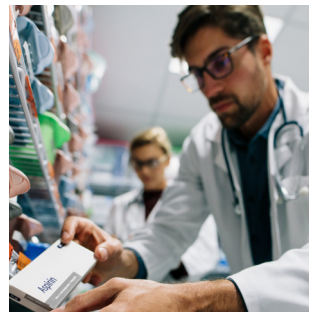# IRC4HR™

NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS

Execute Work Efficiently

**Drive Results Through
Agile Team and Unit 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.

EXECUTE WORK EFFICIENTLY

Drive Results Through Agile Team and Unit Networks

PRINCIPLE

Complex, changing and fast-paced work requires teams and networks to form and re-form, flex and adapt. Successful people drive results by managing specific points in organizational networks and creating a context for collaboration through leadership principles and talent management practices.

"We can't fulfill our strategy without collaboration across borders and boundaries, being able to work with different partners and teammates."

5 WAYS EFFECTIVE PEOPLE FOSTER AGILE NETWORKS

1. Manage the network—not just the team or unit.
2. Create responsive networks through leadership principles and practices.
3. Create conditions for engagement through collaboration.
4. Hire and onboard with network integration in mind.
5. Develop agile talent and reward collaboration.

"People underestimate the level of leadership skill to run a matrix. It's unbelievably higher than what it takes to run a command model … We want the benefits of collaboration but the cost is greater than anybody thinks."

"Our work is so complex, that is why we need to collaborate and connect the dots across silos … We take this seriously and strategically in the way we are looking for talent, the way we are getting it and how we are integrating it."

Complex, changing and fast-paced work requires teams and networks to be adaptive, fluid and flexible. Matrixed organizations and team-based designs rely on intense collaboration. Skillful navigation of intersecting interests, collaborative demands and opportunities is needed—yet often difficult to do. More successful people create a context for network integration and collaboration through an array of intentional leadership actions and talent management practices. As a result, they gain efficiencies and greater effort needed to yield success.

Manage the network—not just the team or unit. Leaders in all organizations are accustomed to work being assigned to teams, or made the responsibility of certain roles or units. More successful leaders understand that while work is **assigned** to these groups it is likely to be **accomplished** through effective networks. They engage in network management practices that create more effective and agile groups. Two decades of research show eight network management practices that are critical for high performance:

- *Manage the center.* People in a network's center are those who are most in demand—often due to role, expertise, personality or reputation. They are valuable employees but can be overloaded or under-appreciated. They can unwittingly become bottlenecks and may hurt performance. Susceptible to burnout, they are the organization's hidden flight risks.
  - ✓ *Address collaborative overload. Help people manage their time and connectivity. Help them re-energize to avoid burnout or isolation.*
  - ✓ *Identify and reward employees for collaborative behaviors like offering resources or information.*

- *Manage the edge.* People on the periphery have few ties connecting them to the team or influential people. Newcomers to the team or the organization begin on the edge. Employees who have narrow expertise or are geographically isolated are also usually there. Sometimes, people on the edge are seen as high performers, but don't contribute much to others' efforts.
  - ✓ *Integrate newcomers quickly.*
  - ✓ *Ensure experts and high-performers are available to help their colleagues.*

- *Bridge important silos.* Often, people operate within established boundaries. Ideas, processes or methods do not move from concept to broader impact. To drive performance, or for efforts to be implemented broadly, leaders and groups must define silos that matter and get to know people and processes across levels, shifts, locations, functions, expertise and demographic groups.
  - ✓ *Facilitate collaboration across lines and levels in the organization. Teach others to reach across boundaries.*
  - ✓ *Foster innovation and change by engaging diverse perspectives. Bring in people across functions, levels, expertise, interests.*

- *Minimize organizational insularity.* Ensure there are structures and clear expectations for interacting with clients, customers, vendors or other stakeholders so ideas flow across groups and opportunities to strengthen the network are not missed.
  - ✓ *Make sure people are aware of one another's expertise and connections.*
  - ✓ *Facilitate work across internal groups or stakeholders and external groups such as customers or partners.*

Generating Results Through Network Management

Bridge silos where collaboration matters

Leverage the network's edge

Know and utilize the network's center

Create responsive networks through leadership principles and practices. More effective leaders have rules and habits that contribute to information and expertise flowing effectively through the network.

