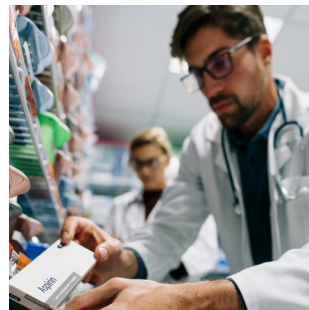


NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS



Execute Work Efficiently
**Build Personal Agility
Through Networks**



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.



EXECUTE WORK EFFICIENTLY

PRINCIPLE

Successful people manage complexity and constant change in today's workplace by supplementing skill gaps, expertise or political awareness through networks. People with more effective networks thrive in formal role transitions and when new capabilities are required.



"You can be much more successful if you can build relationships designed to create pull. It takes a little bit longer, but it dramatically speeds execution."

3 NETWORK STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU ADAPT

1. Create *pull* into networks (don't *push*) when engaging with new groups.
2. Build a network to help you adapt.
3. Prepare to step back and shift to collaboratively efficient interactions.

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

Build Personal Agility Through Networks

"The first 30 days, you just listen. You meet your direct reports, your peers, the teams, the customers. What are our goals? How we are structured? What do people do? Are deliverables clear? Are we efficient? ... I had my perspective on areas I thought should be a priority, but that's just one perspective."

"Don't feel like you need to have all the answers. Nobody is expecting you to and you will build relationships faster if you seek out people who have done this in the past or can steer you in the right direction."

"You have to ask yourself, Am I really the only one who can take care of this? If not, pass it along so you can focus on the areas where your expertise is critical ... Resist the temptation to 'pull weeds.' It gives the feeling of completion, control, accomplishment. But in the end, it's not a real value-add; anyone could have done it and you are trapping yourself in your network."

The accelerated pace of change makes the ability to learn and adapt an essential component of success. Whether compelled by formal role transitions or, more subtly, by the shifting demands of work over time, successful people manage change by supplementing skill gaps, resource deficiencies or political awareness through networks. They anticipate the need to change, understand and address capability gaps, and are agile and adaptable in large part because of network investments.

In contrast, people with less effective networks falter. Stories abound of high performers who couldn't replicate success in new contexts, and, more insidiously, valued people who didn't adapt networks when roles shifted through new projects or expectations. Notably, these failures are *never* seen by the organization as an ineffective network strategy. Connectivity to others—or lack thereof—is an invisible factor. As a result, people become defined by a failure or labeled in ways that deprive them of future opportunities. In many cases, they leave the organization.

To adapt and remain agile, high performers use network interactions to create pull, supplement gaps in skill, expertise and perspective, and become collaboratively efficient. In doing so, they avoid common traps that undermine continued success over time.

Create *pull* into networks (don't *push*) when engaging with new groups or entering new roles. More effective people avoid "pushing" themselves and their expertise into the network by promoting knowledge, experience or brand too rapidly. Instead, they are open and curious, ask a lot of questions, slowly morph their expertise to the needs of incumbents and create mutual wins in interactions. As a result, they get "pulled" into conversations and different networks. They gain perspective and build relationships that help them anticipate change, develop needed skills and see new opportunities.

Notably, people who do this well don't usually think about *how* they do it. Chad noted, "Creating pull is one of those things that I have done without thinking about it ... My experience is that you work on a client, you work with leadership, you do a bunch of new stuff. Then you blink, and it's a year later. You've expanded the network, created a bunch of opportunities and that snowballs into other things."

Through our interviews, we learned that the most successful newcomers found opportunities to help others. They asked questions and were respectful. They created energy by looking for possibilities, points of shared interest and overlap of ideas, perspectives and projects. They *slowly* morphed their knowledge to the new context.

Tyler noted, "Some people need to see you assert your skills and intelligence ... More often, people are receptive when you show how much you don't know and you are willing to learn ... Asking tons of questions and trying to learn from people and teaching when asked, that's a good way to interact with people ... Now, I've been pulled in on a bunch of different stuff. At this point, I'm known to a fair portion of the company as someone who can set up a team and help them deliver."

