

## NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS



Thrive at Work

**Use Your Network to  
Draw You to What Matters Most**



## 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

# Use Your Network to Draw You to What Matters Most

### PRINCIPLE

People who thrive in their work have clarity on expertise they want to deploy in their work and values they want to live through their career. They are intentional in how they spend their time and create networks that pull them to professional and personal objectives.



“You need to be intentional about building the networks that help you move in the right direction ... People who don’t suffer when the system defines their options.”

### HOW TO THRIVE BY SETTING NORTH STAR ASPIRATIONS

1. Clarify your strengths, values and identity and use them to define your North Star.
2. Build your network, organize work and prioritize requests based on your North Star.
3. Rely on truth-tellers to hold you accountable to your North Star aspirations.

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People who thrive in their work are clear about their “North Star” aspirations. They know the **values** they want to live in their career:

*I love developing people ... Integrity in all things ... Being a problem solver ... Making a difference in the lives of patients ... Setting up our customers for success ... Treat people how you want to be treated ... Helping people every day ... I want to have impact ... Am I making things better and bringing other people with me?*

They also think of their North Star in terms of the **expertise** they want to develop and distinguish on in their work:

*To be an expert in a field (e.g., industry, technology, process or base of science) ... Know how different pieces integrate across a value chain ... To communicate well and use emotion to influence and push for creative ideas ... To move from a technical specialist to manager of managers ... To set up a unit and help people deliver.*

In our interviews, having focus and clarity about what matters most was critical to whether people charted their own path or were overrun by collaborative requests, organizational demands and politics. Those that were thriving had a clear personal sense of priorities to guide decisions about how to organize their work, respond to requests, spend time and proactively build their network. Over time, their network materialized key opportunities that enabled them to do work they found more meaningful.

Without North Star clarity, people more easily got pulled into unwanted projects, jobs and situations. They fell into a defensive posture that negatively impacted their well-being. We routinely heard stories of people who felt defined by the system and became less productive and more stressed, trapped and overwhelmed. They were more likely to feel compromised by long days, difficult relationships and negative workplace politics. Some had challenges with their health or personal relationships that were ultimately a product of letting others (e.g., bosses, team-mates, under-performing subordinates, etc.) chart their course.

**Clarify your strengths, values and identity use them to define your North Star.** Thriving leaders think about their strengths and how they want to use them, remind themselves about what they value and how to live those values, and understand the identity they want to build their life around. They are clear about their aspirations and are comfortable letting others know their priorities and their long-term (or next-step) direction.

Marcelo’s North Star is to “bring best practices to my company and change technology to drive key projects.” His aspiration is to



push the technology in his field and lead an R&D function in his company to do the same: “I’m not a person looking to climb the ladder. If I was, I would focus all my relationships on the next step. That’s not my goal, it’s not my motivation. I really like what I do ... I need internal people to know who I am, be aware of what I do, make sure it’s meeting a need and work with me to move the technology forward.”

Aden’s expertise and values have led to a role as a turnaround specialist working in the medical devices industry: “I have a North Star, a sense of purpose and mission. It’s about setting up our healthcare providers for success.” This clarity and commitment came when his newborn son required intensive care for two months: “I watched all these amazing health care providers take care of my son and help him ... I thought, *I need to go do something meaningful in life* ... Now, you can’t drag me out of this business!”

Arianna is strong in her identity as a whole person, not only in her work context: “You have to like yourself and know who you are and what you are willing and not willing to do. If work is the most important aspect of who you are, it puts too much importance on the work environment.” When she doesn’t feel fully engaged and utilized at work, what keeps her grounded are the other interactions in her life: family, church and volunteering. No one area is dominant. “You get a better attitude because you have a broader perspective being in multiple organizations and multiple roles. If something is amiss in one thing, the other things are okay.”

### **Build the network to pull you to your North Star.**

Thriving leaders intentionally forge a rich network of colleagues, mentors and contacts that help them build their reputation and pull them into the type of work they want to be known for.

Malik, a corporate attorney, did this first by proving his ability to set litigation strategy and give legal advice. “Early on, it was about showing my immediate manager that I can represent the group and have credibility in a meeting ... I would ask to join meetings or be part of a cross-functional crisis management team or a task force, the kinds of roles I wanted to do more of ... As my position and scope has grown, the things I get involved in are more consultative, strategic, balancing competing views—which means forming new and trusted networks with key stakeholders throughout the organization.”



