



# Cisco Systems Changes Corporate Culture by Teaching Administrative Support to Reach For the Stars

## ABOUT CISCO SYSTEMS

Cisco leads the internet technology sector in such categories as wireless, telepresence, wireless LAN, web conferencing and voice.

A Fortune 100 company with more than 75,000 employees across more than 1500 locations worldwide.

709 employees come under the Administrative Support umbrella. 60% located at U.S. facilities; 348 are contract employees.



## Cisco Overview

Few organizations go through challenges and changes like those residing in the technology marketplace. It is vital to have the right team with the right skills in place because it can make or break these organizations. This applies to all team members including from the C-Suite to reception. Administrative support members, when invested in their own success, having a vast software skill set and the best communication tools, have a noticeable impact on organization efficiencies, morale and leadership.

Cisco Systems (CISCO®) is an organization of more than 75,000 employees across more than 1500 locations worldwide. Cisco leads the internet technology sector in such categories as wireless, telepresence, wireless LAN, web confer-

encing and voice, among many others. The rapidly changing business environment and competition bring additional challenges to a large organization, and Cisco is no different. The company must remain nimble, respond quickly to shifting directions while remaining focused on strategic initiatives. The leaders of the organization must operate at the most efficient level possible with few distractions. This is the juncture at which the organizational leadership looks to professional development programming to keep the employee skills current and to provide opportunities for employees to continuously contribute to the success of the organization.

As of December 2013, there are approximately 709 employees that come under the administrative support umbrella for Cisco.

- 60% are located at U.S. facilities/ approx. 350 FTEs
- 348 are contract employees



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## Background

Debbie Gross, Chief Executive Assistant to John T. Chambers, Chairman and CEO of Cisco, learned of the Star Achievement Series® through an administrative peer. She took advantage of the opportunity to take the Star Achievement Series® Levels I and II classes, which was created and facilitated by Office Dynamics International Founder and CEO, Joan Burge. Energized and inspired by the courses, Ms. Gross knew she had to find a way to bring this program to the Cisco administrative team.

Cisco has a vast professional development library which is available to employees, but there were no courses at that time that specifically addressed the skills needed to improve and advance for employees on the administrative support team.

## Challenges

Challenges in communications between administrative team members and supervisor(s), lack of collaboration across departments of the organization, the inconsistent level of professionalism, and a sometimes an evident apathy to devel-

opment—were some of the major roadblocks to bringing the team up to the level of support required to augment the success of managers and the overall organization. Time management issues, the prioritization of projects and an aversion to working outside one's department to resolve issues were also evidence of an inefficient administrative support team.

Realizing her administrative team was capable of so much more, Debbie Gross drew up a strategic plan to bring the Star Achievement Series® to Cisco. In 2006, Ms. Gross became the first Certified Trainer of the Star Achievement Series® Level I course at Cisco and began the determined effort to bring the program to Cisco's Learning and Development Group within the Human Resources Department. It took approximately one year to convince the Learning and Development group to approve the program. After the program ran successfully for several years, the Star Achievement Series® (Level I and Level II) was formally folded into the Learning and Development program offerings for employees.

Cisco employees wishing to enroll in the Star Achievement Series® must meet two specific and stringent criteria before receiving approval.

- Employees must receive their manager's approval to pursue the course.
- Employees must receive a rating of 'Strong' in the employee rating system.

Debbie Gross teaches one Star Achievement Series® per year, and limits the course to no more than 30 employees per class.

## Measuring Value and Success

The Star Achievement Series® curriculum developed by Joan Burge, Founder and CEO of Office Dynamics International, has positively impacted the role and perception of administrative professionals in the Cisco workforce.

When asked why Cisco chose the Star Achievement Series®, Debbie Gross, CEA



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stated, “There’s no other comprehensive curriculum available for executive assistants. Joan’s curriculum is always relevant and has continued to evolve with our roles.”

As of 2013, 369 administrative professionals at Cisco had completed Level I of Star Achievement Series®.

As of May 2013, 207 administrative professionals at Cisco had completed Level II of Star Achievement Series®.

