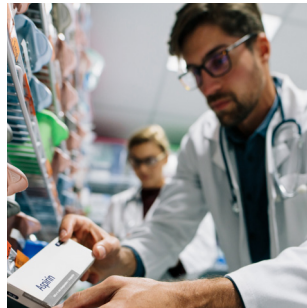# IRC4HR™

NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS

Thrive at Work
Reduce Collaborative Overload to Regain Time and Space

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.

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THRIVE

Reduce Collaborative Overload to Regain Time and Space

PRINCIPLE

Collaborative overload is a significant roadblock to being effective—and thriving—at work. Successful leaders make important choices that streamline their interactions, focus their collaborative efforts and buy back 18-24% of their time.

"Every time you say *yes* to something, you say *no* to something else."

3 WAYS TO STOP COLLABORATIVE OVERLOAD

1. **Challenge beliefs**: Understand how identity and ways you choose to engage drive excessive collaborative demands.
2. **Impose structure**: Focus on priorities. Adapt roles, routines and interactions for efficiency.
3. **Alter behaviors**: Employ appropriate communication channels and promote efficient network norms.

"Constant email, international travel, calls at all hours of the day and night—I was exhausted. The collaborative demands eventually wore me down."

"People are afraid to say, I don't know but I will find out*; they worry that someone will think they don't know their business … so we add more people on every call and in every meeting. The extra people and the extra preparation creates overload—it's unnecessary and disrespectful of people's time."*

"We assume inclusion equals collaboration, with everyone in the same meetings and sharing the same things on email, and that is how we keep our culture of innovation intact. But the reality is we are all drowning."

"The overall volume of collaboration has gone up, but proportionately my workload has gone down. If I didn't start operating a little differently … there's no way I could have managed through that surge in work."

Collaborative overload is a significant roadblock to being effective—and thriving—at work. And it is a problem that is not going away soon as it is fueled by globalization, matrixed organizations, 24/7 connectivity and, often, a push for "one-firm" shared decision making and inclusion of diverse voices. Whether because of a surge in volume or intensity of work or due to a relentless increase in demands over time, people end up attending meetings, accepting requests and responding to calls, emails and texts at all hours. We create collaborative patterns and habits that on the margin do not seem like a big deal yet accumulate to significant amounts of time that absorb our days.

The good news is that people can gain back 18 to 24 percent of collaborative time when they make small changes on three fronts: beliefs, structures and behaviors.

Challenge beliefs: Understand how identity and ways you choose to engage drive unnecessary collaborative demands. Hidden beliefs and assumptions fuel patterns for responding to requests, contributing effort and interacting with others. For example, our identity or sense of value may be heavily intertwined with accomplishment or a desire to help others. Or, we may think that being in-the-know or being the only one capable of doing the work well preserves our reputation or gives us job security. Or, maybe, we worry about missing out if we say no and so tend to always take on collaborative requests. Driven by these beliefs, many of us accept more work, add tasks and work late into the night. Overload in these situations is *self-imposed*—not driven by email, meetings, demanding bosses, difficult clients and overly inclusive cultures.

Creating an identity around being the "white knight" who saves the day or the "go-to person" makes it difficult to say no to collaborative demands. Ruth says, *"Part of me loves it, being needed and helping people … And the excitement of success and being competitive … You can thrive on it for a while, but after years, it's a killer."* Similarly, Ellen built a reputation of being the one people rely on: "I always felt I had to do more. I had to go further. I had to be the best. I had to save the day … I would become their life raft and then would almost drown."

An excessive fear of being wrong can also drive people to over-communicate to cover their bases or spend inordinate amounts of time preparing for meetings. John noted such pressure consumes the time of many, creates stress and prevents collaboration: "Checkers checking the checkers … systems and meetings designed to be bulletproof … memos that are more like research papers."

When people do not question their habits and mindsets, they undermine their ability to tackle top priorities or more ambiguous, challenging or innovative work. They send the signal to other people that this is how they want to operate—while heading down the path to burnout.

Impose structure: Focus on professional and personal priorities, adapt roles, routines and interactions to improve collaborative efficiency. To create some control over their time, thriving leaders are clear about their long-term or big-picture objectives. They define clear categories that help prioritize time and create rules for how they interact with others.

Gail reviews her calendar weekly to shift tasks as needed for the coming days and to build in time for priorities in the weeks ahead: "If what is there does not align with people, purpose or passion, it gets moved … I know where my priorities are and how I want each of my 24 hours to be spent."

Much overload comes from not factoring in the collaborative intensity of the work or role. Thriving leaders redefine job responsibilities to better balance work effort and help team members learn how to leverage each other. Luis notes: "By getting out of the way, I was able to grow the team, bring in other expertise … As a result, we were able to make things faster, more elegant, more user friendly."