In agile networks, people feel safe to speak up, ask questions, admit they don't know and contribute novel ideas. Effective leaders live by ***principles that remove fear and promote prudent risk taking***:

- *Foster idea sharing and openness.* Dan brings all levels and expertise together to make project decisions and talk through priorities and processes: "A good idea can come from anywhere. I never use my title or pull rank. I expect new hires, straight out of college, to challenge my ideas." Deena noted, "If you pose your opinion or give an answer as a leader, you shut down a big percentage of ideas that could have come to the table. My role is framing up the conversation and listening."

- *Critique ideas, not the person.* Marco wants "to know what you have to say. I may tell you we can't do that, but the idea might trigger another idea … and produce that next thought and more conversation. That's the kind of thing that just makes us stronger." Even if he disagrees, he focuses on the idea or the process, rather than critiquing the person, saying something like: *Let's just pause and think it through* or *I like the concept … how can we twist that around and get a good outcome?*

- *Handle bad news well.* "Bad news doesn't get better," noted Rachel. Accept that mistakes will happen. Avoid anger, non-constructive feedback or subtle cues that you are disappointed (e.g., slumping shoulders, sighs, frowns). Focus on learning and next steps. Art explained: "We don't say, *You've failed in this so we're going to cut you off*. Instead, we say, *This approach did not work. Do you have ideas of how you want to move forward?*" And laugh, said Aden: "You have to learn to laugh when you are in difficult circumstances and you get bad news. Obviously you do the right thing to fix the situation. But the more you handle bad news well the more you are likely to hear it before things get to a point where they can not be solved."
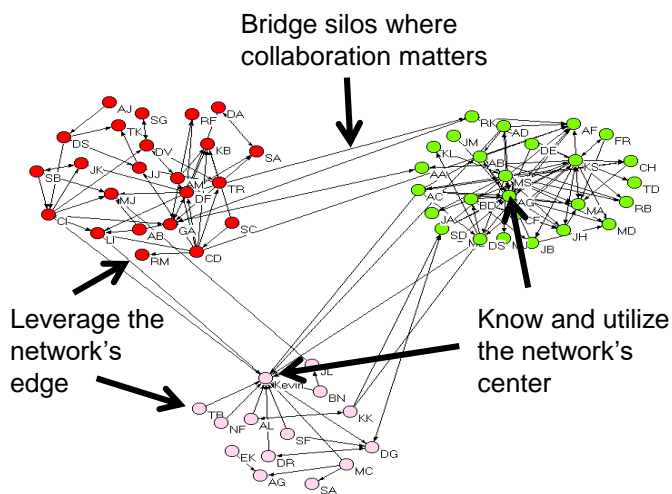
In agile networks, people make choices about where they should contribute deeply and when to take a light approach. They trust others to do their work and create a context where new people have confidence to step in. And, they implement *practices to balance and re-balance collaborative demands across the network:*

- *Never go to meetings alone.* Lars learned to bring other people in on his work early to ensure he's not the only one involved or up to speed: "I have less ability to forecast what I am going to be doing any day, week or month; things have to drop off my calendar because something else important comes up. I'm trying not to do anything alone. Somebody else comes with me to every client meeting. I don't have the only relationship, and they can step in or take care of something without me."

- *Force work to go on without you.* Geoffrey set an hour-long meeting every other week, open to the core team and stakeholders, but he removed himself from the center of the network: "Early on, I said, *Meetings go on without me, I'm not in charge of them*." He intentionally held back his opinion at times, forcing others to speak up and own decisions: "Now, it is up to them to figure out how much review or input they need from me … They can focus on what is really needed to make a decision, not layers of consultation or approvals."

- *Use project meetings to rebalance work and broker relationships.* Whitney uses weekly check-ins: "They let me know what they are doing, how they feel about the workload and who they are working with. I can then help educate the customers about the work and the pace, or help the team prioritize." Lena established 30 minute morning meetings with her leadership team to walk through client issues and tee up the day. Each of those team leaders held daily, tactical stand-up meetings, too. The process created transparency around workload and challenges and fostered collaboration: "Before, I spent too much of my time serving as the go-between, grabbing one leader, saying, *You need to talk to so-and-so, she's dealing with similar problems*."

