

NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS



Produce Innovative Solutions

Build Purpose, Energy, and Trust to Earn Interest, Effort, and Creativity



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

Build Purpose, Energy, and Trust to Earn Interest, Effort, and Creativity

PRINCIPLE

High performers create purpose, energy and trust in networks. When people nurture these characteristics, they garner greater opportunities, effort and creativity from the network. They create PULL in networks and over time generate innovation as a product of information and resources flowing to them.

“It’s about showing what is possible. A lot of people get excited if they feel like they can contribute to an innovative idea or capability ... I try to get them to see how their work is going to help us develop really cool stuff.”

“I love the work and want to see it get done, I’m very open and authentic about that with the team and the engineers I work with ... I am now part of the family; people want to work with me; I have built a level of trust.”

“People who are not engaged are not going to be innovative ... People want to feel valued, to feel their voice is heard and to look forward to coming to work ... Once I have that engaged workforce, the level of innovation and execution is an order of magnitude higher.”

High performers generate enthusiasm within their network. Twenty years of research has shown that the ability to generate enthusiasm in interactions is the largest network predictor of a high performer. It is also tightly tied to where innovations emerge and change takes hold in organizations. Refreshingly, the people who win through innovation are not building massive, surface-based networks. Instead, they invest in quality connections characterized by purpose, energy and trust.

When people create purpose, energy and trust in relationships, they receive much greater interest, effort and creativity from others. Their behaviors create *pull* in the relationship, drawing people to them, their ideas or a possibility they represent. Over time, they build a reputation as someone others want to work with and succeed by creating a context where resources, information, opportunities and talent flow to them.

Create a sense of purpose and meaning in the work. When people find meaning in what they are doing, their skills and knowledge are amplified by passion. They look for ways to contribute and are excited to solve problems or pursue big opportunities. More successful people engage with others in ways that help them to derive a sense of purpose in their work.

Purpose comes from interacting with others who help you believe that your work matters and that you are having an impact. High performers invest time to understand other’s aspirations and what they care about in their work. As a result they are able to position work and collaborations that better leveraged talents, interests and aspirations. Many hold weekly or monthly one-on-one meetings with direct reports and team members, spending 50% of the time off task and getting to know people on a personal level. This knowledge broadens the way the leaders conceptualize problems and their approach to finding a solution—and allows them to steer and shape work in ways that people find personally and professionally valuable.



“People don’t care how smart you are until you show that you care about them.”

3 WAYS TO CREATE ENGAGEMENT FOR INNOVATION

1. Create a sense of purpose and meaning in the work.
2. Generate energy in network interactions.
3. Establish competence- and benevolence-based trust as a network foundation for purpose and energy.

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

Roger explained: “How do we, as the leadership team, get excited? How do we get other people to want to be at the forefront of those things? If we find something that is engaging and interesting to people, they want to be a part of it. They want to help move it forward.” Chad, who led a consulting practice, built multiple client teams drawing on employees with diverse specialties and interests, and operating in several countries: “I try to understand who they are, what they are trying to achieve, what their strengths are. I figure out how to help them and help the client at the same time.” Alec held monthly one-on-ones with each direct report to “understand them as individuals, what motivates them ... If I can line up an opportunity for them that meets their needs and is a project that will solve a problem, that is huge ... It makes a big difference to the employee.”

Generate energy in network interactions. High performers interact with people in ways that leave them feeling more engaged and enthused about what they are doing at work. Twenty years of interviews show that people create energy in day-to-day interactions in six key ways:

- Engage others in realistic possibilities, capturing their imaginations and hearts.
- Stay fully attentive in meetings and one-on-one conversations and show interest in others and their ideas.
- Create room for others to be a meaningful part of conversations. Make sure they see how their efforts will contribute to an evolving plan.
- Disagree by focusing attention on the issue at hand and not the individual.
- Use humor—often at their own expense—to lighten tense moments or remove unnecessary status or politics from interactions.
- Maintain an effective balance between pushing toward a goal and welcoming new ideas that improve the project or the process.