To date, 61 administrative professionals have earned the CEAP (Certified Executive Assistant Professional) certification.

A Vice President at Cisco recognized the immediate improvement of the working relationship with his executive assistant, noting that she now ‘demonstrates the ability to efficiently respond to requests by understanding the business, and is able to successfully handle a high volume workload.’

“The Star Program and my assistant’s involvement in the program have had a significant impact on how she operates. It also has an ongoing positive multiplying impact on my whole team.”

—Phil Harris,

*Sr. Director, CIBU, Engineering*

A Vice President from another division stated that the Star Achievement Series® training made a notable and observable change in the skills of his executive assistant, specifically that she has a ‘greater awareness of differences in working styles and priorities and adapting to develop a complementary working style with me and my team.’

Other executive comments included:

“The STAR program provides a great forum for them (administrator team) to learn best practices, ask questions, and set a foundation for continuous improvement.”

—Senior Director, Cisco

“The STAR Program and my assistant’s involvement in the program have had a significant impact on how she operates. It also has an ongoing positive multiplying impact on my whole team. Next year, other administrative professionals from our team will enroll in the program because the word is out—this program works and is worth the investment.” – Phil Harris,

*Sr. Director, CIBU, Engineering*

The success stories are documented by more than 20 Cisco senior executives—detailing their assistant’s improvement in proactive communications, learning how to leverage network and peer connections to get things done, the ability to quickly adapt to rapidly changing priorities with a professional approach to addressing these changes, and a visible recognition of the changes in leadership by those completing the Star Achievement Series®. Ms. Gross notes that a majority of managers want their executive assistant to pursue the Star Achievement Series®.



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“Before Joan Burge and the Star Achievement Series®, there was no such thing as a ‘strategic business partnership’ between manager and assistant.

Now there is an expectation of a strategic business partnership between management and administrative team members. We have seen a true cultural shift as a result of the curriculum and training from the Star Achievement Series® – managers are encouraging their assistants to pursue this training and the training has become part of the DNA of our culture.” Debbie Gross, Chief Executive Administrator, Cisco

**“We passionately believe the administrative role is a Career of Choice.”**

Since 1990, Office Dynamics International has been the global industry leader in the development and presentation of sophisti-

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**— Debbie Gross,**

*Chief Executive Assistant to John Chambers,  
Chairman and CEO*

cated executive and administrative assistant training, coaching and resources. We offer a broad range of solutions that create behavior change and produce sustainable results.

Office Dynamics’ experience and expertise in the administrative training industry are unparalleled. We have crafted and refined a unique line of premier educational products that boost success for progressive employers and enterprising administrative professionals, secretaries, and support staff.

Our programs teach admins how to create, renew and sustain their focus on

excellence in the workplace, igniting heightened engagement in thousands of support staff worldwide.

Office Dynamics’ quest to provide extraordinary life- and career-changing educational programs in keeping with their passionate support of the administrative profession has earned the respect of elite clients including Cisco

Systems, The Boeing Company, Humana Inc., Procter & Gamble, Nationwide Insurance, Kindred Healthcare, AT&T and Chevron Corporation.

“We help clients transform their corporate culture, resulting in administrators who desire to perform their jobs with excellence, thereby providing even greater support to leadership.”

Our expertise is found in how we partner with our clients to find the best solution, whether that means training a group of assistants, coaching a C-level executive



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assistant, facilitating a workshop, teaching managers how to utilize their assistants for maximum benefit, or identifying administrative competencies.

Office Dynamics was the brainchild of Joan Burge, an eager receptionist who worked her way up through the ranks to eventually become a C-level Executive Assistant, expertly supporting mid-size and Fortune 500 company executives. In 1990, Joan launched her company, dedicated to staff development in the profession she loved. Joan Burge is a bona fide business success story in her own right. Having worked on “both sides of the desk,” she infuses her rare perspective into every aspect of the business—and it remains a primary reason clients consistently rely on Office Dynamics International for their administrative and executive assistant training and development needs. ■



**800-STAR-139**

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