10 Signs Your Network Is Not Optimized

1. Everyone knows they are expected to collaborate, but knowing how to do it and with whom is a problem. Collaboration is viewed as just including many people and using social technology.

2. Matrix structures, layers and processes slow things down. Decisions churn in the system. You (or someone else) has become a bottleneck or gatekeeper, unintentionally creating inefficiency.

3. Caution and CYA rule the day. People get pulled into work or cc'd on emails because others are afraid to take risks or make decisions.

4. You struggle when someone leaves or changes jobs. Newcomers take too long to get up to speed; existing team members struggle with collaborative overload as they pick up the pieces.

5. You are slow offer or ask for help. You are evaluated and rewarded by your own metrics, not collaboration or supporting goals of others.

6. You hold the relationship with a key customer, vendor, contractor or internal function. You haven't invited others to meetings or tried to diffuse ownership or understanding of the work.

7. Onboarding is something done by HR. You and your colleagues give little thought to helping newcomers learn the network and informal ways work gets done.

8. You don't feel valued; your team is not appreciated. You don't have a clear picture of how your work relates to what other people are doing.

9. Relationships between past leaders created mistrust and poor collaboration across silos. Your team is still living with the negative impact.

10. You don't see opportunities for you or your team to work with new people or new groups.

"I wanted to move the team to collaborate, not just when I told them to, but for them to recognize for themselves how they could work with each other and why they needed each other to be successful."

Create conditions for engagement through collaboration.
More effective people make sure people feel valued, connected to their colleagues and invested in their work.

- *Show appreciation.* Small gestures make a big impact. Marty sends handwritten notes to express his appreciation: "I want them and their families to know their efforts and time matter." Sydney said, "Acknowledge hard work! It doesn't have to be a big recognition, just a statement that you notice and appreciate it." Kathryn recognizes small wins and passes along compliments: "People want to be proud of the work they are doing. If somebody does something above and beyond, or if I get a thank-you about a team member, I email my boss and I bring it up in the team huddle."

- *Place trust in others.* Let people know, *This is your project. I'm here to help you along the way, but you own it.* That feeling of trust creates enthusiasm and willingness to give greater effort. Heath said, "There are two mindsets when you bring new people in to a project. You can think: *I'm suspicious so you need to prove yourself. And I will go cautiously and give you incremental opportunities. As you prove yourself, you'll become more effective and be given more opportunity.* Or, you can think: *I trust that you are going to do a stellar job, and I'm going to give you the right platform to be successful from day one.* I tend to go with the optimistic view because I think you get the best out of people if you give them the opportunity to shine."

- *Have some fun.* Don't take yourself too seriously. Do things that help people laugh, blow off steam and have genuine interaction with each other. Deena reflected: "Why is it as we get older, we have to be so serious all the time? If people don't enjoy what they are doing, having some fun, you are not getting the best out of them." Take turns showing a funny video at the beginning of a meeting. Ask a question of the week: a recent vacation, favorite dessert, worst movie, etc. Bring in pizza, have an ice cream social, celebrate birthdays. Arrange creative, unexpected activities (scavenger hunt, behind-the-scenes tours) as well as plenty of downtime to socialize with colleagues during off-sites or strategy sessions.

Hire and onboard with network integration in mind.
While HR and talent functions can establish hiring and onboarding strategies to foster network agility, effective managers and project leaders take proactive steps to bring the right people in and get them integrated into the network quickly.

- *Look for strong collaborative skills during the interview process.* Ask questions to eliminate an "us versus them" mindset or a hero mentality. Marcela said: "Have them talk about a time they had to fix a problem with team members … Someone might be really smart, but if they're not a team player, we won't make them an offer." Dan personally meets top candidates and says, "*Walk me through your day-to-day*. That's the best deep-dive interview question. It gets to what they do and why they do it that way … That tells me a lot about how they would collaborate and contribute here." In Myla's company, top candidates spend a day on site and are evaluated on collaborative behaviors: "What they don't know is that our receptionist and admin staff are part of the assessment process … At the end of the day, I will chat with them and say, *How did it go? Were they polite? Did they have a conversation with you?* … You get quite a lot of insight to how a candidate engages with people."