While people might do many of these things most of the time, more successful people do them when under pressure or stress. They know consistency in tough situations counts.

Early in her career, Celia watched and emulated leaders around her and paid attention to what she did (or didn't do) as she worked with others.



10 Actions that Kill Purpose, Energy and Trust

1. You don't set aside time to deepen relationships and get to know other peoples' skills, interests and aspirations. Meetings are always task-oriented.
2. You assess people, projects and ideas by their value to you, rather than looking for mutual benefit.
3. You have difficulty engaging others in work that matters to you. Your network contributes what is required, but doesn't give discretionary effort or mobilize opportunities.
4. You are easily distracted in conversations with others. You check your phone, email and only partially listen. Your body language and voice inflection as well as what you say portray that the person you are engaged with is not important.
5. You are first to spot roadblocks and point them out. You criticize people, processes and ideas before they have had a chance to develop.
6. You get forceful (loud, dogmatic, argumentative) when you want to make your point. You get *more* forceful when people don't listen or agree rather than backing off and looking for alternative ways to accomplish goals.
7. You think you have good reasons to break commitments and don't see a gap between what you say and what you do.
8. You keep the personal completely out of work. You don't talk about outside interests or future aspirations and don't ask other people about theirs.
9. You take more than you give in relationships.
10. You micro-manage. You do not allow people latitude to do their work or shape their roles.



“You can mandate, dictate and do top-down all you want, but the real energy and real insight come when you match a passion and a purpose to the work.”

Today, Celia knows how to put people at ease and that her physical presence—eye contact, body language, gesturing with her hands—communicates interest and energy. She shows she’s engaged and wants others to contribute: “I do a lot of repeating back, reflecting back what someone says ... I also talk in an emphatic and optimistic way. I try to see what is possible and convey interest. Even if internally I am negative and cynical, I don’t portray that because I know it doesn’t help. I focus on what is good, what is important, why it’s great to be a part of something.”

Establish competence- and benevolence-based trust as a network foundation for purpose and energy.

People don’t get immediately excited about your idea no matter how creative it might be. Rather, our first mental step is to envision the number of scenarios that can go wrong and cause us work or problems. With a foundation of trust in a relationship, reservations fall away. People become more enthused about possibilities as well as comfortable to offer ideas, take risks and help out. In contrast, people who create risk aversion in networks—by using expertise to create status over others, demonstrate intelligence or criticize—never receive these benefits flowing to them in networks.

High performers create safety in networks and show personal integrity in their interactions. Our research over decades shows two forms of trust enable effective knowledge creation and sharing in networks: “benevolence-based trust” (trust that you have others’ interests in mind, not just your own) and “competence-based trust” (trust that you know what you are talking about).

Benevolence-based trust is established when people:

- Initiate relationships ahead of need. Look for opportunities to give information, resources, time, contacts or simply appreciation and respect.
- Stand for something larger than their own self interest. Focus on broader goals and do the right thing even when it doesn’t benefit you or causes additional work. Trust is built in these moments in ways that you often never know about.
- Connect off task and learn other’s interests or ambitions. Establishing non-role connections is a key inflection point where trust develops.
- Are willing to be vulnerable. Be willing to express uncertainty, admit mistakes and acknowledge what you do not know.



