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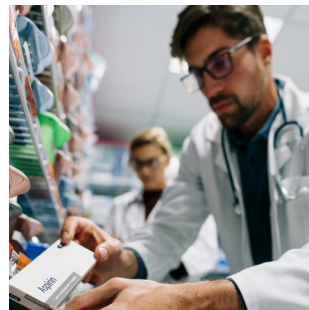
## NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS

Produce Innovative Solutions
**Innovate the Work and the Network Simultaneously**

**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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## PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

# Innovate the Work and the Network Simultaneously

### PRINCIPLE

High-performers think of innovation in terms of both the project and the network that will produce and support the innovation. They engage the network in ways that ensure the innovation hits the mark and is embraced by stakeholders.

*"You can't just talk about your idea and want people to say yes. You have to seed it first. Let them contribute and feel ownership."*

### 5 WAYS TO BOOST OUTCOMES & UPTAKE OF INNOVATION

1. Form core team and extended network; diffuse ownership early.
2. Integrate client needs; seek broad client input.
3. Energize stakeholders with compelling stories; engage naysayers early.
4. Develop a prototype to test ideas, build trust and alter dialogue.
5. Iterate with the network to refine the innovation.

*"It helps if I can show them something, tell them a story around it, ask them some questions, then translate it back to what they are trying to do."*

*"Ideas need to resonate with people in the business, so they can pick it up and go with it and be the ambassadors of it. We need them to feel comfortable in the concept, that it is their idea and they made it happen."*

Insights do not automatically translate to valued outcomes without the attention and support of sponsors, end-users and any number of stakeholders. Innovation needs to be socialized, refined and adapted through the network. People who contribute to the evolution of something new are more invested in its success. When moving into the implementation of the innovation, they become natural champions, early adopters and trainers. The more they engage and spread positive word of mouth, the faster an innovation takes hold. People involved in successful innovations seem to understand this well.

Our research revealed that collaborative activities play a critical role in all phases of a successful innovation, from the problem-solving stage to implementation. What was most striking was the degree to which innovation must occur on two levels for success to unfold: successful innovators simultaneously adapted the service, product or process AND the network. They made decisions early on to engage the network, which shaped the innovation and fueled its acceptance and uptake.

**Form core team and extended network; diffuse ownership early.** To solve a challenge, effective innovators are quick to get the right expertise into the room, candidly evaluate skill gaps and realistically assess team members' ability to commit the effort needed. They involve people who could be conduits for information and valued allies or advisors as the work evolves. They recruit network *brokers* who can bridge silos and scan for insights across the organization and in outside groups; network *connectors* who can socialize ideas and garner support from within a given group; and *energizers* to amplify the ideas and engage the broader organization.

Sylvia assembled "a diverse, energetic, passionate group" to "take a crack at" something no one else had tried: "I reached out to a bunch of people, and said, *These are the skills that I need. Do you have any recommendations?* We ended up with such a diverse team. Diverse in terms of age: one a guy who was already retired and in his second career and another I considered my kid brother. Diverse in terms of multi-cultural and male/female. And diverse background: data scientists, applied mathematicians, nurses, biomedical engineers. It was just a very cool field of people."

Although Sylvia was the project leader, ownership was diffused early on, with each specialist having equal value and team members drawing on their personal networks as the work progressed. Various managers and experts in the company and personnel from the medical system who were stakeholders in the project rotated in and out of the team based on needs: "It was highly collaborative … I had to step back and trust that others are going to do their part." The process worked, resulting in a high-profile success for Sylvia's firm, a solution for a significant healthcare dilemma and a career-defining experience for Sylvia.

## Integrate client needs; seek broad client perspective.

More successful innovators also work through the network to gain an accurate and expansive view of the client or end-user of their product, service or process. They explore the needs of various internal and external clients and potential markets or audiences. Rather than assuming knowledge, this input helps people think differently about the problem and solve it in a more relevant way. As Lucas said, "When we do it right, we can adjust easier and earlier, and we remove some of the uncertainty for us and for the client."

More successful people also engage clients in ways that uncover possibilities, rather than simply gathering data. They ask open-ended questions and listen carefully to understand clients' work, their processes, who they engage with, how they engage and how they think. What is working well and what are their challenges? Those conversations open up other opportunities.

