



# Leadership skills in networking and collaboration in partnership for recruitment and improvement in Vocational Education and Training.

## A guideline

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## BE LIKE A BEE!

A bee flies from flower to flower and collects nectar. The flower will benefit (pollination), the bees benefit through nectar and honey, and humans benefit because of the honey. Bees choose the best flowers to collect nectar. They have some skills they are born with, and some they learn in order to do the job.

Maybe leaders should be like bees?

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## Introduction

There are significant shortages of VET teachers in Europe, and many countries struggle to attract and retain VET teachers with relevant skills (OECD, 2021). The OECD (2021) recommends targeted incentives and support to encourage participation in initial teacher education and training, as well as professional development, to attract and retain VET teachers. This is one of the strengths of partnerships in teacher education. Through collaboration with VET schools and occupational practices, partnerships can provide increased relevance and an improved teacher education experience for both current and future VET teachers.

LeadVET (Leadership Interaction in Sustainable Partnerships to Enhance Continuous Improvement of Vocational Teacher Education) is a EU-funded Erasmus+ project . The ambition of LeadVET is to strengthen vocational teacher education and vocational training by establishing sustainable university-school collaborations. Effective leadership and networking between educational institutions and companies are crucial prerequisites for sustainable, high-quality vocational training at all levels. This guideline provides educational leaders with insights on how and why they should enhance their networking skills and collaboration in partnerships. LeadVET proposes that skilled workers actively contribute to teaching vocational subjects at the upper secondary education level when certified teachers are not available.



Figure 1 Emstad by ChatGPT

Additionally, teacher education should offer tailored in-service training that aligns with both company needs and educational goals. Furthermore, a network model for mentorship has been developed, allowing both VET schools and teacher education programs to benefit from complementary competencies when mentors work as a network. This calls for a partnership between companies, VET schools, and vocational teacher education programs.

This guideline has been developed during a Learning, Teaching, and Training Activity (LTTA) that brought together representatives of the following groups:

1. Vocational schools with teacher recruitment or other related issues.
2. University VTE departments with an interest in better partnership arrangements with schools and employers.
3. Employers and employer organizations.

The objective of the LTTA was to improve the boundary-spanning capabilities of participants and to enable them to build highly functional networks in their own VET ecosystems, thereby improving the recruitment and competencies of prospective VET teachers. Feedback from teachers, leaders, and university educators is essential for enhancing VET because it brings together diverse perspectives that contribute to a well-rounded understanding of the system. Teachers offer practical insights from the classroom, ensuring that reforms are grounded in the real challenges of teaching and learning. Leaders provide input on aligning educational practices with institutional goals and policy constraints, making proposed changes more feasible. University teacher educators add research-based knowledge and insights into trends in industry, helping to keep curricula relevant to labor market demands. Together, this feedback fosters continuous improvement, ensuring that VET programs remain dynamic, adaptable, and responsive to the evolving needs of students, industries, and society. During one week in Helsinki, Finland, these representatives gained insights and developed ideas on how and why they should enhance their networking skills and collaboration in partnerships. As one of the participants expressed at the end of the week:

I think my contribution to the activities was of great value because I shared my own experiences which other members didn't have and they shared views and experiences that I didn't have. So, we created a unique and very creative atmosphere, fulfilling the goal of answering all questions by adding new ideas, our own experiences, and our

own solutions to the problems, creating a big pool of ideas. Altogether, it was like using more than two hands to solve the problem.

# The importance of networks and partnership in VET

In Vocational Education and Training (VET), the connections between educational and occupational practices are crucial, as VET teachers operate at the intersection of these domains. The profession of vocational teaching is continually evolving due to changes in jobs and societal challenges, necessitating adaptable teaching and learning practices. However, vocational teaching faces recruitment and retention issues, as it is challenging for professionals in practical occupations to combine their work with teaching in a university context. Additionally, the age and profile of potential recruits often make it difficult for them to pursue full-time study courses.

Partnerships between educational institutions and industries are essential for several reasons<sup>1</sup>:

1. **Innovation and Quality:** Informal networks and collaborations foster innovation and improve the quality of education by integrating real-world practices and experiences.
2. **Skill Development:** Partnerships help in enhancing the skill levels of both students and employees through effective supervision and training.
3. **Practical Experience:** Collaborations provide students with hands-on experience and relevant training, making them better prepared for the workforce.
4. **Recruitment and Retention:** Strong partnerships can improve the recruitment and retention of vocational teachers by creating a supportive and dynamic educational environment.
5. **Problem Solving and Efficiency:** Networks facilitate quick problem-solving and make school leaders more effective by saving time and reducing stress.
6. **Sustainability and Trust:** Building trust within these networks ensures the sustainability and ethical management of vocational education programs.

