



PRODUCE  
INNOVATIVE  
SOLUTIONS

# Exec Taps Diverse Network to Elevate Sales Message

## CASE CONTEXT

A pre-sales executive needs to broaden her company's sales message to be about the flagship product's transformational business value, not just the product's features. Drawing on her network, she creates a diverse task force that develops an innovative two-pronged approach for the solution.



FEMALE

Level: SENIOR LEADER

Industry: TECHNOLOGY

## 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.



Having a great product with great features sounds like nirvana, but Rachel faced a challenge: *How do we*

*elevate our sales message?* As manager of pre-sales activities, Rachel oversees the organization that builds and presents product demos and creates business cases for selling. But the focus was more on features than the broader value proposition. The organization needed to “win the hearts and minds” of prospects by painting a picture of how the product would transform their business and change the way people work. Competition from lower-cost incumbents whose products are “good enough” was fierce, and it was too easy for people to stay with them. “We have to be great, because we have to fight ‘good enough,’” Rachel explained.

It became imperative to articulate the broader value proposition based on input from her boss, her leadership team and the sales team. The problem was brought to a head when the CEO became frustrated doing a demo, saying it lacked the focus needed for properly engaging prospects.

To make sure problems like this are brought forward, Rachel encourages people to give honest and complete feedback, she leads by example, and she shares the “why” behind an action to enhance engagement and motivation. People need to feel that they are part of the business strategy, not just “a service ticket doing demos.” Then, to recognize people for a job well done, Rachel begins her staff meetings with a Hero Moment, in which managers share an achievement by an individual in innovation, creativity, mentoring or teamwork. This provides personal recognition, inspiration, and reinforcement that innovation is a core value at the company.

Rachel's team was able to address the CEO's specific issue quickly, but this was considered “a band-aid fix.” She needed a broader solution to ensure the problem did not resurface. “I felt this had to be an innovation project: How do we approach this differently?”

In creating a task force to address the problem, Rachel built a cross-divisional team that included pre-sales and product marketing, focusing on expertise (right skills and/or right people on their teams), those with a broader vision, and those whom the senior leadership team respected. Because execution was a high priority, she made sure the team was small enough to get things done quickly.

The task force took a two-pronged approach: a short-term feature-based solution, and a longer-term plan to focus on the broader narrative. This approach was a direct result of the diversity of input she received in framing the problem.

The task force showed good work quickly. The short-term solution was addressed. For the longer-term plan, the task force concluded it must identify an architect who can design the broader narrative, and then determine the process for executing on the narrative, working with product marketing and related groups.

Product marketing played a vital role on the task force since they designed the new product features, which were essential to the short-term solution and the longer-term plan. Going forward, she said the architect of the new narrative will need to be someone “on the outside looking in” who isn’t caught up in the minutiae of the product features but can take a broader strategic view and create a compelling story. She’ll be leveraging her network to identify that person.

Indeed, an important aspect of Rachel’s success lies in consciously managing her time to focus on what’s important, build the right relationships and be creative. Without this, innovation suffers.

Avoiding collaborative overload, so she can stay focused, is a constant challenge. Because she has held a variety of roles in the company, she is often pulled into many different areas and needs to manage that. “Every time you say yes to something you say no to something else,” she said. “I say yes probably more often than I should.”

Building the right relationships underneath her is also critical. When she was promoted to her current role, managing an organization of 300, the size was new for her. She had to be more thoughtful about empowering people to handle issues without her, steering them to the right contacts so they could begin building relationships and she could get out of the way.

Amidst all the collaboration demands, Rachel also values “alone” time. She blocks time on her calendar for reflection, emphasizing, “I need to be sure I have time to think.”

## Network Insights

- **Create a network and context where bad news could come to you promptly, in time to fix things.** “Bad news does not get better.” Deal with it quickly rather than letting it fester.
- **Use the network to help frame the problem more broadly.** Rachel was able to see both a larger strategic issue and a short-term need. A more insular network would have stayed in crisis or problem-solving mode.
- **Tap a network of experts to create solutions.** In forming a task force to address the problem, Rachel relied on her network of experts as well as those who were respected by senior leaders so that solutions had credibility and were (more) likely to be accepted.
- **Continually focus on “why.”** This helped Rachel’s team see how their work fit with strategy and feel a sense of purpose in their work—i.e., that they contributed directly to the company’s success.

## Ideas to Build Boundary Spanning Relationships Critical to Individual Innovation and Performance



### Emergence / Creativity Ties

Rachel begins staff meetings with a Hero Moment to recognize individuals (in her organization or another organization) for innovation, mentoring or teamwork, to inspire others. If the individual is outside of her broader organization, she sends a note of congratulations to him or her thanking them for their great work.



### Professional Growth Ties

- Rachel reaches out to her previous boss for advice on problem-solving and for market perspectives. It’s a two-way relationship; they both share views.
- She connects with the senior HR leader for advice, especially on organizational changes she is considering.
- She seeks feedback from her spouse, who has a similar role at another company (nothing proprietary is shared!).



### Depth/Best Practice Ties

Rachel meets twice a year with other pre-sales executives at a professional conference to compare best practices, hiring challenges (“we promise not to poach!”) and other issues.



### Sensemaking / Landscape Ties

- Rachel meets informally (e.g., lunch or drinks) with her boss’s executive assistant, who has visibility into many things she does not.
- She meets informally with marketing and product team members, many of whom are friends.

## 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).