

## Cisco Systems, Inc.

### Developing Women: Cisco's Executive Shadowing Program

#### Organizational Information

Founded in 1984 and headquartered in San Jose, California, Cisco Systems, Inc. is the worldwide leader in networking that transforms how people connect, communicate, and collaborate, specializing in Internet Protocol (IP)-based networking equipment, software, and services. The company launched a new brand campaign in 2012 with a new tagline, "Tomorrow Starts Here." The company's product and service line includes Internet routers and storage, borderless networks, IP telephone equipment, and voice/video conferencing solutions. In 2011, Cisco realized \$43 billion in revenue and employed more than 63,000 people in more than 165 countries around the world.

#### History and Launch of the Activity, Program, or Policy

Cisco's Executive Shadowing program began in 2009 as a grassroots effort to develop women employees by pairing Cisco executives with talented women across business functions. Unlike many diversity and inclusion activities, which are often initiated or sponsored by a company's human resources department, Executive Shadowing began as an activity conceived by Bernice McHenry, a core team member of the company's Connected Women Employee Resource Group (ERG), and it continues to reside within the ERG. The program was piloted in the San Jose chapter of Connected Women, and has since expanded to 10 chapters throughout the United States and around the globe, including Asia Pacific and Europe.

The program exposes employee "shadows" to the various roles that executives perform at the organization, increases cross-functional visibility, and helps them to better understand a "day in the life" of a Cisco executive. Because the core team felt a successful pilot was necessary for the program to garner future support, the Connected Women leaders were careful to identify a set of amenable executives and to ensure that executives and shadows were appropriately matched during the pilot program.

#### Strategy of Activity, Program, or Policy

##### *Shadow Selection Process*

Executive Shadowing was formally rolled out in 2010, when the program, helmed by Jennifer Pospishek, one of the San Jose chapter's core team members, became the San Jose lead. It remains housed within local Connected Women chapters. Executive participation is open to men and women at the director level and above; employee participation is open to women at the director level and below (at Cisco, directors typically have ten to 20+ years of work experience). Participants interested in shadowing an executive submit an

application, and the leaders of the local Connected Women chapters—women in line roles who volunteer their time and energy because they are committed to the program—conduct interviews with applicants to assess career development goals, communication style, matching preferences (if any), and general presence. Interviews also help ensure that participants' objectives in applying to the program are aligned with the intent of the program itself (e.g., interviewers clarify that Executive Shadowing is *not* a mentoring program). While program leaders try to accommodate as many participants as possible through the selection process, they may be constrained by the number of applicants as well as the number of executives who have committed to participate. After an applicant has been selected, her manager provides approval for participation. Once approved, shadows are paired with executives at the same office location, but in a different function, in order to help them develop new skills and gain exposure to a new line of business.

In general, the ERG leaders make every attempt to accept as many applicants as possible, even securing backup executives in case of last minute cancellations. Cisco also maximizes participation by assigning more than one shadow to the same executive where necessary.

## *Training*

A key component of Executive Shadowing is the pre-shadow training. During the month prior to the shadow experience, shadows participate in multiple training sessions to help them prepare. These training sessions typically occur in person at the participant's local Cisco office, and topics include what to expect and the commitment required to participate, preparing and practicing an elevator speech, as well as "dos" and "don'ts" when working with an executive (e.g., don't bring a laptop to the shadow experience, as you are there to observe and absorb information). The Connected Women chapter leaders strive to regularly update training content so that it remains relevant and applicable to returning participants. For example, the San Jose chapter recently organized a panel of previous shadows and executives to discuss their experiences in the program and answer questions. Training also helps maintain and improve the program's reputation among executives by ensuring the shadows are professional and well prepared.

Also in advance of the shadow period, shadows and executives meet one-on-one for approximately 30 minutes. During this time, both parties review the shadow's profile and goal sheet and strategically collaborate on the agenda and activities for the shadow experience. Goal sheets are individualized profiles that help clarify participation objectives while simultaneously allowing executives to quickly learn more about their match. Shadows are expected to drive these planning conversations.

## *Shadow Experience*

Shadows and executives typically spend four hours or more together during the shadow period. Activities are determined during the one-on-one planning meetings, and while they generally vary according to the executive's function and job role, activities have included:

- Staff meetings.
- Strategy and planning meetings or conference calls.
- Customer/partner meetings in person or via TelePresence.
- Technical conference calls.
- Leadership training sessions led by the executive.

## *Post-Event Celebration*

At the close of the program cycle, executives and shadows convene locally for a celebration event. The event provides an opportunity for executives and shadows to meet again after the shadow experience, to network with fellow participants, and to share experiences via table exercises. There is also a review of post-shadow survey results (see Measurement Tools, below), and Certificates of Completion, which are distributed to the shadows.

Recently, the San Jose chapter invited a guest speaker, Wendy Beecham, Managing Director of Executive Education at UC Davis's Graduate School of Management and former CEO of Watermark, a women's leadership organization based in the San Francisco Bay Area, to speak at its post-event celebration. The topic was "Building Strategic Connections," which focused on further reinforcing the power of building a strong network both within and outside of the organization to promote professional growth.

## *Sample Participation*

Since the 2009 pilot, Cisco has effectively scaled the core planning and execution team with the growth of Executive Shadowing (in San Jose alone, the program expanded from 47 pilot participants to more than 160 in 2011). In 2010, the core team consisted of one woman plus ad-hoc support; grew to five individuals in 2011; and as of 2012 consists of 15 members.