For example, collaborations between companies and VET-schools allow businesses to access a pool of young, talented workers and influence their education. Meanwhile, students benefit from a range of teaching materials and early work experience, which can lead to more attractive job offers in the future. These partnerships are vital for creating long-lasting and mutually beneficial relationships. National legislation also requires vocational education

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Minnesota 2025

providers to cooperate with the local labor market, and other education providers, as well as public and private organizations. Networking is therefore also one of the statutory duties of educational institutions. (see e.g., Finland's Vocational Education Act (531/2017))

When collaborating in partnerships, one crucial task is to make sure there is a clear advantage to be gained by collaborating, meaning that collaborators can gain something significant together that they could not achieve alone. Use should be made of windows of opportunity to advance collaborative approaches (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2015).

This is often referred to as creating a win-win situation. Creating win-win situations is essential for building sustainable partnerships because they foster mutual trust, commitment, and long-term success. In win-win situations, both partners gain tangible value from the relationship. This balance makes the collaboration more equitable and less likely to lead to conflicts. When both parties experience clear benefits, the partnership is more likely to endure and grow (Lank, 2006). Next, trust and cooperation are fundamental to any successful partnership, and win-win outcomes help strengthen these qualities. When both partners feel their needs are being respected and that they are valued equally, they are more likely to collaborate effectively and pursue shared goals. Strong interpersonal relationships, built on mutual respect, create a foundation for sustainable collaboration (Kaner, 2014). This mutual trust encourages open communication, which is vital for solving complex problems and navigating the diverse objectives that often arise in multi-stakeholder environments (Huxham & Vangen, 2005).

Additionally, win-win situations promote long-term commitment. When both parties continue to experience benefits from the partnership, they remain motivated to invest in the relationship. On the other hand, if one side feels shortchanged or undervalued, the partnership can deteriorate, leading to disengagement or even termination. A balanced, win-win dynamic fosters lasting commitment by ensuring both sides have a stake in the ongoing success of the collaboration (Covey, 2004). Moreover, creating a win-win environment encourages shared growth. In a sustainable partnership, both parties contribute to each other's success, leading to continuous development and mutual achievements. This dynamic fosters a positive feedback loop, where the success of one partner fuels the success of the other, creating a more robust and resilient partnership (Covey, 2004).



Win-win situations also help to prevent conflicts. When the needs of all parties are met, there is less tension and fewer disputes, resulting in a more harmonious working relationship. This allows the partnership to remain productive and stable, even when challenges or external pressures arise (Lundin, 2013). Sustainable partnerships can weather difficult times because they are built on a foundation of fairness and mutual respect, which reduces the likelihood of internal conflict.

Lastly, win-win partnerships foster innovation and creativity. When both partners feel secure in the relationship and trust that their contributions are valued, they are more likely to share new ideas and collaborate on creative solutions. This collaborative environment encourages innovation, helping both parties develop new approaches and strategies that benefit the partnership as a whole (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). In turn, this fosters the growth of the organization and strengthens its capacity to achieve broader goals.

In summary, creating win-win situations is key to building sustainable partnerships because they ensure mutual benefit, strengthen trust, promote long-term commitment, and encourage innovation. Effective partnerships are rooted in a balance of give and take, where both parties contribute to and benefit from the collaboration. This approach allows for shared growth and stability, ensuring the partnership can thrive over time.

## Boundary spanners and boundary crossing

### Example of the Importance of boundary spanners

There is a large company with many departments. In one of these departments, there is a skilled worker who also has excellent teaching abilities. He trains every new employee in the department and assists anyone who encounters problems, effectively teaching them how to resolve issues. The head of this department knows the leader of the company's training center, where apprentices are trained. He informs the training center leader about this skilled worker, suggesting that he could be a great teacher for the apprentices. Consequently, the worker transfers to the training center and begins working as a teacher for both apprentices and employees, continuing to excel in his role.

His new supervisor at the training center knows the principal of a vocational education and training (VET) school and recommends the worker for a teaching position there. The school and the company agree that the worker will split his time, working part-time as a teacher at the school and part-time at the company, where he continues to train apprentices.

There is a network inside the company: Leaders of departments know each other. One of those leaders also knows a principal from another school. As the skilled worker still has a position at the company, it doesn't lose a qualified worker. Plus, the school has now a skilled teacher with practical experience.

