

NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS



Produce Innovative Solutions
**Create Emergent Innovation
Through Open Interactions in
the Network**



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.



PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Create Emergent Innovation Through Open Interactions in the Network

PRINCIPLE

Successful people create space and openness for possibilities to emerge through the network. They facilitate the emergence of unexpected solutions via their interactions and subtle behaviors. As they explore ideas and options, surprise offers and unexpected insights come their way.

“I see it all the time ... You can jumpstart a conversation, an idea, just by being in the right place, when you know who to reach out to and you don’t feel afraid to ask others what they know and what they care about.”

“Too often, people don’t want to risk an interaction where they could come across in a negative way ... I am OK to be vulnerable. I am not afraid to look dumb or ask a stupid question. If I’ve missed something, I’ll go ask.”

“You have to celebrate the fast-follow, the stealing of ideas ... to reassure people that they don’t need to come up with all the answers themselves.”

Novel solutions, better processes and compelling, new products and services are pressing goals of organizations, but innovation is often stifled before it starts. The interactions within networks have a powerful impact on whether the right questions are asked, ideas are expressed and potential solutions are explored and refined. In our interviews, successful innovations evolved when people created space and openness for possibilities. As they explored ideas and options, surprise offers and unexpected insights came their way, opening the door to different—and better—solutions and opportunities.



“A team is not the execution arm of my idea; I rely on networks that are diverse in experience and ideas.”

Seek out serendipity and take advantage of unexpected interactions. Sparks for innovation can come from unexpected places, unexpected people and unexpected connections. More successful innovators know how to take advantage of surprises—bumping into a former colleague, a lunchtime conversation, a “doorway moment”—to explore ideas and look for mutually beneficial opportunities. Learning what others are working on and interested in triggers insights, suggestions and referrals that seem like random serendipity but are a result of thoughtful network interactions.

In these unplanned interactions, people are transparent about their own projects, interests and challenges. Deandra told someone in her distant network how her team was struggling to improve the customer experience: “She said, *Oh, I had this great experience!* So, we looked into that organization ... A chance interaction led to a new idea and resource for us.”

Similarly, Maximus bumped into a former co-worker, asked a technical question and realized the two were working on related problems. They had complementary skills and perspectives—and could see how together their solution could be more expansive than either could do on their own. They joined forces to create a prototype to test their idea. Later, Maximus mentioned the project to his boss, who mentioned it to a vice president. He was asked to explain the work and how it could be applied broadly. Because he took advantage of serendipitous moments, Maximus solved a problem, scaled the solution and changed the trajectory of his career.

3 WAYS TO FOSTER EMERGENT INNOVATION

1. Seek out serendipity and take advantage of unexpected interactions.
2. Optimize creativity through exploration and willingness to be wrong.
3. Be open to adaptation or evolution of the work as ideas emerge.

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You can't force fortuitous discoveries, but you *can* systematically pursue serendipity by creating routines for exploring ideas across the network and using serendipitous moments well. Some of the practices we heard in our interviews included:

- Walking to office, lunch or for coffee a different way as often as possible and stealing 5 minutes of colleagues' time along the way.
- Setting aside time each week to meet 1 or 2 new people or have exploratory conversations with people in your distant network.
- Telling people about an idea or a problem you are trying to solve. Ask how they would tackle it or who they would bring in to help?
- Using networking tools such as LinkedIn to prompt new thinking. Review for updates on contacts' interests and roles and search for past contacts to rejuvenate for new purposes.
- Volunteering for activities or events that bring you in contact with new people, such as giving tours or participating in onboarding programs.

Optimize creativity through exploration and willingness to be wrong. To allow unexpected ideas to emerge, innovators make the most of their network interactions—whether they are planned or spontaneous, in one-on-one conversation, or teams. They engage in conversations with curiosity, eager to learn about what others are involved in or passionate about. They look for possible connections or opportunities that could be mutually rewarding.

Critically, more effective innovators are careful not to shut down people or ideas early on, either directly (“That won’t work because …” or “We tried that before.”) or indirectly signaling their opinion (nodding, frowning, going down one path and not encouraging other voices). They respond with open-ended comments and questions (“That’s one thing we could do. How could we build on that? What else? Who else?”). As Luis said, “I will back up an idea, ask questions, stay open to discussing options no matter how crazy they seem. It gives other people courage to say things or bring out ideas.”



