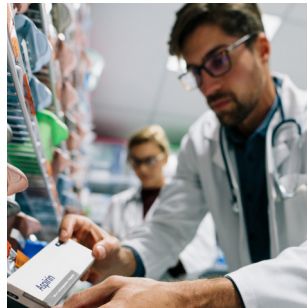


## NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS



Execute Work Efficiently  
**Scale Accomplishments  
Through Networks**



## 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

# Scale Accomplishments Through Networks

## PRINCIPLE

High-performers have a clear grasp of expertise and aspirations of people in the network beyond their local team. They think of possibilities, problems and projects in terms of *network capability*, not personal capability. This shifts how they enroll others and execute plans, resulting in stronger outcomes.



*"I want to know how each person fits in and explore other ways they can be deployed or contribute ... I can't imagine doing my job without knowing capabilities around me in the network."*

## 3 KEYS TO EXECUTE BEYOND YOUR ABILITY

1. Build an understanding of expertise, capabilities and aspirations in the network.
2. Envision projects and opportunities as a set of activities for a network, not as a linear list of tasks for you to accomplish.
3. Engage others by diffusing ownership and contributing only where you have unique value to add.

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

*"Learn what other groups and leaders of the company are working on and their priorities, so you can genuinely talk about things they are invested in and not just trying to do your exact responsibility or narrow task. You see things coming and can help or handle problems in a different way."*

*"I would be working with one client team, trying to solve a problem. And I had experiences with or knowledge of another team and I could say, Oh, somebody over there has expertise ... I was able to work the informal network to understand and get something much more important done."*

*"The opportunity came through existing relationships connecting us to the right people ... Because we were not narrow, we could see the deal coming and said, it's something we should talk about and see how to get involved."*

In today's organizations, few accomplishments of substance are a product of individual effort. Rather, success is enabled by networks that provide needed expertise, information, resources, decision approvals and political support. High-performers see their personal networks as a unique resource that allows them to execute beyond their own efforts or expertise and that of their immediate team. They think of possibilities and projects in terms of *network capability* where their network is a fluid extension of their own expertise that magnifies what they can do. As a result, they are involved in more substantive accomplishments, innovative solutions and meaningful outcomes. Crucially, scaling capability in this way hinges on making relationship and network investments *ahead of time* to gain a clear understanding of others' expertise, capabilities and aspirations.

### **Build an understanding of expertise, capabilities and aspirations in the network.**

Knowledge of a network shapes to a great degree the kinds of opportunities people see and how they envision the roles and contributions of others. More effective people develop a diverse set of contacts and learn their skills, expertise, interests and aspirations. *What capabilities are in different teams? What drives or motivates each person? What do they do now? What do they want to do?*

In our interviews, people who effectively scaled accomplishments routinely preserved time to extend their network and get to know people and groups across functions and silos. They connected with others through their daily work and made time for one-on-ones. Hunter prioritized getting to know the interests and priorities of peers as well as leaders: "Learn what is important to them ... When you have good relationships with stakeholders, your boss, directs, skip levels or cross-functional counterparts, beyond your normal sphere of influence, they can give you perspective that helps you shape what's going on around you."

Bart's weekly one-on-ones with direct reports were open-ended conversations, sometimes to talk through current issues, other times to discuss goals, interests and personal ambitions: "You connect with people, understand where they are, make yourself accessible to them ... It helps you see possibilities differently by virtue of how you collaborate."

Often little things make a difference in relationships. Sienna said, "Sometimes it's just, *What's up?* or a personal conversation about something I know is going on in their lives—I want them to know I care and am interested in them and what they are doing."

**Envision projects and opportunities as a set of activities for a network, not as a linear list of tasks for you to accomplish.** High-performers recognize limits of time, perspective and expertise. Most successful people describe a key inflection point in their careers where they began to envision projects and opportunities as discrete tasks or expertise to map onto capabilities in their network, rather than a stream of activities that they needed to accomplish. As a result, they could see unique possibilities by leveraging talent broadly, rather than fitting work into existing roles, teams or processes.

Fritz, a manager in an engineering firm, saw an opportunity to bid for a massive infrastructure project that was well outside the scope of his division. But, he understood the firm's talent and experience across locations, functions and divisions: "I had to go on an internal campaign to make it happen ... We had to draw from the whole company." They won the bid and the success of the project materially changed the capability and reputation of the company.

Shifting to a network view of capability is not always easy or automatic. Ashley, an experienced manager and rising-star leader, said she is still learning how to work through the network and her comfort with it varies depending on time frame, risk level and trust among the people involved: "I am challenged with this constantly, because I still tend to think, *I'm going to make my to-do list and get going*. But, I have learned to sit back and think it through ... I don't find myself as often thinking, *What am I going to do about this?* I find myself asking, *What's the primary objective? Who else do I know that connects to this type of work or brings in a different view? Who can I involve who needs an opportunity to shine or grow?* I approach things a little differently now than I would have two years ago."