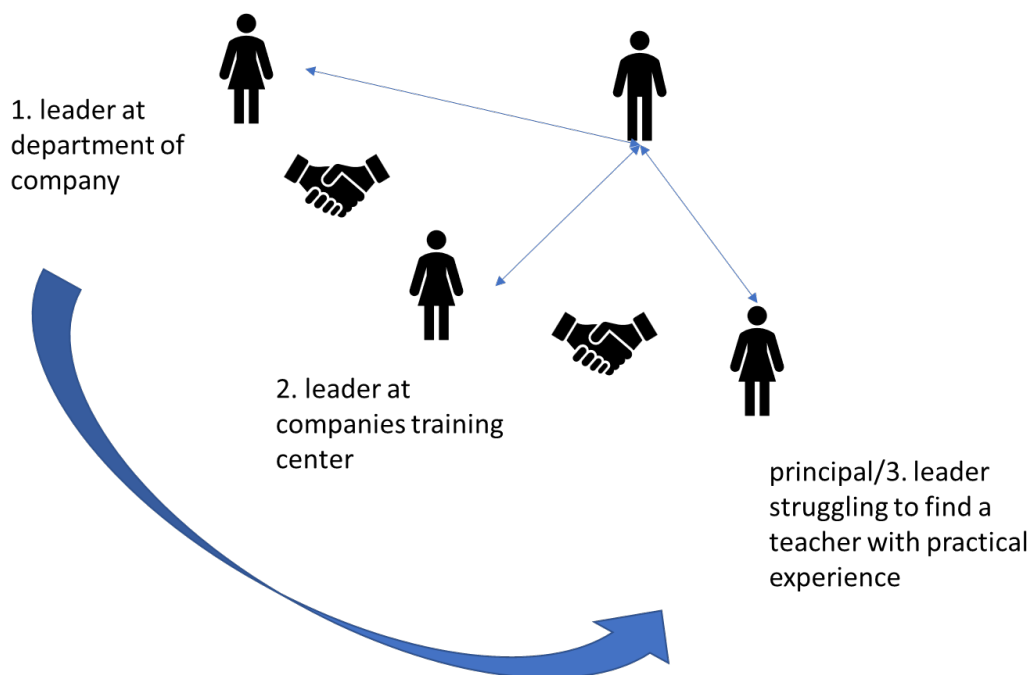


Figure 2 Boundary crossers in a network. Own illustration. 2025

This example of a boundary spanner illustrates the concept —individuals who navigate and bridge different domains, disciplines, or social groups by connecting people and building relationships. Boundary spanners can be a function, group, or person. In a high-quality school, everyone acts as a boundary spanner. Examples include teachers, teacher groups, leaders and management teams, and even cleaners and receptionists in the lobby interacting with students and external companies, . Providing brokering opportunities is crucial for both worksites and schools to enhance learning for students, teachers, and employees (Andersson & Köpsén, 2019, p. 549)

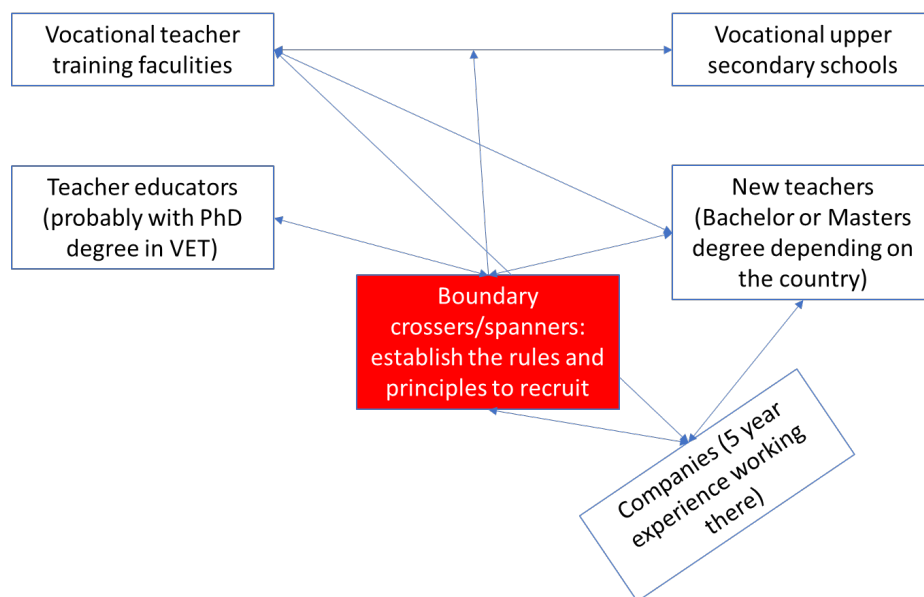


Figure 3 Boundary crosses in exchange with different people. Own illustration 2025.