Kavita wanted to make a move to a different practice area based in the U.S. She used every project as a way to gain skill, understand the structure of the global business and cultivate trusted relationships: "I learned that if you do a good job people will come back to you, but likely just on the same topic. To expand your horizons, you have to have conversations with people beyond what they are asking for: What else are you working on? Maybe I will have some detail that will help." One project was pivotal: "I offered my support on business development proposals that included work in the U.S. and built my contacts and connections that way." By showing interest and gradually adapting her skills to another group's need, she became a go-to contributor and was offered a position on the team in the U.S. Time and time again resources, opportunities, talent and information flowed to people that create pull in networks rather than presume they need to prove themselves or advocate their brand too early.



Avoid Network Traps that Undermine Execution and Derail Careers

Years of research has revealed traps that derail successful people when they do not adapt their networks and relationships as conditions or roles demand new capabilities.

The Under-Developed Network Trap. This can happen two ways: by over-relying on current strengths rather than leveraging relevant experience in the network or by not seeing and using the informal network. In both cases, people miss the opportunity to build networks to address important gaps such as deficiencies of technical expertise, limited understanding of cultural or market dynamics or problematic decision-making or interpersonal style.

The Misaligned Network Trap. People falter when their interactions with different groups are not authentic. Sometimes they engage in surface-level interactions but don't build a personal connection, sense of trust and reciprocity. Other times people are too chameleon-like, resulting in fragmented networks or creating unease about their intentions. If this misalignment isn't corrected, people find it difficult to get engagement and effort needed for their projects.

The Collaboratively Overloaded Network Trap. People can be overwhelmed when they have a large volume and diversity of collaborative demands consuming their time. Due to personality, role design or defaulting to expectations of others, they end up working long hours at a frenetic pace. Unfortunately, they use their own time inefficiently, become less innovative over time and have a greater tendency to burn out. They negatively impact the network by wasting others' time, invisibly holding up work and stifling innovation.

The Biased/Insular Network Trap. People often lean on trusted ties and colleagues whose expertise was valuable in a prior role rather than seeking out new experts, advisors and allies. If they allow certain voices to become disproportionately influential, they have a biased view of what is important in a new role or situation. The more insular the network (such as people they have known for a long time; those with similar functional backgrounds that "get" and "think like" them; those that are physically close by or often in the same meetings) the more biased their thinking becomes. Plans do not reflect the needs of all stakeholders; innovation falters due to similarity of voices and perspectives; decision-making is compromised (even to the point of ethical lapses).

Build a network to help you adapt. People who become productive in new roles or in changing situations surge into both the work *and* the network. They quickly develop connections with people who can help them make sense of their context and responsibilities. They use their network to fill in gaps in expertise, skill or political awareness. They meet and engage both formal and informal leaders, and build ties and relationships across level, function, geography and expertise.

Immediately upon joining a new firm, Rick established relationships with his boss, direct reports and team—and set up meetings with 47 people across the business. He met with peers who would provide perspective and become his “sensor network.” With the heads of the firm’s practices and regions, he sought to understand the business and how his team could be an asset. Knowing these people were key for political support, to set his reputation and to get things done, he also asked, “*Who’s your trusted deputy? Who do you want me to work with? ... This saves their time. Helps my team execute. And, it boosts my credibility when I deliver something.*” He introduced himself to heads of various corporate groups such as finance, legal and IT who “are the arms and legs for getting our work done.” He wanted to establish a relationship before he had to ask for anything: “When I met with these people, the conversation was, *Help me know what you do and how you operate. When people need something from you, what approach works best?*”

Others similarly “onboarded themselves” when they moved into new roles. Just as important, people sought out a range of perspectives and sources of feedback even when established in their groups or roles. Brenda always relied on “truth tellers” to be sounding boards and give her honest feedback: “Once, I had someone in my team pull me aside and say, *Hey, you probably didn’t know this, but your facial expressions didn’t match what you said.* Those are the things you need to hear.” Gail described “calling in the brain trust”—people who share similar values in the work but fill in gaps in your experience and expertise: “You’ve done your homework, but you need these people to see the white space, to see what you are missing.”