## 10 Behaviors that Limit Your Ability to Accomplish Work of Greater Scale and Impact

1. You quickly say no to projects or shut down ideas because you and your immediate team are overloaded or don't have needed skills.
2. You wait until you have a problem or need to learn about the expertise, interests and capabilities of people and groups outside your immediate team.
3. You view work as an endless stream of personal to-do items. You know what needs to be done and it seems easier to do it yourself rather than break the work down in different ways or get others involved.
4. You direct others as they complete a set of linear tasks. You have them check in with you often and tend to micromanage their work.
5. You stay on task when talking to others. You prefer to be all-business and keep open-ended or personal conversations to a minimum.
6. You thrive on being an expert and enjoy a sense of accomplishment through results you produce. Making things happen through others—indirect accomplishment—is a challenge.
7. You run team meetings as report-outs and do not create space that allows team members to ask questions, help each other and build execution networks independent of you.
8. You get involved in decisions that are outside your expertise or in situations where other people are capable without you. You are unclear about your role and value add.
9. You are often rushed and don't slow down to consider who else you could include. You have a hard time delegating, because you haven't developed others.
10. You stay in your lane. You don't have visibility into other functions or projects and you hesitate to ask questions outside of your scope or role.



"You have to look at problems as bundles of issues to be solved by the best people. I'm not the technical expert in any of the areas my lab is responsible for, so I have to know who that is, and I have to know who their customer is ... and I have to make sure everyone is talking."

**Engage others by diffusing ownership and contributing only where you have unique value to add.** More effective people begin building collaborative, agile relationships within the group and remove themselves from the center of the network so that others feel ownership and commitment to the work. People in the network start to draw on and adapt expertise and rely on each other to solve problems, accomplish work or pursue opportunities. They don't get stuck waiting on a gatekeeper or overloaded manager and are more responsive to problems or unexpected opportunities.

Effective people help the members of the network gain awareness of what each other is working on and see connections. They make introductions, bring in clients, pair up people who don't know each other and use team meetings to strengthen relationships. Cassie brings together core and extended teams for a project kick off: "We make sure everybody knows who's who on the team. It opens up communication and lets everyone know that I'm there and others are there if they have any questions."

Jalen uses project meetings and encourages people to "carry the ball more." He had to get comfortable letting go and only getting involved when he had unique value to add: "They like to come to me for everything, and of course it feels good to help others and be the expert ... but, I want more interaction and teamwork. If everyone knows what's going on, they can see a problem and say, *Is there any way I can help?* and not go through me every time."

Marty was responsible for a merger integration effort and created a team from several locations with different specialties and assignments. From the beginning, he held bi-weekly video calls asking each person to contribute one at a time and inviting anyone else to offer help or another perspective: "The process drew out folks who are instrumental, but more introverted ... It became very collaborative, very open ... Once the team was together for a little bit and had some successes, they trusted each other and valued each other's opinion a little bit more." He became confident in their abilities and that they would know when it was necessary for him to weigh in or intervene: "If they reached a point of resistance, they would come to me and say, *Hey, we need you ...* That's where I would plug in and help out."



## Tips for Scaling Capability and Accomplishment

- Establish relationships across functional lines, physical distance, expertise domains and demographic groups. Learn about current work and capabilities, but also get to know people as people. What do they care about? What are their interests, aspirations, hopes and goals?
- Schedule network development into your calendar. Hold regular meetings with employees and colleagues that build awareness of one another's work and expertise—and also take time to have off-task conversations.
- Ask questions outside of project scope. Learn what others do and their areas of expertise. Find out what other groups they work with. This allows you to apply your interest and expertise to theirs. It also helps you know how to think of each other for future needs.
- Stay connected with people on topics they care about. Send relevant articles or ideas to seed the relationship. Introduce people who may have shared interest or could benefit from each other's expertise.
- Don't make everything flow through you. Tell direct reports and networks involved in your projects, *"Before you come to me, share your problem or idea with others on the team."*
- Use experiences to build both the capability and the network of team members. Have them shadow you in meetings so they see you demonstrating needed skills or behaviors. Then, shadow them to be a safety net as they learn and gradually back out.
- Provide team members with a sense of context—then step back. Help them see how their work aligns with strategic objectives or the bigger picture, but don't fill in all the details or insist on overseeing every step.

**THE TAKEAWAY?** Stop thinking about work as a stream of activities you need to accomplish. Start envisioning it as a set of tasks and possibilities for a network. Invest in understanding expertise and aspirations across silos and building relationships *now* for stronger outcomes in the future. Encourage ownership and progress to disperse across the network and get involved only where you add unique value.