Leaders may institutionalize boundary spanning as a function to be managed. Boundary spanning leadership is defined as the capability to create direction, alignment, and commitment across boundaries in the service of a higher vision or goal (Cross et al. 2013, p. 81). This ensures that if someone leaves the organization, the practice of boundary spanning does not disappear with them. Leaders have the responsibility to foster trust among employees to maintain the sustainability, transparency, and ethics of boundary spanning and the networks they create<sup>2</sup>. Part of a leader's role is thus to inspire effective boundary spanning. Boundary

<sup>2</sup> See:

file:///Users/annebee/Downloads/Why%20You%20Should%20Collaborate%20Across%20Boundaries%20from%20Center%20for%20Creative%20Leadership.pdf

spanners in network building can be initiators, maintainers, and facilitators. Through these networks, they can identify potential teachers for part-time, half-time, or even full-time positions. Projects created in collaboration with companies are crucial tools for boundary spanners.

Imagine a vocational school, “Skill Builders Academy,” that collaborates with various local businesses. It focuses on enhancing students’ practical skills by integrating real-world business projects into the curriculum. The school works closely with companies in different industries to provide students with hands-on experience and relevant training. Understanding the external environment is crucial for Skill Builders Academy because it allows it to tailor its educational programs to meet the current demands of the job market. By collaborating with businesses, it ensures that students acquire the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their chosen fields. This partnership also helps businesses by creating a pipeline of well-trained, job-ready candidates.

Participant in learning, teaching or training week:

I think my notes about boundary crossers is useful for those who are recruiting VET teachers because it gives some ideas of where to start. As a boundary crosser you can initiate cross boundary projects between school and company. This can lead to a development of partnerships that eventually can lead to vocational workers being inspired to teach. At the same time the leaders of the company may be convinced that there is a win-win situation in a collaboration.

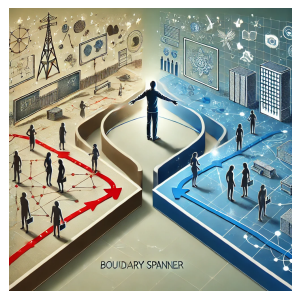


Figure 4 Emstad/ChatGPT

## The importance of informal networks.

### Example of the Importance of Informal Networks at the Organizational Level

School principals often maintain informal connections with their colleagues from other schools to discuss topics such as school financing, administration, and educational practices. This informal exchange provides a platform for sharing valuable knowledge gained from direct experience. Through regular and intensive dialogue with other principals, they can learn about innovative financing models or efficient administrative strategies that can be implemented in their own schools. Additionally, exchanging ideas on educational methods enables the continuous development and adaptation of teaching approaches tailored to the specific needs of their students. This fosters proactive school management and better prepares principals to face challenges.

Informal networks play a vital role in organizations for several reasons (Seitle et al. 2024). They serve as a source of innovation, bringing fresh ideas and creative solutions to the table. These networks also enhance the quality of school staff by facilitating the exchange of knowledge and best practices. Learning from diverse experiences is another key benefit, as it broadens perspectives and improves overall educational practices. Moreover, informal networks enhance cooperation among staff, fostering a collaborative environment. They help solve problems quickly by providing immediate access to a wide range of expertise and resources. Additionally, these networks save time and make school leaders more effective by streamlining communication and decision-making processes. Overall, the presence of robust informal networks significantly contributes to the efficiency and success of educational institutions.

According to the LeadVET PR1 report (Seitle, Wilbers, Emstad, Støen Utvær, Nyberg, Saranpää, & Bayındır, 2024) network analysis is important for several reasons, particularly in the context of education, vocational training, and organizational development. Here are some key reasons:

1. **Understanding Relationships:** Network analysis helps to understand how different actors, such as schools, universities, businesses, and government agencies, interact and collaborate. This insight can reveal strengths and weaknesses in existing relationships and partnerships.

2. **Resource Identification:** Through network analysis, one can identify the resources and competencies available within the network and how these can be better utilized to support teachers and students.
3. **Recruitment Improvement:** In recruitment processes, network analysis can help understand which channels and methods are most effective for attracting qualified teachers, as well as how to enhance these processes.
4. **Collaboration Enhancement:** The analysis can uncover opportunities for better collaboration among various stakeholders, leading to more effective educational programs and better support for teachers and students.
5. **Innovation and Development:** Network analysis can promote innovation by identifying new partnerships and collaboration opportunities that can lead to the development of new methods and approaches in education.
6. **Effectiveness Evaluation:** By analyzing networks, one can assess the effectiveness of various initiatives and programs, and how they impact the learning environment and teacher development.
7. **Adaptation to Needs:** Network analysis can assist educational institutions in tailoring their offerings and programs to meet the actual needs of the labor market and society, which is particularly important in vocational education.

Overall, network analysis contributes to a more holistic understanding of how educational systems function and how they can be improved to meet future challenges

Leaders should be aware of informal networks because they offer several significant benefits. Firstly, these networks help reduce stress by providing a support system where leaders can share challenges and solutions. They also decrease workload by facilitating the delegation of tasks and sharing of responsibilities among network members. Informal networks enable leaders to act quickly in their daily tasks and responsibilities by providing immediate access to information and resources. Additionally, these networks allow leaders to focus on other important tasks by streamlining processes and improving overall efficiency. Understanding and leveraging informal networks can greatly enhance a leader's effectiveness and the organization's success.

