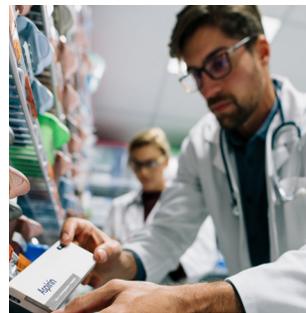


## NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS



Thrive at Work

**Make Network Investments  
that Create a Sense of Purpose  
in Your Work**



## 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.



## THRIVE

### PRINCIPLE

A sense of purpose in your work is only partially tied to the nature of the work. Purpose also comes from proactively investing in certain kinds of relationships and interactions at work. Successful people find and fuel purpose through intentionally built networks.



“Purpose and a sense of thriving are built for me much more through the interactions I have with people than the exact work.”

### 5 WAYS TO GENERATE PURPOSE THROUGH INTERACTIONS

1. Establish the *why* in the work.
2. Build in time to connect with people who care about similar processes, outcomes or values.
3. Co-create and explore with others.
4. Find energizers—and be an energizer.
5. Step outside your own self-interest and help others.

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# Make Network Investments that Create a Sense of Purpose in Your Work

Courtney’s work is interesting, but it is the quality of her work relationships that is fueling her current sense of satisfaction. “Right now, I feel like I’m in a period where I’m thriving and things are going well—ironically, even though neither my boss nor I are convinced that one of our projects is going to be successful! ... The collaboration that I have with this group is really good and my co-leader and I have an amazing working relationship.”

Brendan is a road warrior, working from airplanes and hotels and connecting with his dispersed team through conference calls and emails. Even so, he sees that purpose and thriving for him is fundamentally tied to his interactions with other people. “The work we do is important. But the reason I am here is I like the people ... It’s the nature of the interactions, where I’ve helped someone develop, or I’ve had a conversation which helped someone advance a project or initiative, or I’ve been part of something with others that really moved the business forward—that’s what gets me out of bed in the morning.”

Courtney and Brendan, like other leaders we interviewed, have learned that thriving is not determined by the details of the work or things going well. Thriving is about being connected to others and finding purpose through those interactions. Thriving leaders in our research had a clear personal sense of priorities and intentionally created a constellation of relationships to support them. They structured their time, pursued opportunities and engaged others in ways that reinforced their purpose. Over and over, we heard stories of the meaningful context leaders are creating for themselves, through five types of interactions.

**Establish the *why* in the work.** Purpose gets built in collaborations where people know their work matters and has impact. For some, this requires having a clear line of sight to the organizational mission. Most important, however, is for people to feel part of something bigger than themselves *and* see their unique contributions. The leaders in our interviews talked about their personal *why* *and* helping their teams galvanize around a collective sense of purpose, such as besting the competition, having impact on the field or industry or helping colleagues learn and succeed.

“People *want to be part of something*. They are not just in it for themselves,” says Elijah, who uses regular meetings with a dispersed sales force to reinforce a collective sense of purpose. Similarly, Sonia connects daily work to the positives for her group: “We are lucky. We are part of something bigger than us. If we do this thing right, if we blow this thing out of the water, it’s going to be so cool!” Barry notes, “People seem to have a *bigger sense of purpose and more positive outlook* when they understand how what they do contributes to the mission.”

**Build in time to connect with people who care about similar processes, outcomes or values.** Work feels purposeful when people are interacting with colleagues who care about the same things. People who spend time with others who have similar values are able to bring themselves more fully to their work.

Leaders we interviewed expressed different ideas of what matters to them in the work, including similar expertise, desire to get results, connecting on a personal level, being efficient or having fun. Maya values working with people who understand quickly why things matter and then take action. A shared, deep interest in the technology makes a difference to Marcelo: “We all have a thirst to know more and see the technology move forward.”

Leaders who thrive make time for the people and activities that fuel them, even if it takes diligent scheduling. Sofia looks at her calendar a week or two in advance: “If I see that a week is going to be particularly tough because I have three or four difficult meetings, I try to organize things so I have a number of offsetting positives, even if I am overloaded. I know that I don’t want to be part of a week where everything is negative.”

**Co-create and explore with others.** The process of engaging with others to understand and tackle a problem is a significant source of purpose. People enjoy finding ways to meaningfully contribute. And they enjoy the “scaffolding” of ideas developed in a rich dialogue. People who thrive bring in others early, explore possibilities and find shared benefit.

Jerome’s peer network allows him to learn and explore ideas: “I will start with something small, *Here’s our first layer of thinking, let’s talk about this, let’s see what it prompts in you ...* We build up trust and solutions in layers.” Helene’s favorite projects have involved teams that work on exploratory or emerging projects: “There is excitement in starting from scratch, being first to work on something ... It helps people if they feel some ownership and like they are a part of creating something.” Darren is drawn to solving hard problems: “I’m always on the search for people anywhere across the organization who have a perspective or point of view that can help ... The folks who help you unpack the problem are the ones who will get more excited than you are to go after the next big chunk.”