- *Hire people with great networks.* People with strong networks create a new pool of resources from which to draw when answers or expertise are needed. Look for candidates who have good relationships with others in their field (former colleagues, professional associations, academics) or ties into organizations that may be relevant to their role or the company. Elijah said, "Once I've determined a person is right for a role, I ask about networks, *Who do you know?*"

- *Take responsibility for pulling people in.* Formal leaders and network influencers should not expect newcomers or other isolated people to push their way into the network. Ken considers who could benefit from the experience: "When a new project comes up, we look at who has the interest, skills or development need. Who at the end of this project will come out a better person?" Geoffrey invites new hires and people across various groups to join team meetings, not just project meetings or those related to work they are initially assigned to. He introduces them to clients and allocates time for one-on-one lunches and coffees.

Develop agile talent and reward collaboration. Invest in people and build their capacity for the long-term.

- *Make 1:1s a priority and spend half the time off-task.* Get to know employees' career goals and aspirations, likes and dislikes. Bart said: "It's so important to connect with people, understand where they are and help mold work they are fully engaged with." Des noted: "Those conversations don't come off the calendar easily. Make people feel important. Be present, don't check your phone, listen." Ruth explores questions such as: *How do you spend the majority of your day? What would you be doing more of, if you had the time? How can I help?*

- *Create mechanisms to monitor and evaluate collaboration.* Add collaboration metrics to performance reviews and build feedback into work practices. Marcela's firm holds end-of-project evaluations of team members, including upward feedback to leaders: "We are rated anonymously on different dimensions, for example, how we structured the project, how we guided it, our team management skills, how we support each other." The input is discussed every six months and factored into development goals.

- *Reward people for being great collaborators, not great heroes.* Be careful about the actions you praise—and model for others. Lena said, "I celebrate when the light bulb goes on for people! … If I see an early career professional collaborating and engaging and reaching across, I'll recognize it, make sure it gets noticed and establish them as a model for others to follow." Lena also knows how easily people fall into the superhero role: "I had one hi-po who was doing everything; she wasn't giving others an opportunity to get involved, wasn't collaborating with other partners. It was a struggle to convince her it was about building her team."

- *Support people who are struggling.* Find out what is going on and recognize that part of the problem may be in the network structure or interactions. Kathryn said, "Show people you haven't given up on them." Cassie noted how she was motivated by the honesty of a manager who told her, *you're not ready for this*. The manager helped her understand where she was, and how she could get where she wanted to be.

Tips for Leading Agile Networks

Intentionally manage four key points in networks to produce results through collaboration: **Network Center, Network Fringe, Internal Silos** *and* **External Stakeholders and Clients**.

Embrace leadership principles and practices that model and cascade effective collaborative practices:

- Handle bad news well. People will take prudent risks and execute without bringing all to you (and so slowing the team and overloading you).

- Set collaborative expectations for your team and use regular meetings to revisit collaborative practices, re-allocate workload and manage network demands.

- Use small actions—celebrating birthdays, chatting about the weekend, saying thank-you, respecting time zone differences, having lunch together—to connect in a personal way and set a tone for collaboration.

- Promote effective use of collaborative technology. Set group norms around response time and after-hours use. Become succinct with email and shift to a phone call when discussion is needed.

Institutionalize talent management practices that create a context for effective collaboration:

- Hire for collaboration. Ask for people to describe a problem-solving situation, actions taken and results. Listen for responses that focus on "we" not "I."

- Help newcomers get pulled into work early. Pair new hires with a well-connected employee. Be sure the newcomer joins in on team and client meetings.

- Hold career conversations to be sure people are growing in their role and are prioritizing relationships and network-building as well as work.

- Provide cross-boundary assignments to build engagement and grow capability across the network.

- Reinforce collaboration rather than just heroic accomplishment. Recognize and reward people for contributing to other units.

THE TAKEAWAY? The quality of collaboration in networks drives results. Take steps to improve collaborative behaviors within your team and across groups. Consider whether your leadership and talent practices enable the adaptive, flexible networks you need to be effective now and in the future.