The people we interviewed rarely relied on first impressions to identify influencers (research has shown that people are notoriously bad at this).

At the beginning of a project or new role, effective people use various tactics to spot opinion leaders:

- *Ask for referrals.* Begin with who you know: “Who in your group is well connected? Where are they connected? Who else should I talk to?”
- *Go to existing cross-functional teams who are solving problems.* Learn who is in their network and “see who is offering really good ideas.”
- *Check in with a manager, mentor or other senior leader.* They have a different view of the business and access to other networks. Tell them what you are doing, get their input and end with: “Give me two other people I should meet.”
- *Find out who people turn to if they need help.* Often, they are introverted or low-key people who may not have obvious influence: “I asked everyone on the team, *Who do you go to if you have a problem or a question?* The quietest person was the one they all relied on.”
- *Look for passion and energy.* Find people who want to get involved: “Look for people who are forward thinkers; who are just in the thick of things; who are curious about new things.”
- *Watch for the people who are deferred to or agreed with.* Figure out who the informal leaders are. “There are always two or three people that everyone listens to ... If you crack that nut, everyone else will follow.”
- *Listen to vocal critics, but look for signs of passive resistance.* Not everyone who disagrees will do so directly: “Pay attention to the people who are the loudest complainers or give the most resistance. I try to build direct and transparent relationships with them. Even if they don’t like what’s going to happen, if I can get to them and diffuse some of that anger or listen to issues, then we’ll end up in a better place.”

Enroll influencers early by being transparent, diffusing ownership and understanding barriers.

Getting influencers involved early on and with genuine engagement can dramatically speed uptake and smooth execution. People who gain buy-in from opinion leaders—and effectively address naysayers—take steps that show openness to others’ interest and a desire for the best solution.



4 Network Roles to Identify, Engage and Align for Impact

Research shows that four kinds of network roles can either facilitate or derail plans and projects. These people may or may not be in formal positions of leadership or authority. Their influence often goes unrecognized, but those that engage them early and proactively are more successful in executing plans.

- **Connectors** are influencers because they have many ties and relationships, which are often concentrated within a unit, geography, demographic or expertise domain. They are important because they have local influence and legitimacy in these groups.
- **Boundary Spanners**, also called brokers, are influencers because they bridge across units, geographies, expertise domains, hierarchical levels, sub-cultures or demographics. They are effective at understanding and integrating different knowledge domains, perspectives and interests.
- **Energizers** are influencers because of their ability to create energy and momentum in support of initiatives. Engaging a small number of energizers builds enthusiasm among many people more rapidly than traditional cascading approaches to communication or change efforts.
- **Resisters** are influencers because they push back. Positive challengers strengthen ideas through constructive means, but resisters can also de-energize through negativity or exclusive focus on personal gain. A small number of negative challengers can invisibly derail initiatives. Seeking them out and giving them voice or responsibility can often help initiatives keep from dying the death of a thousand cuts.



“I pay a lot of attention in meetings regarding who listens to who, who defers to who, and who is called out as a trusted source in a given area. If you stop focusing on yourself and what you want to say and pay attention to the dynamics, you can pick up a lot that helps you.”



- *Use informal conversations to prep influencers.*

Let stakeholders in on your concerns and early thinking. This prepares them for conversations with other stakeholders and formal presentations and decision making. When Hunter saw a problem in launching a new product that could affect sales compensation and market share, he was open early on: “I made leaders aware that this was what I was thinking and that it could be a problem ... I wanted to lay the groundwork.” Similarly, Maya said, “When I go into a meeting, there is no cold person in the room. Everyone already knows where I’m coming from ... People don’t push back at that point. I’ve already done the hard work.”

- *Allow for co-creation with influencers.* Rather than presenting a locked-in, rock-solid plan or solution, offer a starting point and co-create the details. This initially takes more time but creates a sense of broad ownership, which leads to more genuine support and commitment to an approach. Malik engages his colleagues and business leaders to come up with strategy: “No one person can be an expert, so we pressure test things ... What haven’t we thought through? Are there gaps to fill in? Are there different ways to look at it? Kicking the tires either leads us to problems or we know it’s good.”