## 10 Signs You Are Off Course

1. Your calendar is driven by others’ needs and you are overly consumed by workplace politics, trying to navigate who is winning and who is losing.
2. You operate out of fear. You are uncomfortable taking risks, preferring to play it safe versus doing what you think is right.
3. Your network is insular. You talk to and work with the same group of people, rather than creating ties across silos or organizations.
4. You are known for work you don’t enjoy or skills you don’t want to develop further. You don’t know how to turn down these requests, or change your reputation.
5. Your LinkedIn account is 90% people you know from your current role. You don’t keep up with colleagues from prior jobs or at other companies.
6. You don’t have colleagues, mentors, friends or family giving you honest feedback and different perspectives.
7. You haven’t defined the capabilities you need to make your next move.
8. You don’t have an internal or external network in place to help execute a successful role transition should opportunities emerge.
9. You don’t operate with clarity of who you are and what you value. Your work persona seems at odds with how you behave in your personal life.
10. You are taking work day-by-day. You hope to make it through to easier times rather than playing offense and proactively charting your path and network.



“Playing defense sucks. You are always reactive and living in fear. The only way to get out of it is to get clarity on who you are and what you want to do and start forging a path and network that enables you to get there.”

Similarly, Cora, a researcher and team lead, morphed her work to create a role and context she knew she would thrive in: “Early in the role, I started to put into motion what I was most excited to work on.

There was stuff that was easier, but is that the stuff that is most exciting to me?” Similarly, she pushed to work with people she respected and would enjoy working with: “If I could get them on the project, what would they want to be doing? How could we incorporate that?”

Leaders who pursue a North Star also use their network for advice, feedback, information and opportunities. They reach out to peers or people who have done similar work to learn what they don’t know or gaps they need to fill. They respond to and learn from their manager, mentors, internal influencers and stakeholders. But they also ask for what they want. Yolanda explains, “You have to have an intentional approach to how people can help you grow in your career and what you are looking for ... don’t let the demands happen to you.”

**Rely on truth-tellers to hold you accountable to your North Star aspirations.** Thriving leaders rely on trusted mentors, family, spouses and close friends—those who know them well—to pull them back when they get off course. Gail seeks “truth tellers” in her professional and personal life, people who will give her honest feedback: “You want people who won’t let you complain, who will call your bluff—but who will also tell you when you are right.” She leans on her husband, mother and sister: “There’s just a ton of love and mutual respect in these relationships ... I am lucky I can have those gut-check conversations.” Older couples at church, too, help Gail stay grounded in family and faith. After one particularly intense and exhausting time at work, one woman gently said: *You know this is not what it is all about, right?*

Similarly, Des was in a stretch when he was just going through the motions with his family: “I was there but I wasn’t fully present.” His wife finally called him out on it. Later, having the experience of dealing with cancer in his family put things in perspective: “You get reminded that your life can get turned upside down in a quick minute. You know you can’t get your time back, so don’t screw it up.”



## Tips for Building Networks that Pull You Toward Your North Star

- Get crystal clear on what matters to you professionally and personally. Write down expertise you want to leverage in your work and values you want to live through your career.
- Reflect on times in your career when you were thriving in your work. Clarify the activities or outcomes that made the work meaningful. Then consider the interactions you had with others around the work. Seek to replicate those elements.
- Be clear on what you want to be known for at work. Technical expertise? Developing people? Solving problems? Step into roles and moments that let you showcase and develop that expertise.
- Schedule and protect time in your calendar for North Star priorities. Start saying no to requests that pull you away or consume too much of your time.
- Make plans to attend an event or conference in your field, industry or a related domain. Reach out to your network for recommendations and to connect with others who may be presenting or going.
- Update your LinkedIn account. Contact or re-connect with 1-2 people each week, giving information, sharing resources or asking a question.
- Use your online presence to reflect your North Star interests and activities.
- Ask one or two trusted people to help you hold true to what matters most and to live up to outside commitments, such as family, health or community.
- Be proactive in network development. Ask people you know for introductions to others. Explore complementary work with people you don’t know well. Always ask, *who else should I be speaking with?*

**THE TAKEAWAY?** Leaders who have a strong sense of well-being and satisfaction “play offense.” They refuse to be defined by the system or resigned to roles they don’t enjoy. To thrive, clarify expertise and values central to your North Star. Use that clarity to guide your choices about your work, the network you build and the relationships you initiate and invest in.