Tips for Creating Purpose, Energy and Trust

- Rather than assigning a role or task, bring people into work that will draw on their particular interests, expertise and aspirations. Use regular 1:1s to get to know people and look to mold opportunities that matter to them: for example, by expanding their reputation for expertise, creating peer networks with high performers, mentorship by senior leaders or cross-boundary assignments.
- Stand up for other people and important principles. It sends a signal that you can be trusted to take the right actions.
- Give to others in a non-calculating way without expectation of immediate benefit. Later, you will benefit from a natural desire in others to reciprocate.
- Clarify expectations and commitments. And don’t over-promise. Too often, in an effort to please others, people overstate what they can accomplish and end up disappointing those who are counting on them.
- Act with discretion, keep confidences and handle difficult conversations with care and integrity. Hold others in your team and extended network accountable to do the same.
- Learn what messages your non-verbal communication is sending. Ask a trusted colleague to give you feedback on whether your stance, expression, eye contact, tone and gestures communicate enthusiasm and interest. When body language, tone of voice and words are all communicating the same message, you become more credible, persuasive and trusted.



“I found that people tend to want to work with you if there is a mutual benefit, or if you show them you are willing to help them out when they need it.”



When coming into a new project, Mateo takes time to see who is involved, understand the network dynamics and learn what he needs to accomplish: “I stay under the radar at the beginning and listen, listen, listen.” He introduces himself to project leads, managers and specialists and sets up one-on-ones. He prefers to have some level of personal conversation as well, connecting off task about interests or family: “We are always asking people for something; I try to avoid making a request from someone I’ve never met. People tend to respond better and want to help if we have some previous connection and a sense of who the other person is.”

Similarly, Alexa focused on building trust with a team that had a bad experience with a previous leader: “I spent a lot of time showing people how I am leading this differently. I had to empathize, ask questions: *what didn’t go well in the first phase? what role would you have liked to play?* ... I committed to fixing those things and followed up on that week after week ... If people don’t want to be there, they will not come to the table with any ideas or energy.”

Later, when Alexa felt overwhelmed and out of her depth, she opened up with a couple people: “They swooped in and rescued me. It was the first time in my career I had been brave enough to be vulnerable at work ... I learned that asking the right people for help at the right time can make a world of difference ... And, being more vulnerable has allowed other people space to step in, be needed, take the lead.”

Competence-based trust is established when people:

- Are transparent about their expertise and legitimacy. Understand how credibility is established in a given context: for example, by who you know, what you have done previously or external markers of expertise such as degrees or publications.
- Match their words and deeds, consistently following through on commitments they make to others. Clarify expectations, set realistic objectives and do what you say you will.
- Are candid about areas they are not an expert in or knowledge they do not have. Clarify what you don’t know early. This helps others to trust competence in domains you do have strengths and avoids scenarios in which people begin to rely on you in ways they shouldn’t.

“As obvious as it sounds, you have to demonstrate your value by doing your job,” Mateo explained. “You show the team you can execute and that you are doing what you say you are going to do. The end result is that you build trust, forge connections with people who also get stuff done, who appreciate the work ... Those people will reach out to me and I’ll reach out to them in the future.”

Jo also learned not to try to be the expert or the person that everything needed to flow through: “My team did not need me to be the person who knows the most about anything ... What they needed was someone who was available, who would listen and would try to help ... I may not understand what was needed, but I knew who might have an answer.”



Tips for Creating Purpose, Energy and Trust (cont.)

- Don’t assume everyone cares (or even knows) what you are dealing with. Too often, leaders lose sight of what others value and are concerned about as their own responsibilities magnify.
- When you disagree, make sure to have a very clear focus on the issue at hand and use language that separates the issue from the person with whom you disagree. Rather than saying, “I don’t think that will work,” consider saying, “Given where we are trying to go, here might be another solution.”
- Be authentic—avoid putting on a corporate mask. When you show who you really are, others open up, too. Don’t be afraid to connect off task, be self-deprecating or show vulnerability.
- Identify one or two behaviors that if you did consistently and, importantly, when under pressure, could have a positive impact on the way people interact with you and with each other.

THE TAKEAWAY? Good ideas abound in organizations. The only way they turn into reality is if people are motivated to contribute their time and talent. To generate enthusiasm in the network—a characteristic that is tied to successful innovation—create a sense of purpose, energy and trust through key, consistent behaviors.