- *Gain insight to barriers and challenges.* Successful people ask questions to gain understanding of others’ motives, expectations and needs. They express interest for what others think and the constraints they see. Importantly, they show empathy for changes or challenges others face. Ken noted, “Most people don’t hide where their frustrations are—it comes out pretty quick if you ask. If you can address the concern you win instant credibility. Even if you can’t, explaining why often gets them on your side.” Trey learned the downside of not asking. He was tapped to map out a new supply chain process but made an initial misstep: “We did not put ourselves in other people’s shoes; we didn’t learn their concerns early on. It turned quickly into a confrontation, which put people in entrenched positions and behaviors ... We got to the right place, but we should have had more empathy in those first discussions.”



10 Signs You Don’t Have Support from Needed Opinion Leaders

1. You rely on first impressions and assumptions to decide who is influential.
2. You leave it to formal leaders and routine communication channels to gain understanding and buy-in from people affected by or involved in a plan or project.
3. You avoid critics, naysayers and resisters. You hope they will quiet down or come around as the work moves forward.
4. You don’t harness the excitement and energy of people who are genuinely interested. You may not see them as influential, or you are unaware of energizers in other groups and departments in the organization.
5. You share top-line information. Details or concerns are too closely held. You typically present and sell your plan to influencers or stakeholders when it is finalized rather than look to co-create.
6. You notice the group agrees on a shared goal or strategy, but people go back to their silos and pursue misaligned goals or their own objectives.
7. You give too much attention and influence to the loudest voices and the usual contributors.
8. You see people engaged in competition and being right, rather than co-creation and aligned purpose.
9. You drive to the details and take action without building relationships. The connection with others you need for success is surface-level or inauthentic. Other team members, influencers and groups do not interact often with each other.
10. You don’t have strategies, systems or routines for identifying, engaging and aligning influencers.



“Collaborative success feels really good. When you get true alignment in the network, you can feel the teams working together in a really positive manner.”



Align influencers to get networks pulling in the same direction. Lack of alignment among influencers and groups that need to work together will slowly and invisibly drain momentum and effectiveness of an effort. High performers work to get influencers aligned and pulling in same direction.

- **Energize around purpose.** Together, agree on a vision, challenge or goal toward which different teams understand they are working (such as beating a competitor, fixing a system error, creating sustainable growth) and clarify *why* it matters. *Why does the organization, unit or network exist? What is the value proposition or unique offering? What are you trying to accomplish?* Darren's company was facing a time-sensitive talent crisis, affecting all functions: "There was a very short window of time to solve the problem. If we didn't scale up hiring, the business might not survive ... The reality sunk in that if one of us fails, the rest of us fail." Similarly, Chrystal ran a cross-functional project team that embraced shared responsibility for success: "We had a really healthy mix of senior and junior people on the team, but everybody, regardless of their rank, was equal and on the team to work and contribute. We all felt like we were doing something that really mattered in a life-or-death way for the company."
- **Invest in relationships.** Even with a shared goal or purpose, it is easy for people and groups to get disconnected or misaligned. Knowing stakeholders and collaborators, their business interests and individual priorities, helps to identify conflicts, spot misalignment and course correct. When network ties become trusted connections, information is readily shared and decisions are made based on broader alignment. Marty led a team involved in a complex merger integration: "A key lesson for me is to spend more time building the relationships and high-level business needs, rather than getting down into the details too soon." Chrystal noted: "Too often dialogue stays at the superficial level when teams are coming together. And, that is fundamentally not interesting, not bringing out the best in people. I believe in doing what it takes to get below that superficial level."