## 10 Signs You Are Losing Purpose In Your Work

1. You are not sure you are adding value. Your role is unclear. If you were asked about your unique contribution, you would fumble for an answer.
2. Your team or function feels like everyone is in it for themselves. Competition, secrecy and lack of collaboration are the norm.
3. You can’t remember the last time you had a “mind meld” with someone at work. There’s a huge gap between what matters to you and what other people seem to care about.
4. You are isolated and not sure who to turn to. Your inner circle is small and you find yourself complaining, not solving.
5. You are micro-managed. Someone is always questioning you about your decisions or progress. Your boss doesn’t support you with time or resources and does not help by removing obstacles.
6. You feel trapped or stuck. Creativity, learning and progress seem a distant thought.
7. Dread and exhaustion hits when you think about your boss, your team or your project. You are drained, not energized.
8. Trust? What trust?
9. You don’t believe in the importance of the work and your peers care about markedly different outcomes than you do.
10. You are getting burned out by helping others. You’ve become the hero, the go-to person, and feel like you can’t say no.



“I gain a lot when I reach out to other parts of the organization to understand how I fit in ... When you’re in your bubble on a day-to-day basis, you don’t see the “why” or understand the strategies.”



**Find energizers—and be an energizer.** Energizers are people who generate enthusiasm among others, pulling people toward their projects and ideas. People who are around energizers want to give time and contribute their ideas. The leaders we interviewed who were thriving were people others want to work with or work for, and they were drawn to energizers themselves.

Energizers are consistent and reliable, engendering trust through actions. When Deena took on a new role leading a team in an area outside her expertise, she listened attentively in both 1:1 conversations and larger meetings, asked questions and matched work to team members' goals and interests. Des energizes his team by getting to know people as people—their interests, strengths, weaknesses and aspirations—and by acknowledging accomplishment. Fun, too, is part of the mix. Des opens each meeting with a “wow” moment, with team members rotating who brings in something interesting and inspiring to the team: “It’s a moment to say, *let’s not take ourselves too seriously* ... We laugh together before we get down to work.” For Kelsey, an energizing leader is someone who shows trust in others and does not stifle enthusiasm. “When someone says, *Yes, I love your enthusiasm and go explore the idea*, I feel like they trust me and support me and believe in me.”

### **Step outside your own self-interest and help others.**

Helping others, whether colleagues, employees or customers, creates a strong sense of purpose. Learning to find satisfaction in the development and success of others is a critical transition point for leaders to thrive in such demanding times.

Lauren’s sense of purpose derives from helping her staff: “What I really appreciate is to feel I have connected the dots and removed obstacles for them.” Over time, Michelle has learned how gratifying it is to tee something up so another teammate can solve a problem: “Seeing other people do their own thing, seeing people run with it, I found I really enjoy that.” Marcelo said, “When you literally say, ‘YEAH! Whoo-hoo!’ over a direct report who learned to appreciate a co-worker’s expertise after fighting against it for months, you are on to something. Being a geek about developing others can be highly satisfying!”



## Ideas for Engaging in Interactions that Generate Purpose in Work

- Explain to co-workers the reasoning behind an action, the benefits and how their work fits in. Establish the “why” before the “what” or “how.”
- Use team meetings to share stories of impact on customers (internal or external).
- Hold systematic check-ins with teams and direct reports. Protect 1:1s and devote at least 50% of time to the individual’s experience and aspirations.
- Focus teams around shared values, like desire to make an impact or innovation or driving change.
- Determine who cares about the same things you do and work with them whenever you can.
- Take control of your calendar and review it weekly. Don’t let things that fuel you get pushed off.
- Initiate and cultivate relationships that help you co-create work. Bring people in early to define problems, explore solutions and “kick the tires.”
- Don’t allow de-energizing people and situations to define you. If you see you are going to have difficult meetings, offset them with positive ones.
- Appreciate and celebrate. Give recognition and gratitude. Set aside an hour each week to send notes and emails to recognize effort, desired behaviors and outcomes.
- Connect off-task and make room for fun. Get to know people as people. Don’t take yourself too seriously.
- Get involved in side projects. Volunteer with your co-workers in the community. Engage with affinity groups, mentoring or internship programs, communities of practice or other company-wide or cross-boundary work.

**THE TAKEAWAY?** Too often people let the demands of their current role dictate what they are doing and lose the opportunity to create a more purpose-driven network. Our research indicates that people have significant autonomy to create a context to thrive, even in difficult times or mundane work. You should take advantage: sculpt your role and engage with others in ways you find purposeful and positive.