IRC4HR™

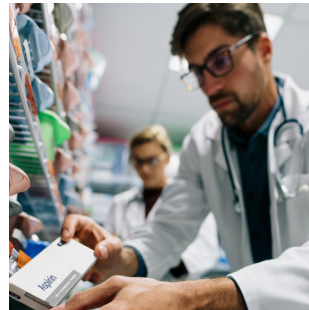## NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS

Thrive at Work

Buffer from Work and Anchor in Non-Work Networks to Gain Perspective and Foster Well-Being

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.

Connected Commons

Buffer from Work and Anchor in Non-Work Networks to Gain Perspective and Foster Well-Being

PRINCIPLE

A non-work network helps people broaden perspective on life, define themselves more expansively and build confidence. Without boundaries and non-work relationships, people become uni-dimensional— needlessly consumed and defined by work demands.

"It is easy to fall into a world where you only have friends at work, you only talk about work, you only think about work. It's hard to switch off."

AVOID BEING UNI-DIMENSIONAL AND FOSTER PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

1. Set a few firm rules— tailored to your role, commitments and preferences—to buffer from demands of work.
2. Anchor in life beyond the job through one or two groups that pull you in and provide different perspectives.

Work can easily be overly consuming and take on an unhealthy and unsustainable level of time and attention. "It becomes a downward spiral," Logan says. "Work starts creeping more and more into your other life and you stop doing things at a personal level because you are spending more and more time at work. At some point, everything revolves around one thing: work."

For Logan, family commitments are his biggest incentive to protect time away from work. He also rides with a cycling club for mental space: "If you are focused on something you enjoy, you don't see that phone showing you more emails or requests. If you don't have those activities, the phone is close by and buzzing and it is easy to look at it and get sucked back in."

Barry's ties outside of work include a volunteer commitment to a local charter school: "It was something that fit my interests and would challenge my mind in a totally different way ... I've had people say, *I can't believe you have the time! Why are you so involved?* ... It's like people are surprised that you have a willingness to focus on something different, something more than work."

When people we interviewed were thriving, like Logan and Barry, they described various habits and relationships that *buffered* them from the incessant demands of work and *anchored* them in life beyond the job. They created rules, set expectations and developed their network in ways that fostered confidence, perspective, and physical and emotional well-being.

Buffer from work with a few firm rules. Often just a few changes create the mental and physical space people need to feel reenergized and grounded. Putting up a few clear boundaries helps them say no and prevents other people from structuring their days and weeks—and often boosts performance. Some of the practices we heard were:

> *Check emails just three times a day ... Put the phone down when I walk in the door; don't pick it up again until the kids are in bed ... Dinner time with family; don't check email ... Leave work at 4:30 once a week to get to the gym ... Put the phone on airplane mode 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. so I can sleep ... Leave work 15 minutes earlier to avoid getting stuck in traffic ... Work from home on Fridays ... No Saturday email.*

The rules people set were personal, tailored to their roles, family commitments and preferences. Helene intentionally adds 45 minutes to her commute time by taking the train rather than driving: "It forces me to leave the office on time ... It lengthens my day but takes away the stress of driving in traffic ... I actually meditate on the train which has really helped."

Courtney has a firm leave time three days a week, so she can be prompt to pick up her son from daycare. She put these rules in place after a spell where she was feeling burned out and taken advantage of: "My days kept stretching out and I felt like it was a fight to be at home and take care of my family." At first, she worried that there would be negative consequences of her new rules. She was surprised: "I set down the rules and people respect them! The world didn't fall apart … Why didn't I do this before? It's made a huge difference in my life and being happy."

Interestingly, about 20% of interviewees integrated more than they buffered. Rather than setting hard boundaries or rules, these leaders saw the positives in the flexibility and integration of connectivity, rather than the negativity of work demands. This was especially true among senior leaders with their 24/7, high-demand careers. "There is no balance. In fact, we should quit using that word. The beauty of today is *integration*," says Gail. "My life is so much better because I can sit at a parent/teacher conference or a soccer game and my boss will call if he needs me. I can check email wherever I am."

Similarly, Deena says, "As high as the stress is, with the accountability and responsibility, I still feel like I have flexibility in my job. For that, I'm grateful." Marcy made a mental shift to acceptance and appreciation: "I accept that at a certain level I lose some of my own free time. I don't get irritated by that. I am getting something, too, in terms of career achievement, development and financial rewards."

Anchor in networks beyond the job. Successful people commit to relationships and activities outside of work that pull them into a group and create a compelling life outside of work. These anchoring connections provide different perspectives and keep people from becoming uni-dimensional.

Anchoring in non-work groups also has organizational benefits. People become re-energized, and they make connections and have ideas that can be brought in-house and applied.