Tips for Identifying, Enrolling and Aligning Influencers

- Don't over-rely on formal leaders or roles to drive change. If informal influencers are on board, they will bring others along more naturally.
- Use network analysis, interview techniques and careful observation to locate key opinion leaders in networks. When you identify a group or unit that you should connect with, set up an exploratory meeting. At the end, ask who else you should be speaking with, who would be energized by this idea, and who might resist this? These questions will guide you to network influencers.
- Consider the perspective of those who will be affected to avoid unnecessary conflict and speed implementation. Assume a stance of empathy; listen and engage in ways that address their true concerns.
- Bring in the challengers early. Don't delay—involve them before an idea is locked down; give them voice at multiple points; revise based on their input—or let them know why not.
- Introduce your concerns informally to influencers. Provide them with data and let them know your process for developing a plan so they can help frame the problem and shape solutions.
- Establish the *why* of the work and co-create—people will be more likely to stay with you and fight through the obstacles that will arise when launching and scaling something new. Be flexible. Don't expect to know what you are trying to do down to the n^{th} degree prior to engaging influencers and starting work.
- Engage a group of passionate influencers in creative dialogue about goals and objectives. Use storytelling to get at the heart of an issue; agree on three adjectives to describe customers, the team or the challenge; use posters and pictures to literally create images of the possibilities if everyone worked at their best.
- When influencers are brought together but don't know each other well, help them create awareness of one another's expertise and make off-task connections to help build trust quickly.



- **Clarify how work fits together.** When a group is new, or influencers are responsible for distinctly different components of an effort, more effective people spend time reinforcing who is doing what and why. They foster a broad awareness of team expertise, to help identify overlap and complementary capabilities and opportunities. Heath has learned to establish clear roles, including responsibility for internal communication and team integration, as well as stakeholder and client management: “You can’t leave that to chance. It gets mapped out fairly early on. When we get feedback from teams that are struggling, we essentially hear: *I did not fully understand my role. It wasn’t clear enough.*” Effective people also articulate intersections and interdependencies, so that the network is responsive to the needs of others. Myla noted: “With a more collaborative organization, we see if one team has a problem, you see the others diving in and trying to help them, as opposed to standing back and saying, *It’s not my client. It’s not my problem.*”
- **Create systems for collaboration.** Coordination and integration of work does not happen automatically. People who create a discipline around openness and co-responsibility are more effective than when collaboration and alignment are assumed. They ask, what behaviors and collaborative practices are needed to reflect or align peers around the purpose? Lucas’ client work involves coordinating among multiple contributors from several areas of expertise and he runs structured meetings to keep projects on track: “The crucial component is the attendance at those project meetings. I want representation from all sub-teams—requirements, development, quality/testing, deployment—in the group. That’s really important because they each bring a slightly different perspective on how you define the work and what the success criteria is.” Lucas and the team are able to play out options and tradeoffs early on in the process, rather than stumbling into problems at later stages of the project.

Other people described creating jobs with the specific purpose of connecting and communicating across groups and boundaries; having a project leader or expert manage the timetable, logistics and details to keep action and purpose tightly connected; creating spaces for sharing, constructive debate and risk taking. These efforts are not incidental. As Marcella said, “Collaboration creates motivation: you’re not by yourself, you have a team supporting you. It creates energy and a team spirit.” John noted you want to make sure people are participating, not just “getting on the bus.” He said, “Two teams can be working on a very compelling mission or purpose and one flounders and one flourishes ... What differentiates that is the quality of interactions within those teams around the work that they are trying to accomplish together.”

- **Track and celebrate wins along the way.** People want to know they are making progress and have a chance to acknowledge wins and milestones. This is especially important when success is measured in small ways or results are seen in years, not weeks or months. As Marty said, “You need to feel like you are achieving something, not just part of a giant thing that is not all in your control.” When Maya worked for a fast-paced startup, the various teams got together every Friday to share project updates and wins: “We drank beer and everyone said something they were happy about or grateful for.” Alec starting many meetings with a “customer moment” to share a story or letter from a patient about how a treatment changed their life: “It’s extremely motivating. We point out, *This is why we come to work, why we do what we do.*”

THE TAKEAWAY? Influencing without authority isn’t just about **how** to influence—it’s also about knowing **who** to influence. Go beyond the obvious stakeholders or formal leaders. Identify connectors, boundary spanners, energizers and resisters in networks that matter to your outcomes. Engage them early though transparency, shared ownership and understanding barriers. Then align influencers to get groups pulling in the same direction.