10 Signs You Are Stifling Innovation

1. You love an idea and want others to agree. You make the case and persuade rather than explore and listen to input.
2. You limit possibilities early on by focusing on constraints. Assumptions about what you can't do shut down idea generation before you start.
3. You like your routines. You walk the same hallways, take the same stairs and work in the same office spaces. Breaks and lunchtime are always with the same few people.
4. You rarely offer help or ask for help. Reaching out to people outside your immediate group feels risky.
5. You edit your own imagination and ideas. You dismiss a solution or ignore an opportunity because you aren't sure it will be a win, or you worry when something might get shot down.
6. You hesitate to talk about your projects and challenges with people you don't know well, or when you have an unexpected opportunity to talk to someone.
7. Your social media or LinkedIn accounts are dormant. You don't look at your connections' interests, expertise or ties with a current dilemma or challenge in mind.
8. Exploratory conversations are uncomfortable. You prefer presenting the facts or making a case rather than looking for connections or common interests.
9. You create bulletproof presentations to demonstrate your innovative product, service or process to stakeholders.
10. You drive to a decision quickly. You point out objections or flaws in a plan before an idea has had time to develop.



“Idea generation can come from anyone—random people can come up with incredibly clever things if you are open to it and looking for how insights can combine.”



Other subtle behaviors encourage openness and emergence of possibilities:

- **Battle assumptions and perceived limitations.** Use “what if?” conversations “to engage in the problem as if you have no assumptions, no burden or baggage to close your minds ... If you had a magic wand, what would you create?”
- **Allow people room to run and ideas time to mature.** Protect a budding idea from levels, roles or people that might shoot it down: “Early on, it is hard to separate a good idea from a bad idea; you will be tempted to say it is stupid and move on.”
- **Avoid the need to be right and a culture of perfection.** Be willing to take a risk: “I remember getting challenged quite a bit ... the CEO stepped up and said, *We’re going to do it. Nobody knows for sure if it’s going to work, but it’s our best guess. And if it doesn’t work, we’re going to fix it.*”

Be open to adaptation or evolution of the work as ideas emerge. Unexpected, often positive changes or outcomes will come as different people are brought into the work and ideas are combined. When people are not rigid in their path or expectations, they appreciate and adapt to unforeseen directions.

Linda developed a prototype of a simple team assessment and brought it to the “gatekeepers who were willing to test something a bit different. They offered ideas on how to improve it and help it land better.” Later, she presented it to a management team. Instead of accepting the work as is, they suggested keeping the concepts but using them in an entirely different way as an interactive activity. The input and creativity of these managers “led to the real opportunity, which I could not have predicted.” Through word of mouth, other managers replicated the activity with their teams and a new idea quickly became embedded across the company.

In Eugene’s experience, more robust possibilities emerge when ideas shift and change as constraints crop up: “My job is to encourage people to look for ways to do things that we didn’t think were possible ... and then to investigate, ask questions ... If that means taking time and talking to people and working through the pushback and the network, that’s what I do. I tell everybody that I’m always concerned that I get to KNOW before there is a NO.”



Tips to Prompt Surprise Insights and Opportunities

- Don’t rush to judgment early in conversations. Suspend criticism and doubts. Delay jumping in with a reality check and reasons why something can’t be done.
- Be willing to take a personal risk. Be the first to make a suggestion or put an unformed idea on the table, then say, *Challenge me. Somebody tell me something different.* Model openness and vulnerability for others in the network to take risks.
- Choose face-to-face and phone conversations over email or online interactions. Talking allows you to gauge interest, ask questions and take a topic down an unexpected path; email is best for confirmation of information and simple transactions.
- Look for people who will disagree with you or counter you in some way. For significant new projects or problems, find a challenge partner to flag your blind spots and push you to consider additional views.
- Be open and transparent about what you are working on. Have a short narrative to tell or focused question to ask when opportunity arises with others at lunch or over coffee, or when you reconnect with someone in your distant network.
- Create structured events to pose a challenge and explore ideas: hold a virtual meeting of experts and stakeholders, introduce a topic to a community of practice, create a forum to elicit stories and suggestions.
- Take a few minutes in an unrelated meeting to run an idea or problem by the group. Use conversation before a meeting starts to ask someone for time on their calendar or a referral.
- Avoid the “not invented here” mentality. Remind people that they don’t have to come up with answers themselves—borrowing and adapting an idea is how innovation happens.

THE TAKEAWAY? In our interviews, every successful innovation benefitted at some point by at least one and usually multiple surprise insights, resources or ideas. You can prompt your network to generate unexpected, creative insights when you do three things: pursue serendipity, explore with others and stay open to evolution of the work.