"All the people that I know who are most satisfied and are also viewed as being successful have really strong interests and passions outside of work. They formed great networks and were infused with different ways of thinking," notes Sofia.

10 Signs You Are Getting Consumed By Work

1. You routinely cancel plans because you have too much work to do. Your family and friends have learned to make plans without you. You are keeping up via Facebook.
2. You feel important because you are so busy. You don't understand how other people commit to regular activities such as a book club, yoga class, choir practice or coaching a sports team.
3. You take calls or respond to text or email no matter what you are doing.
4. Your manager thinks nothing of making last-minute requests because you are always the last to leave and have no other priorities. You now expect it and plan to work late or bring work home.
5. All your friends are work friends. If you go out, you only talk about work. And, your teams and co-workers rarely talk about non-work interests.
6. You stopped volunteering or being part of group activities because you have become unreliable.
7. It's been a long time since you were inspired or energized by a person, idea or experience outside of work.
8. You spend weekends getting caught up on work, even though you feel guilty taking time away from family or other commitments. If you don't work, the next week is overwhelming.
9. The last time you went to a non-work social activity, you couldn't think of anything interesting to talk about. All your stories are about work.
10. You are gaining weight, eating meals on the go or not sleeping well. You are ignoring a health issue or waiting until work slows down to take care of yourself—but it never slows down.

"Listening to people who are completely different … Those activities give me room to breathe and create new perspectives. Then I go back and focus on my work. If I didn't have people in my life outside of work, I wouldn't be effective in my job."

"When you have this energizing outside life, you come in to work with a different point of view; people get refreshed by that and uplifted by working with you … What started as an anchoring activity ends up being a powerful source of success."

Thriving leaders were invested in at least one and usually two groups outside of work. The activities themselves were not important; what mattered was regular participation and a social aspect to help them keep their commitments. Examples include:

Weekly dinner out with friends … Volunteer board member of local nonprofit … Swimming with kids every Saturday … Dinner with extended family every other week … Coach kids' sports teams … Moms group … Book club … Dinner club … A monthly music class … Friday family pizza and movie night … Tennis group … Yoga class.

Participating in groups outside of work also creates opportunities for people to relate to others in an authentic way, not tied to the expectations of their role. Agnes, an executive who runs and is a race volunteer with a local group, says, "One of the things that I love is that the people in my running club don't know what my job is. They don't know what I do. It's a completely different perspective from when you're at work. I'm just Agnes who does a 25-minute 5K."

Networks are particularly important to encourage and sustain healthy habits. Several leaders talked about being active with family and friends, often working out, skiing, hiking or biking together. Nina relies on her sisters for motivation: "We have a competition to see who can track more steps on our Fitbits! In the past, I would say, *I don't have time to work out*. Now, I want to find a way to beat them!"

Some leaders recharge through activities that absorb their attention fully. They may be physically immersive (biking, skiing, weight lifting) or mentally immersive (photography, playing music, "cooking something complicated"). The key is to go all-in. This creates a needed mental separation from work and helps them be better equipped to re-engage with others. Zachary laughs that he "works all the time," but does turn off work for two things: "The only things I have found that will totally distract me from work are the grandkids and car racing! For both, if you don't think about what you are doing, you'll end up in a lot of trouble!"

THRIVE

Why Anchor In Non-Work Networks?

Our research repeatedly showed that people who are thriving are anchored by connections into one or two groups outside of work. They avoid becoming uni-dimensional by being with people who care about other things and think in different ways. The details vary. People anchor in community, volunteering, exercise, sports, family traditions, intellectual or academic interests, social groups, artistic interests, and religious and spiritual practices. For thriving leaders, these groups and activities are not optional: they are commitments that are rarely cancelled.

Benefits of anchoring in non-work networks include:

- **Gives you a reality check.** All of life isn't lived in the bubble of work. There are other things people care about and other ways to live.

- **Fosters gratitude.** Your deadlines, pressures and challenges are not the only things you notice. You pay attention to the good things in your life.

- **Provides opportunity to learn from different people and different domains.** You see patterns or make connections that can be applied or adapted to work.

- **Helps you be resilient.** You are not limited by one role. Your identity is not wrapped up in what is happening professionally. When you define yourself broadly, you are energized and strengthened by other aspects of your life when work is difficult.

- **Builds confidence.** Reduces the sense of dependence on one company. When you are not operating out of fear, you make better decisions for the business, your current work and in planning for the future.

- **Promotes focused performance.** When you anchor in networks that encourage healthy habits (sleeping, eating well, exercise), you improve physical well-being, cognitive function and emotional regulation.

THE TAKEAWAY? Don't let work become all-consuming. Instead, commit to at least one non-work group (two is better) that pulls you in and absorbs your attention. And set a few rules that allow you to shut off work and re-charge. These strategies build your non-work network, which helps you define yourself more broadly and fosters physical health, well-being and resilience.