THRIVE

10 Collaborative Habits of Leaders at Risk of Burnout

1. Your default response to a request is, *Yes, I will, of course I can*. Helping, being needed or having a reputation as the expert feels too good.

2. Your calendar gets filled up by other people's priorities, not yours. You rarely map out time for your own North Star objectives or dedicate time for reflective or creative work.

3. You allow calls and meetings to drag on without structure or clarity of purpose. You stay in meetings when it is not clear you add unique value.

4. You take pride in being always on. Your desire for closure or to show others your work ethic makes you too quick to reply to email or IM.

5. You too readily solve problems, answer questions and make decisions, rather than involving or relying on others. You struggle to develop others; team members funnel everything through you.

6. You over-prepare for meetings, nailing down arguments and creating needlessly detailed plans rather than moving ahead with ambiguity.

7. You labor over emails when a short phone conversation or meeting would be more effective.

8. You still think you can multi-task. You respond to notifications or check your phone instead of focusing on the present person or project.

9. You arrive early or stay late to do your "real work." Catching up on evenings and weekends is routine.

10. Your big-picture goals aren't reflected in your to-do list, and your to-do list isn't built into your calendar.

"I used to go to every meeting on my calendar because I thought that was important. I have come to the realization that if they really need me they will come find me. I am probably skipping 30% of my meetings now and work seems to be getting done just fine without me."

Efficient collaborators also proactively shape the expectations of others, letting their colleagues and direct reports know when and how they should be involved. They are willing to decline meetings or assignments. They are aware that shifting demands off themselves requires knowing the aspirations and expertise of others. Shamira focuses her time where she has unique value to add: "Is someone else better suited to do it? Is there someone else on my team who can learn from the experience? If someone else on my team is in a meeting, can they just give me an FYI, or do I need to be there? How many of us do we need in any meeting? … It's about respecting my time, but also everyone else's time. I work with people who think I need to be in every meeting and I tell them, *No, that's not going to happen*."

Alter behaviors: Employ appropriate communication channels and promote network norms that decrease collaborative overload.
Email is often inefficiently used as the default method for all sorts of communication. More effective collaborators use email for transactional purposes and to confirm agreement on action items after a meeting. They are quick to abandon email when they sense disagreement and avoid email in early-stage problem-solving. Instant Messaging (IM) or texting is used for efficiency with established relationships. Virtual meetings involve quality video and audio, and collaborative tools are used to streamline work, not force extra involvement.

Effective meeting practices—such as clear focus, right people and agenda discipline—preserve efficiency and allow people to feel needed and engaged, rather than overloaded. Always be clear on what you want to accomplish from a meeting or conversation. Changing norms around the duration of meetings can help you carve out more time, too. Eugene sent an email to the 14,000 people in his global organization: "Effective immediately, every recurring meeting I have will be cut in half … that will cut back on the time prepping for the meeting and make our meetings crisp and to the point ... I got a lot of responses saying *Amen! Thank You! I will do the same with my team*." Alexa found that a well-run, two-hour project meeting once a week reduced the number of emails she reacted to: "We know whatever it is, we can hash out in that meeting."

Tips for Preventing Meetings, Email and Calls from Taking Over

- Plan an hour each week—late Friday or Sunday—to review your calendar, clarify priorities and lock in important activities for the upcoming week.

- Before you jump into a conversation or email thread, ask yourself, *Is my involvement necessary?* Are you acting out of desire to show expertise or add value? Is ego or fear driving your choices rather than desire to make a unique contribution and diffuse ownership?

- Instead of responding *yes* or *no* to requests, talk about when: *Would you like me to get this done before I do that? I can't do this until next week; is there someone else who could get it started?*

- Meet with your team to identify 3-5 things you will stop asking about. Step back, ask them to rely on planned updates rather than including you in small details or emails. Handle bad news well.

- Impose structure for meetings, including an agenda, expectations of outcomes and clarity on who should be included and why. Use pre-reads so time together is spent on important collaborative tasks rather than reporting or catching up. Use facilitation roles to keep the meeting on track.

- Promote efficient use of email. Consider both format (such as use of subject line to denote *Action Required* or *FYI*) and norms around response time, after-hours use and when to shift to a phone call.

- Recognize your own rhythm of work and block time accordingly. This may mean avoiding meetings or emails in the first part of the day, preserving that time for thoughtful, focused work. Other tactics include holding creative work until the end of the week, or building in 15 minutes after each meeting to follow-up while ideas are fresh.

THE TAKEAWAY? If you are one of the many leaders spending 85% or more of your day in meetings, on the phone and on email, it is time push back against endless collaborative demands. Check your beliefs about what drives you, what matters most and where you can add unique value. Use systems and create habits to protect time and space for your priorities. Replace behaviors that inefficiently consume time, talent and energy.