## Sources for connecting to networks

### **An example of how one individual can be connected to various types of networks**

A vocational teacher shares his experience working at a vocational school in economic subjects. He describes his most important network as a close collaboration with a training office, which connects to various companies within his field. This collaboration is not only formal but has also evolved into an informal network through regular meetings, discussions, and social gatherings. This dual nature of the network allows for both structured and spontaneous interactions, enriching the professional relationships involved.

In addition to this, there is a dedicated examination network that plays a crucial role in his professional life. This network, too, blends formal and informal elements, providing a platform for exchanging ideas and best practices in both structured settings and casual environments.

Beyond these primary networks, he is also a member of several other networks, including Erasmus+, various universities, and public institutions. These affiliations broaden his professional horizon and provide numerous opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange.

When asked if others could take over these networks if he were to leave, he acknowledges that while the networks exist, they are deeply personal. New members must invest time and effort to integrate into them, as these connections are built on trust and mutual understanding developed over time.

This example illustrates how a vocational teacher can be connected to various types of networks, each serving a unique purpose and collectively enhancing his professional life. The blend of formal and informal interactions within these networks fosters a dynamic and supportive professional environment. Opportunities to find and be a part of new networks can be found in different sources. Some of the networks disclosed by participants in the Helsinki event are presented below.

#### 1. Institutional Collaboration:

- Training Office: Close collaboration with a training office that connects to various companies in the field (Germany).
- Government Coordination: Networks established by government coordinators for student placements (Turkey).

#### 2. Formal and Informal Networks:

- Examination Network: A mix of formal and informal networks involving meetings and social discussions (Germany).

- Informal Networks: Teachers using informal networks to help students find placements, often starting internships before formal agreements are in place (Turkey).
3. Educational and Professional Networks:
- Additional Networks: Participation in networks like Erasmus+, universities, and public institutions (Germany).
  - Health and Social Care Department Meetings: Joint meetings with supervisors from nursing homes and kindergartens, including teachers, supervisors, and school leaders (Norway).
4. Industry Partnerships:
- Collaboration with hotel and restaurants: Partnership with a pastry chef for “masterclasses” and selecting future apprentices (Norway).
  - Company Competition: Companies competing for the best students, making placements easier (Turkey).
5. Data and Resource Management:
- Tracking Internships: Use of an Excel document to track vocational students’ internships, which is later transferred to Vigo (application and administration tools for upper secondary education in Norway).

These categories highlight the diverse sources of networking, emphasizing the importance of both formal and informal connections, institutional collaborations, industry partnerships, and effective data management in fostering strong vocational education and training networks. These sources highlight the importance of both formal and informal networks in fostering collaboration, enhancing educational practices, and facilitating student placements in vocational education.

There are many topics to consider in industry partnerships. The organization’s relationships with external partners serve as a source of learning and are essential for creating new knowledge and integrating the organization’s expertise with the specialized competencies of other actors in the network. Interaction enables the transfer of embedded knowledge within



organizational routines and the creation of new knowledge, facilitating organizational renewal. (Ben Arfi et al., 2018; Spender et al., 2017)

In the context of leadership, the organizational network becomes an integral part of the management framework. Research indicates that innovation collaboration (e.g., in research and development activities) is more effective for green innovations compared to non-environmental innovations. Partnerships with educational institutions and other entities (such as incubators, venture capitalists, and large corporations) have proven to be the most impactful tool for advancing green innovation. The need for interdisciplinary environmental solutions and the complexity of knowledge required for green innovation drive collaboration. From the perspective of SMEs and startup entrepreneurs, collaboration and interaction with research institutions and educational organizations should be long-term and continuous throughout their lifecycle, as networking is a fundamental pillar of entrepreneurial expertise. (Ben Arfi et al., 2018; Spender et al., 2017)

In industrial collaboration and networking, it is important to consider the differences between educational institutions, universities, and industry. Partners are often small businesses and entrepreneur's resources are variable, so the greatest resource constraint for entrepreneurs is often their own time. Entrepreneur-friendly schedules, designing training as workshops, and practical, down-to-earth approaches motivate entrepreneurs to participate. Entrepreneurial stories are crucial for inspiring both students and other entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurs may face challenges in effectively demonstrating their expertise within networks due to the unfamiliarity of the terminology and discourse commonly employed by large corporations, educational institutions and research organizations. Nevertheless, collaboration with larger companies yields reciprocal benefits. A large company gains agile and divergent thinking from a small business, while the smaller company receives the expertise and network resources of the larger organization. (Albats et al. 2020; Baumann & Kritikos 2016.)

