



PRODUCE
INNOVATIVE
SOLUTIONS

Network Reputation & Focused Approach Helps Team Leader Deploy New Efficient Process

CASE CONTEXT

A leader of a small team that works with multiple projects and groups builds on his relationships and established trust to develop and deploy a new contracting process and policy. He works closely with stakeholders on a pilot project, then expands as success is shared through word-of-mouth.



MALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL LEADER

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.



Emmet is in a role that is not known for innovation. As a contract lawyer, his work is behind the scenes and yet

crucial to the outcomes of complex partnerships and alliances for a global NGO. Over the 12 years he has been with the organization, he has worked as the contracting expert embedded in various functions. He now manages a team of six to create, negotiate and advise on major contracts required within a large, highly specialized division. Most of the projects are complex, involving multiple vendors, sub-contractors and partners—but he saw a way to streamline contracting and help project teams be more efficient.

The new contracting model evolved from a similar effort with the communications group. At the time, even the smallest projects with established vendors required a new contract, which slowed down the process and, for the most part, was unnecessary. “I wasn’t adding anything of substance to the contracts, so it seemed kind of pointless.” Emmet developed a general contract and a protocol for project managers to authorize routine agreements. “They were fairly low-risk, low-dollar contracts, but it shifted authority and gave trust. That was successful and is now the standard model for communications.”

When he moved to his current role, he wondered if there was a way to apply the same idea to more complicated, high-risk, high-dollar agreements. How could contracts be created—and the internal systems be set—in a way that allowed for flexibility in implementation but were solid on the fundamentals? “These arrangements would often involve long-term work, two or three parties and various budget streams. Intellectual property issues and roles and responsibilities had to be clearly addressed ... There was more potential liability in this type of work.”

Emmet tested a new approach with a team that was about to begin a multi-year project that would involve a series of deliverables with a large vendor. He had an idea of what the contracts and the process could look like: the contract itself would be fairly open ended, then each element or step would be agreed to via email. But to make a change, he needed detailed input—and buy-in—from the project leader and team, the vendor and division management and legal. He began to work his network. “First, I had to connect with folks in the program 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 engagement could encompass. Then, the project leader and I talked with the vendor, to nail down the services and pricing and how best to arrange the work.”

The next set of discussions were more tactical, talking to the people who would be involved day-to-day in how the work would get done. “We had to go into their expectations and plans for managing the work. I told them, *As soon as we move into this type of contracting model, you can’t rely on me and my team to keep track of all the various documents, the process and the compliance. So, how specifically are you going to do all that?*”

Emmet also consulted with colleagues in legal, to flag any unique liabilities or concerns. He coordinated with finance to update the invoice protocols for the project. And, he spent significant time with the group director to clarify the shift in authority and accountability. “My expectation was that once he heard it and understood it, he would be fine, but I felt the need to explain it and bring him along ... This wasn’t going to be some wild and crazy thing, but it was unusual so I didn’t want anybody to be surprised ... A little bit of that was to protect myself, too.”

Once he had all the elements in place, he drafted the contract and related processes, then circled back to all the project stakeholders. Rather than getting everyone in the room together, he met with just one or two people at a time. “It was more effective for me to be the connector, talking it through with the different stakeholders.” Given the level of detail and the trusted place Emmet held in the network, this “spoke-and-hub” model of engaging others was appropriate and effective. In larger groups, or where the network is unfamiliar, a “full-team-in-the-room” approach may be more useful.

The new contract process was a success, leading to greater interest and acceptance. Word of mouth and Emmet’s established reputation gave the new approach credibility. “I didn’t package up a roadshow and do a pitch. But the other folks in the division saw how it worked and asked if it could work for their projects ... We let them know that what we’ve developed helps them be more efficient in their job.” This greater efficiency has reduced the time Emmet’s team gives to contracting and has streamlined work for their internal clients. “In this culture, I could not have mandated a change. It required relationships, trust and education—and now this process is the preferred way to do business.”

Network Lessons

- **Define the collaborative approach that is most effective for the nature of problem you are solving.** A spoke-and-hub model can be appropriate when expertise needs to fit into a tightly defined problem space or the risk is high.
- **Invest time in getting feedback from network on pilots or prototypes of evolving solutions.** Test a new approach by starting small with a single project rather than a big roll-out. The spoke-and-hub process for getting suggestions, adapting based on need and gaining buy-in works well if close attention can be given to stakeholders.
- **Don’t expect immediate and broad uptake.** Employ appropriate mediums of communication to ensure richness of dialogue and support. Do not develop in isolation. Build on successful track record. Expand via reputation and satisfied, influential early adopters.

Network Practices to Ensure Adoption of New Policies or Ways of Working

Often working through the network and informal channels is more effective than a formal effort or launch. Pilot projects allow new processes or approaches to evolve and strengthen. When it is time to go broader, you have paved the way with both the formal network and informal influencers.

1. Preview changes in policy or practice with formal leaders and then engage network influencers. Ask around to learn who are the decision makers and opinion leaders within the affected groups.
2. Communicate preliminary changes in a way that summarizes the reason for the new approach and delineates specifics. Email or other written documents give people time to digest and prepare their questions.
3. Meet with leadership and key network influencers to refine detailed approach and plan. Be open to ideas or concerns—address them as thoroughly as possible while staying in line with overall goals objectives.
4. Conduct workshops or roll out broadly using effective face-to-face teaching practices. Workshops and group sessions should be designed to communicate but also richly engage people on an experiential level.

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 or email Rob at rlcrossjr@gmail.com.