Emmet described how a narrow, transactional project became an innovative solution for multiple internal clients: "I connected with the team to really understand what they were trying to do … I pushed them to map out the full range of things they might want to do, to have a broader exploration of what the work could encompass." Those exploratory conversations allowed him to have richer conversations with possible vendors, resulting in a solution that was broadly accepted.

Often taking that second step in the network yields valuable insight. Leo learned about customer needs for his software solution from the marketing group, but he "wanted to learn from actual people who are doing this job day in and day out." He pushed, and his manager asked a colleague to pave the way for Leo to interview a few customers to gain a richer understanding of their work and their challenges.

## 10 Mistakes That Undermine Uptake of Innovation

1. You develop in isolation, with a small core team. You view selling your idea, getting buy-in and implementing as separate from innovation.

2. You wait until ideas are packaged to get input and suggestions. You think in terms of idea, plan, develop, launch—and skip past rapid prototyping needed to iterate and build the network of support.

3. Your innovation network runs everything through you. You are the gatekeeper and arbiter of ideas and expertise.

4. You feel disconnected from your end-users and stakeholders. You haven't taken time to get to know the people who will implement or be affected by a change or new idea.

5. You avoid naysayers or people you know do not share your interest and priorities. You try to perfect the idea before exposing it to others.

6. You become wed to a specific solution early. You commit resources, move ahead and are too far down the road when objections or suggestions for improvement come along.

7. You confuse staying open to possibilities with celebrating all ideas or agreeing to what others want to do. You struggle to balance pushing toward a goal and welcoming new ideas.

8. You rely on data alone to garner support for change and adoption of your idea. You don't communicate the personal benefit, compelling story or emotional pull of your innovation.

9. You over-plan or get stuck in perfecting a prototype in hopes of staving off criticism.

10. You don't factor in time and budget for multiple revisions and so can't adapt to user needs.

"A prototype speaks louder and does not require them to just trust me … People can start to identify what is useful and things to solve. It totally changes the conversation from *Can this work*? to *How do we use it?*"

**Energize stakeholders with compelling, positive stories; engage naysayers early.** Effective innovators have a clear story that captures the importance of what they are working on. They engage others on the level of emotion and experience. Data and the business case are important, but rich stories of possibility (rather than threat) are often the inflection point in decision making. Over and over again the evidence shows that building a narrative around positive possibilities and creating stories that enable the stakeholders to re-tell and make the narratives their own was key to success.

Fritz had to convince individuals and business unit leaders to get behind a challenging project. He showed them how it would change their careers and build a strategic capability for the business: "You know what's downstream of this for the company if we're successful? … Help me with this project, and your next five or ten years will be materially different."

Similarly, Stephan made the case for a transformative business model, giving context that the world was changing and the business must change, too: "The story was not to get people afraid, but to show we have a massive opportunity … Success was when a couple big stakeholders started telling the story for me. They would bring this up and make it their own."

A compelling story of *why* also helps engage people who are resistant. Just a few influential challengers can derail initiatives, so involving naysayers early allows you to hear concerns and anticipate roadblocks. As people invest and connect, they are less likely to become a source of friction later.

Janelle encouraged her process-improvement team to seek out critics: "We brought in people we knew would be resistant so we could refine the process. We asked, *What else do you need to accept this and see it as valuable?*" For a crucial, cross-division effort, Tristan tapped someone who did not support his approach to oversee a key, high-profile process: "Because of her role, not having her on board would have made the task impossible … She would undermine the work if she was not supporting it." She became invested in a good outcome, and her ideas and contributions made for a stronger solution.

## How to Tailor the Network to the Innovation

- Insist on taking more time on the front end to understand the scope of the problem and engage the network. It may feel as if you are not moving fast enough, but you will avoid misunderstanding, friction or disinterest that will slow you down later.

- Use qualitative and quantitative data to mobilize the need for change. Quantitative presents the context and case for change, but rich, qualitative stories reflect the emotional experiences that mobilize people to take action.