## Mapping networks

### **An example of an informal network, and how it can be mapped.**

At one vocational school, a comprehensive system was established to track where all vocational students had completed their internships during their first and second years. This system recorded the company's organization number, name, the contact person responsible for supervising the students, along with their contact information, and the specific competencies the students had developed. Each student could have multiple placements across different companies. Additionally, the system tracked which company each student was apprenticed to or was a candidate for an apprenticeship.

In practice, an Excel document was created where each class had its own sheet. Each department maintained a workbook for all their classes. At the end of the year, this data was transferred to the Vigo system. The reason for this two-step process was that teachers found it too complicated to input the data directly into Vigo, so this task was gradually phased out. This effort was part of the Social Contract initiative. The list of individuals supervising the apprentices in the companies could potentially serve as a pool of future vocational teacher candidates.

Leaders should possess both knowledge and skills in order to understand and leverage the value of networks and the importance of mapping networks within an organization.

Knowledge and skills are important for developing strategies to strengthen weak connections and enhance network resilience, and to influence others to engage in and contribute to network-building activities.

### **Knowledge and Skills for Identifying and Mapping Networks**

To identify and map networks, leaders need a comprehensive understanding of what a network is and how it functions. They must be aware of the networks they have and possess management knowledge, particularly in stakeholder management, to keep networks alive, even when there hasn't been any recent communication. Familiarity with VET/VTE systems and relevant legislation is crucial, as is knowledge of software programs that facilitate network management. Leaders should also know the criteria for hiring the right employees and should be aware of who they really want. Additionally, they need basic knowledge about the latest market needs and current trends.

Skills essential for identifying and mapping networks include the ability to analyze and understand the structure and dynamics of networks, identify key nodes and connections within the network, and proficiency in using tools and technologies to map and visualize networks.

### Leaders' Knowledge: Key points

- **Understanding Networks:** Leaders should have a comprehensive knowledge of what a network is and how it functions.
- **Awareness of Existing Networks:** Leaders need to be aware of the networks they have and possess appropriate management knowledge, particularly in stakeholder management, to keep networks alive, even in the absence of recent communication.
- **Familiarity with Systems and Legislation:** Familiarity with VET/VTE systems and relevant legislation is crucial.
- **Software Proficiency:** Knowledge of software programs that facilitate network management is helpful.
- **Employee Criteria:** Leaders should know the criteria for hiring the right employees and should be aware of who they really want.
- **Market Trends:** Basic knowledge about the latest market needs and current trends.

### Leaders' Skills: key points

- **Analyzing Networks:** Skills essential for analyzing and understanding the structure and dynamics of networks.
- **Identifying Key Nodes:** Ability to identify key nodes and connections within the network.
- **Mapping and Visualization:** Proficiency in using tools and technologies to map and visualize networks.

In the example provided at the start of this chapter, the school used an Excel document to get an overview of the network. Another tool used by the partners in LeadVET is MindManager, which was used when the VET-related networks of each partner were mapped. The following figure (figure 1) shows the mapping of the networks of Haaga Helia, using Mindmanager:



# Knowledge and Skills for Leading and Utilizing Networks

To lead and utilize networks, leaders must be able to create networks themselves, knowing how to approach different groups such as politicians and company representatives. They should understand the importance of cooperation and collaboration, be willing to share, and be good role models. Appreciating employees' contributions and ensuring everyone is included in sharing processes is essential. Leaders need to be good facilitators, providing space for employees to see the value of networking in their programs. Flexibility and open-mindedness are important, as leaders need to be strict with frameworks but flexible in practical implementation (Weber, Zimmermann & Fischer, 2018).

Mentoring skills are crucial, including empathy, active listening, and the ability to guide and mentor others. Leaders should have competence in understanding how organizations work and how to develop them, both theoretically and practically. They should understand the purpose of schools and the components of various program areas that are needed to facilitate teachers' practice. Innovation skills are important for thinking outside the box, and technological skills are needed to create maps and use suitable tools in different situations (Özdemir, 2023).

Necessary skills for leading and using networks also include the ability to bring people together effectively, strong communication and social skills, including crisis and conflict management, and the ability to motivate and influence others to engage in and contribute to network-building activities. Analytical thinking and organizational skills are essential, as is demonstrating altruism by not only taking from other institutions but also giving back. Leaders must be flexible, adapting to changing situations and accommodating the needs of employees working across split positions. Showing respect and fostering an environment where all team members feel valued is crucial. Acting as an effective communication partner, ensuring clear and timely messaging, maintaining transparency, providing regular updates on organizational changes, and embracing new ideas and suggestions from skilled workers are all important. Finally, leaders need to manage time and plan effectively to align work schedules, priorities, and resources (Anderegg, 2022).