10 Common Mistakes When Roles and Demands Change

1. You are too eager to sell your knowledge, expertise, credentials and ideas to build credibility in the network. You don’t learn about others’ work or explore ways you could be most helpful.
2. You rush to prove yourself to your new group or leaders by making immediate change. Yet, “100-day plans” or quick actions fail because they are based on uninformed views and send a message of arrogance.
3. You act bulletproof or sell yourself as the expert. You set too-high expectations and find it harder to back out of collaborations (by sending your team) later.
4. You don’t invest in a broad, cross-boundary network. You get to know your immediate team and formal leaders and then get to work.
5. You expect your track record of success, technical ability or expertise to carry you through change. Your peers have the same mindset.
6. You try too hard to please everyone. You take on tasks or commit to supporting efforts that come your way, rather than those that align with your goals and interests.
7. You don’t let others know you are overloaded or overwhelmed. You tough it out, surge into the work without a plan for rebalancing a few months out—and get stuck in a vicious cycle.
8. You don’t schedule time to extend your network or build solid relationships. The busier you get, the tighter your circle becomes. You miss out on new, important or interesting work, vital perspectives and support systems.
9. You don’t leverage other people to point out what you don’t know or to help you “sense” problems. You miss out on opportunities to improve.
10. You don’t get to know people and groups you will need for support or resources. Asking for help at the time of need is more difficult and people may be less willing.



“It is easy to think you are smarter than you really are, but you have to ask, *In this role, what do I know?* And depend on other people to help drive how you think about what you don’t know or don’t understand.”



Prepare to step back and shift to collaboratively efficient interactions. When taking on a new role or assignment, or when working with new groups, successful people surge into the work, investing time and engaging frequently. However, several months in, they shift to more collaboratively efficient interactions. If people don't make this shift, they get over-utilized and create a heavy reliance on themselves that cannot be sustained. They become less effective, and, over time, experience exhaustion and burnout.

- **Avoid being “the indispensable expert” or the “white knight.”** Once you have a reputation of knowing everything or being in charge, it is difficult to change expectations. Jo explained: “You have to be comfortable not knowing everything ... Things change very quickly ... If I had approached it that I was the expert, I wouldn't have lasted six months in the job.”
- **Don't own all the relationships.** If everyone and everything flows through you, you become overloaded and ineffective. Erika's formal role to gave her entry into meetings and discussions with senior leaders and cross-functional groups. Rather than being a gatekeeper, she would bring a team member with her. After a meeting or two, Erika stepped back: “My team could watch and learn from how I engage ... Once they felt confident and empowered, I would figure out my path to fade into the background.”
- **Gain clarity on where you need to give your attention.** Know what you won't do and what you need to do. Laurie was supported by her boss to delegate and decline work: “There are areas where I have more interest or skill and could just do it, but my manager said, *Delegate all of that. I know you can do it already.*”
- **Have critical conversations with co-workers to set or adjust expectations.** Rethink habits around decision making and approvals; who goes to meetings and for how long; how people get help when they need it. As he backed out of some project work, Luis had multiple one-on-one conversations to reassure people: “I let them know I wasn't going away. It's going to be more productive, more innovative, and in the end, I will be more available at the right times.”



Network Actions that Boost Agility

- Employ a “pull” (versus push) strategy in relationships. Ask questions; morph your expertise to others needs. Build relationships by asking people how you can make their work easier or offering resources or ideas.
- Build the network needed to supplement skill, expertise and resource gaps. Seek out people who have done similar work in a different group. Leverage expertise of the prior leader. Learn from your new boss and people in other functions who have insight into the context, people, processes and culture.
- Craft the role you are stepping into. Rapidly develop your network *and* demonstrate your abilities in the type of work you want to be known for. Both are essential for building reputation and pulling you into work you want to do.
- Find two or three confidants who know you well, share your values and have a sense of your role. Leverage these “truth tellers” to get brutally honest feedback about the work and how you are interpreting or responding to things.
- After the initial surge of learning in a new role or group, focus on managing collaborative overload. Block out time for your priorities. Don't continue to be involved in everything. Decide where you add value and pull back on the intensity and frequency of your collaboration in lower priority areas.
- Clarify expectations of yourself and others. Be transparent about what you know, what you don't and how you will rely on the skills and commitments of the team. Manage email and availability off-hours in ways that suit your rhythms and preferences. Push back on meetings by defaulting to shorter meeting times, asking if you are really needed and be willing to leave when your time is better spent elsewhere.

THE TAKEAWAY? The right network is a hidden asset for dealing with change and transitioning to new roles. Increase your initial and long-term success by using network interactions to pull you into opportunities, supplement gaps in skill and perspective, and drive efficient collaboration.