- Use network analysis, referrals and careful observation to identify key influencers as well as expertise in networks that will be affected by a change or are experiencing the problem you are trying to solve.

- Ask your team and people elsewhere in your organization about their networks to identify possible contributors. Ask senior leaders for referrals; they operate in different networks and have awareness and ties you don't have. Tap into talent management processes and professional development networks.

- Balance input from the extended network with the agility of a small group to go deeper and move faster. Draw in multiple voices early and quickly, but don't let being inclusive and broad lead to over-analysis or paralysis. Narrow to a core team of people who have the time, expertise and genuine interest.

- Set up team processes to diffuse ownership. Ensure team members interact directly with each other and across the network. Intentionally hold back your involvement and voice to let others make connections and solve problems. Don't allow meetings and decisions revolve around you.

"We knew we didn't want all like-minded people. Or people who will just nod their heads. We had to have people who will argue the heck out of things, who are willing to stir things up."

## Develop a prototype to test ideas, build trust and alter dialogue.
Innovative teams—and individuals—produce a prototype early and rapidly seek input to help clarify what might work. They share working code, small-scale models and detailed mock-ups. They hold pilot programs and create demos. Rather than building in long planning cycles or working to perfect a solution, they "get ideas into play" and don't wait until deployment to hear suggestions, concerns and perspectives.

Bryant was involved in creating a new client offering and shopped it out to different groups in the organization by running internal pilot workshops: "We walked through the prototype and applied it to see how it worked and where the bumps were ... with the next iteration, we had a good idea who would be our early adopter teams." Stuart's team created a prototype app for sales reps, who were asking for easier access to data through their phones and tablets. Samuel adapted a project he had previously done to show his new team one way they could approach a major process change. Deandra routinely ran pilots of new retail systems or processes in just a few locations.

Notably, presenting something tangible for people to see and react to dramatically changes the nature of the conversation and interactions. Unlike a straight-forward presentation or attempt to persuade, a prototype focuses attention on the solution, not the presenter. Discussions center around how the prototype works and how it could be fine-tuned or applied. In a subtle way, prototypes show that something can be done and draws people into a positive, productive conversation. As Anja learned when she demonstrated a prototype technology to potential supporters: "It created a sense of trust in what we can do ... I am not just talk."

## Iterate with the network to refine the innovation.
Effective innovators involve different audiences (leadership groups, end users, clients) at multiple points along the way. They present their prototype as a starting point, then continue to test ideas, ask questions, listen and refine—or even shift their thinking or the concept. More successful innovators expect to spend significant time in this phase, and factor it into their project timelines and budgets.

Fern's task force worked in cycles, coming together to advance the thinking, then separately running ideas by colleagues: "This is where we used the power of our different networks. We would talk to people we knew. Then, we would get back together and *say, these people really hate this* or *the guys over here don't understand* or *we didn't see that* ... Then we refined and problem solved and designed."

As more stakeholders and end-users give input, teams need to be willing to make incremental changes, test and adapt quickly. In one instance, Stephan recalled: "We needed to evolve significantly from our early thinking ... 75% of the functionality changed based on those stakeholder meetings."

Stuart's sales team app was tested, changed, tested again with larger groups, revised again before launch—and even afterward: "Over the next year, I continued to reach back out to the field, to look at usage data and metrics to learn how to improve. *What changes would be good? What else do you need?* We kept asking and responding."

## How to Tailor the Network to the Innovation (cont.)

- Don't avoid vocal critics or passive resisters; seek them out. Use a negative feedback to address legitimate concerns. Pivot off potential solutions that don't work.

- Elicit stories and emotion from stakeholders, clients and end-users. Ask questions that prompt a broader understanding of a need. Understand what people are trying to do, not just what they ask for.

- Work in cycles. Develop ideas and create prototypes. Engage stakeholders and listen. Iterate and refine. Repeat. Factor this pacing into your team processes, timelines and budgets.

**THE TAKEAWAY?** A good idea isn't guaranteed to be an innovative success. To move from concept and development to implementation, adapting the network is just as vital as the innovation itself. When starting something new, work on the innovation and the network simultaneously. Generate interest and support from clients, stakeholders and contributors by fostering ownership and co-creating.