Below we have listed knowledge areas and skills identified by our participants in the Helsinki LTTA week, through which leaders can effectively build, identify, and utilize networks and partnerships to drive organizational success and foster innovation.

## Knowledge

- **Network Creation:** Ability to create networks themselves, knowing how to approach different groups such as politicians and company representatives.
- **Cooperation and Collaboration:** Understanding the importance of cooperation and collaboration and being willing to share and be good role models.
- **Employee Contributions:** Appreciating employees' contributions and ensuring everyone is included in teams and sharing processes.
- **Facilitation:** Being good facilitators, providing space for employees to see the value of networking in their programs.
- **Flexibility and Open-mindedness:** Being strict with frameworks but flexible in practical implementation.
- **Mentoring:** Knowledge of mentoring skills, including empathy, active listening, and the ability to guide and mentor others.
- **Organizational Understanding:** Competence in understanding how organizations work and how to develop them, both theoretically and practically.
- **Purpose of Schools:** Understanding the purpose of schools and the requirements within various program areas to facilitate teachers.
- **Innovation and Technology:** Innovative skills for thinking outside the box, and technological skills for creating maps and using suitable tools in different situations.

## Skills

- **Boundary-Breaking:** Ability to bring people together effectively.
- **Communication and Social Skills:** Strong communication and social skills, including crisis and conflict management abilities.
- **Persuasive Competence:** Ability to motivate and influence others to engage in and contribute to network-building activities.
- **Analytical Thinking:** Skills in analytical thinking and organizational skills.



- **Altruism:** Demonstrating altruism by not only taking from other institutions but also giving back.
- **Flexibility:** Demonstrating flexibility, adapting to changing situations and accommodating the needs of employees working across split positions.
- **Respect:** Showing respect, fostering an environment where all team members feel valued.
- **Effective Communication:** Acting as an effective communication partner, ensuring clear and timely messaging.
- **Transparency:** Maintaining transparency, providing regular updates on organizational changes.
- **Open-mindedness:** Embracing new ideas and suggestions from skilled workers.
- **Time Management:** Managing time and planning effectively to align work schedules, priorities, and resources.



Figure 6 Emstad/Chat GTP

## Interpersonal skills and collaboration

### How interpersonal skills foster sustainable partnerships.

A high school student, along with a supervisor, sought guidance for a science project. Initially, simple project ideas were suggested, suited for the student's age. However, both the student and the supervisor were ambitious and expressed interest in pursuing more advanced research in brain imaging.

Although conducting MRI research seemed impractical for a high school project, the supervisor and the student discussed leveraging a professional network through the student's mother, a professor with connections in the medical faculty. With her help, access to an MRI machine was secured for two weeks—something that would have been difficult without these established relationships.

Through effective communication, trust, and collaboration, the team successfully completed the project and published the findings in a prestigious journal. This case demonstrates how strong interpersonal skills, such as listening and networking, can transform ambitious ideas into valuable, long-term partnerships that benefit all involved.

In any successful partnership, especially in complex and collaborative environments, leaders must possess strong interpersonal skills (Emstad & Birkeland, 2020). These skills are critical for navigating the interactions and dynamics that drive partnerships forward. Whether collaborating with external organizations, managing relationships, or balancing multiple interests, a leader's ability to communicate, understand, and work effectively with others is key to sustaining productive, long-term partnerships. Here are several reasons why interpersonal skills are essential for leaders in fostering and maintaining successful collaborations. They are the key points from external input and discussion with participants:

- partnership should be based on interaction between two or more partners/ participants (interaction in a social environment),
- networks/ partnership should be driven by written and unwritten rules, as interpersonal skills help us to understand each other, but require structure to be fully effective.
- Solutions have to be found for emerging problems, involving collaboration with multiple institutions, with different perspectives and objectives => complex environment)



- One has to reach people in key positions;
- One has to find resources and increase the reach of the network;
- One has to take care of, and nurture, one's partnerships;
- One has to widen one's vision & the mission of the institution,
- One has to keep the work environment (in one's own institution) balanced and safe, and create a win-win situation, so it is important that you know each other and what the benefits for my partner could be.

### Interpersonal skills important for a leader in building a sustainable partnership

Figure 4 (below) titled "Interpersonal Skills of Leaders" offers a comprehensive breakdown of the types of skills crucial for effective leadership, dividing them into three key categories: teachable, enhanceable, and non-teachable skills. Each of these categories represents a unique facet of leadership competencies that contributes to success, especially when it comes to building sustainable partnerships, such as those envisioned in LeadVET.

