



EXECUTE  
WORK  
EFFICIENTLY

# Building an Agile Organization through Collaborative Practices

## CASE CONTEXT

A skilled manager shifts culture and practices toward collaboration and integration. She uses agile meeting practices, role definition and boundary spanning ties to build the capabilities of the firm.

Lena is a software developer-turned manager, leading a group responsible for a third of revenue for a professional

services firm. She leads program teams that design and implement technical systems for public and private-sector organizations. Alongside current contracts, Lena’s teams are building next-generation capabilities. “My mission is to expand and shape our contracts, diversify revenue streams and innovate. We want to have distinctive capabilities and are cultivating our people to aggressively pursue that.”

Lena has steered her group toward greater integration and collaboration over the past two years, particularly to manage a large client. She navigated the consolidation of multiple contracts into one and restructured her teams to foster collaboration and work across silos. “We can’t fulfill an enterprise-wide strategy without collaboration across borders and boundaries, being able to work with partners and teammates ... When I came in, individual task managers were looking at a project-only view. They were good at doing their specific jobs but were not talking to each other.”

Lena applied agile practices to strengthen relationships and lateral networks. She established stand-up meetings with her leadership team, taking 30 minutes each morning to walk through client issues and tee up the day. Each of those team leaders would hold daily, tactical stand-up meetings, too. Issues that needed more time or separate focus would be “parked” for a separate meeting. The process created transparency around workload and challenges. Team members could ask for help or steer each other through processes or politics. “Before, I spent too much of my time serving as knowledge broker, grabbing one leader, saying, You need to talk to so-and-so, she’s dealing with similar problems. *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.*” As they gained knowledge of the bigger picture and each other’s roles, they began to work together, be honest about challenges and take risks to share ideas or pitch future opportunities.

Lena pushed expectations further by redefining the roles of her direct reports to include responsibility for integrating work across the portfolio. “Some leaders were naturally moving in that direction more than others ... I wanted them all to clearly have that additional responsibility.” She opened the conversation with her team, getting input, refining the expectations. “*Once they could see what it means to lead at that level and collaborate across the group, they understood the why behind it. It was not just check-the-box or Lena wants this.*”

FEMALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

Industry: PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

## HIGH-PERFORMING LEADERS LEVERAGE NETWORKS TO DO 5 THINGS

Based on 20 years of research in more than 300 organizations, we know that the quality of your professional relationship play a significant role in your success. We have extended this research to describe the way high-performing leaders leverage their networks to: Innovate, Execute, Scale, Thrive and Adapt.



To translate the goal of helping people grow and collaborate deeper into the group, Lena has pushed to get people at all levels engaged in company-wide “centers of excellence.” The company established several technical groups that cut across clients and practice areas, including one that Lena initiated and currently sponsors. “These groups are the best way to get people to learn across the company, propel ideas, offer new perspectives.” To provide that push to connect, Lena has made participation in those forums part of performance goals. “Sometimes teams can be so insular and you have to push to get people out of their comfort zone ... I celebrate when I see this done well, 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 sees value in group events such as welcome breakfasts, ice cream socials and quarterly all-hands meetings with time to network and for people to meet each other. She budgets for groups to celebrate big milestones together. She also makes time to be a mentor and encourages other leaders to do the same. “I support anything we can do to help people integrate, to build out the network they need and to guide them through their career path ... It was important for me to have that kind of trusted relationship, someone to talk to who wasn’t my boss.”

Lena also recognizes how easily established, in-demand people can become overloaded. She keeps an eye out for overwork and burnout and works with managers to correct it—not just for the individual but so the whole team can grow, thrive and have purpose. “I had one hi-po who was doing everything, but the burnout was self-inflicted; 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. She needed to focus on what she does well and give others opportunities ... For me, this job is about building teams of leaders not just individuals. I get frustrated when I see a person represent themselves rather than the team behind them. If leaders have confidence in themselves, they will share that stage with others.”

## Network Insights

- **Strengthen lateral networks to promote execution.** Use frequent meetings to shift from working in isolation to discovering how to work together and help each other. This builds the team’s capacity and frees you up as decisions and connections don’t always funnel through you.
- **Redefine roles to set collaborative expectations.** Work with your team to create shared understanding of needed behaviors and outputs, then hold them accountable.
- **Provide opportunities to build boundary spanning ties.** Centers of Excellence, learning events and social activities help people build effective networks, both within their field and across domains.
- **Use performance conversations and mentoring to integrate people on the fringe of networks—and to help people who are overloaded.** This helps people understand what contacts they need and how best to leverage them.

## Network Practices for a Successful Center of Excellence

Lena has been involved in the evolution of successful Centers of Excellence and communities of practice. Here are a few of her network practices that make them work:

1. *Use network analysis and surveys to map skills, levels of experience and network influencers.* Involve influencers in key areas (capabilities, functions, locations) and use their pull to create engagement organically.
2. *Co-develop with influencers and diffuse ownership early.* Don’t hold leadership tightly or try to do it all yourself. Bringing in others shares the workload, builds energy and supports longevity.
3. *Drive capabilities into accounts and business units.* Identify people to purposefully link the group to points of execution in the organization. This allows expertise to be applied and the group to gain reputation for impact and for the needs of the business to be fed back into the CoE.
4. *Give technical leaders a platform.* Create ways to showcase expertise (TED-type talks work well) and then engage with other practitioners in the company. Seed cross-boundary involvement and push experts to morph their knowledge to solve problems outside their scope.
5. *Let energy and buzz steer the direction and value of the CoE.* Allow focus and technical application to emerge as people are heard and create pull for their ideas.

### ABOUT THE RESEARCH & ROB CROSS

Building on 20 years of research with more than 300 organizations, the Network Leader Research Project seeks to understand the approach and strategies that enable certain leaders to consistently achieve peak performance. The research includes 160 in-depth interviews conducted by Rob Cross, a Professor of Management at University of Virginia’s McIntire School of Commerce. The Connected Commons is currently focusing its research on leadership effectiveness, talent optimization and organizational alignment and change—three areas where network insights can clearly drive performance. For more information visit [www.connectedcommons.com](http://www.connectedcommons.com) or email Rob at [rlcrossjr@gmail.com](mailto:rlcrossjr@gmail.com).