During the 2012 fiscal year, global participation rates were as follows (table lists only in-process or completed Executive Shadowing cycles, and does not include all participating chapters):

Location	# of Shadow Pairs
<b>ASIA-PACIFIC</b>	
Japan (includes Executive, Manager, and Peer Shadowing programs)	90
<b>EUROPE</b>	
Italy	49
Spain	9
United Kingdom	60
<b>UNITED STATES</b>	
Boxborough, MA	11
Herndon, VA	20
Lawrenceville, GA	56
Research Triangle Park, NC	39
Sacramento, CA	14
San Jose, CA	81
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>429</b>



## Success Factors

Cisco's internal culture, which celebrates giving back, helps facilitate Executive Shadowing. Giving back of individual time within the organization, as well as to the global community, is an important company-wide value. For this reason, many executives are enthusiastic about participating in Executive Shadowing—it's a straightforward way to engage with employees at various levels and to provide tangible career development. As Executive Shadowing has become more visible, executives have actively championed participation in the program with their peers, and the return rate among executives year after year is high. Executives find benefit in giving their time, but also in reflecting upon and sharing their leadership philosophies and how they handle challenging situations and/or manage their teams.

Many shadow programs include one discrete task, such as a four-hour time block during a specific period of the year, without much definition or preparation in making the best use of that time. But, because Cisco's program is linked to the company's overall strategy of learning and development, it involves an assessment, training, pre-work, shadowing time, and post-activity debrief and celebration. The program's unique design and thoughtful implementation have earned it a strong, positive reputation among executives and employees, and accelerated its benefit to talented women at the company.

## Challenges

As a global technology company, Cisco is adept at connecting people across its various systems and networks—the company's internal virtual support systems are strong. However, given the high-touch nature of the Executive Shadowing program and limited travel budgets, Cisco has not focused on matching shadows and executives across different Connected Women chapter locations, so for now the program operates within individual chapter locations. Additionally, because volunteers in each chapter run Executive Shadowing, recruiting enough of them to keep the program operational has been a challenge globally, as they commit time to the program in addition to their regular job responsibilities. Yet because of the program's popularity, commitment from the Connected Women ERG, and enthusiasm from past participants, the program's "core team" has grown significantly from just a few initial people.

## Catalyst Change Drivers

### 1. Communication

After the successful pilot, the program was marketed internally to Connected Women ERG chapters around the globe. To support widespread adoption of Executive Shadowing, the San Jose ERG coordinates with global chapters via group phone calls, emails, outreach, and regular communication events to help them design, scale, and implement the program in their own regions. The Connected Women chapters also share project management schedules, training materials, and other execution logistic materials on Cisco's intranet so that all locations can access them. Finally, thanks to Cisco's deep commitment to Executive Shadowing, the company has committed to disseminating their materials for other organizations to use (including Catalyst member companies; see below for more information).

## 2. Measurement Tools

The leaders of each Connected Women chapter with Executive Shadowing are expected to conduct a post-shadow survey of the program to solicit feedback from participants, including both shadows and executives. The survey leverages parts of Cisco's global employee engagement survey, but also includes tailored, localized questions. It assesses satisfaction levels related to content (e.g., matching, training, milestone activities, organizational support, suggestions for improvement) and measures the program's impact on such factors as loyalty and engagement.

### The Impact of the Activity, Program, or Policy

Informal participant feedback has been extremely positive, and accounts of personal development are common. After shadowing an executive, participants have reported feeling more confident asking for they want and better prepared to negotiate next steps in their career, having a better-developed sense of the achievements they want to make in their careers, and knowing how to communicate with senior leaders. Some executive-shadow pairings have even transitioned into ongoing mentoring and sponsoring relationships. Examples of positive feedback from shadows include:

*The single most impactful and insightful day in my career at Cisco! I learned meaningful management tools and gained important career advice that I was able to put in practice immediately.*

*The opportunity to have visibility to high level strategy discussions, listening to executive readouts, and observing the dynamics of the team were extremely valuable to my development as a leader.*

*All of the barriers were gone. I could really observe, ask and learn.*

### Next Steps

Cisco's Executive Shadowing program continues to expand. The San Jose chapter is focused on continuing to grow the program and encouraging new participation. The chapter actively reaches out and gives preference to new participants before accepting returning shadows. The local chapters are equally focused on attracting more volunteers to help plan and implement the program. For example, women who have shadowed for multiple years are asked to help in some capacity with the program. Tasks include reviewing applications, interviewing applicants, matching shadows and executives, conducting training, and creating materials. The greater the number of volunteers, the better Connected Women can distribute the workload, and volunteers can count the experience toward Cisco's mandatory diversity and inclusion performance review goals.

## Additional Resource: Toolkit

In association with Adobe and Bayer, Jennifer Massaro of Cisco's San Jose Executive Shadow Program core team devised a toolkit outlining how to implement an Executive Shadowing program. The toolkit was created in 2012 to fulfill the requirements of a yearlong *WOMEN Unlimited* leadership program in which women from Cisco, Adobe, Bayer, and many other companies participated. The toolkit, using Cisco's Executive Shadowing program as its foundation, covers all phases of Executive Shadowing, from building a business case to implementation, and includes training samples and other resources.

Cisco and the WOMEN Unlimited team has generously agreed to make this toolkit available to Catalyst members. Please contact [Practices@catalyst.org](mailto:Practices@catalyst.org) if you are interested.