#### Teachable Skills

Teachable skills are those that can be systematically developed through structured learning processes. These skills can be transferred through formal education, training sessions, and mentorship, making them highly accessible and practical for leaders aiming to foster partnerships in vocational teacher education (VTE). Some key teachable skills in the context of LeadVET include:

- **Active Listening:** This is the ability to listen attentively, understand, and respond appropriately to others. Leaders can learn techniques to enhance their listening skills, making them more effective in resolving conflicts and addressing the needs of diverse stakeholders in sustainable partnerships.
- **Conflict Resolution:** The ability to manage and resolve conflicts in a constructive manner is a skill that can be learned through training. This is particularly critical in partnerships where conflicting interests or misunderstandings might arise between institutions or individuals. Leaders who are proficient in conflict resolution can ensure smooth collaboration, e.g. within university-school partnerships.
- **Cultural/Intercultural Awareness:** In an increasingly globalized educational landscape, leaders need to be aware of cultural nuances and how these affect

communication, decision-making, and relationship-building. This skill can be taught and developed through workshops or international exchange programs, and it is vital for partnerships in VET, which often involve diverse teams from different cultural backgrounds.

- **Clear Communication:** The ability to communicate ideas, instructions, and feedback effectively is a cornerstone of leadership. Communication training can help leaders develop the clarity and precision needed to foster understanding among partners, ensuring that everyone is aligned with the project's goals.
- **Research Skills:** Leaders in VET need to base their decisions and strategies on solid research. Acquiring research skills allows them to analyse data, evaluate trends, and use evidence-based practices to guide their partnerships toward continuous improvement.
- **Ethical Standards:** Adhering to laws, regulations, and ethical guidelines is teachable through formal courses and training programs. Leaders who understand and enforce ethical standards help to create trust and transparency within partnerships, ensuring long-term sustainability.
- **Team-building:** Building strong, cohesive teams is critical in any leadership role. Training in team-building strategies equips leaders with the ability to foster collaboration, ensure team members work harmoniously, and leverage the strengths of each participating individual towards the success of the partnership.
- **Analytical Thinking:** Leaders can be trained to analyse complex situations, evaluate multiple perspectives, and make informed decisions. Analytical thinking is essential in solving problems that arise in partnerships, ensuring that decisions are data-driven and beneficial for all stakeholders involved in vocational education.

## Enhanceable Skills

Enhanceable skills fall into a unique middle ground. These are traits that, while not entirely teachable, can be developed and refined through experience, feedback, and continuous learning. Leaders often possess these skills to some extent, but they can enhance them to become more effective. In LeadVET, enhanceable skills were found to be crucial for navigating the evolving and sometimes unpredictable nature of partnerships. These skills include:

- **Adaptability:** Leaders with adaptability thrive in dynamic environments, adjusting their strategies and approaches as circumstances change. Whilst some individuals are naturally adaptable, this is also a skill that can be honed through experience. Leaders in

VET partnerships may face unexpected challenges or shifting priorities, and the ability to adapt ensures they remain responsive and effective in such situations.

- **Persuasiveness:** The ability to influence and inspire others is critical for leaders who need to bring various stakeholders together in support of a common goal. While persuasiveness cannot be entirely taught, leaders can enhance this skill by learning communication techniques, building credibility, and understanding the motivations of their partners. In LeadVET, we found that leaders must be able to persuade schools, universities, and other stakeholders to commit to long-term collaboration, making this skill indispensable.
- **Endurance:** Leading sustainable partnerships, especially in educational contexts, requires long-term commitment. Endurance is the capacity to maintain focus, energy, and motivation over extended periods, even when faced with setbacks or challenges. While endurance may be partly inherent, it can be cultivated by building resilience, managing stress effectively, and staying motivated through personal reflection and goal-setting. Leaders, including those in the LeadVET project, tasked with driving long-term improvements in VET, will need to strengthen their endurance to ensure continuous progress and sustained collaboration.

## Non-Teachable Skills

Non-teachable skills are inherent qualities that cannot be easily instilled through education or training, yet they are often the traits that set exceptional leaders apart, as opposed to a reluctance to learn new skills and embrace change. According to Koster (2021), some problematic behaviours include impatience, insecurity, intolerance, bitterness, disruptiveness, and poor listening. Freeing oneself from these problematic characteristics plays a pivotal role in shaping how a leader connects with, and influences, others. For LeadVET, gaining non-teachable skills that are the inverse of these behaviours was found to be invaluable in fostering trust, empathy, and authenticity in partnerships. These non-teachable skills include:

- **Empathy:** The ability to understand and share the feelings of others is a key trait in building meaningful and trusting relationships. Leaders with the ability to show high empathy can navigate the complex emotional dynamics of partnerships, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. This is critical in a diverse field like VET, where stakeholders come from diverse cultural, social, and professional backgrounds.

- **Sense of Humour:** Although it may seem trivial, a leader's ability to maintain a sense of humour can greatly enhance team morale and diffuse tension in challenging situations. Leaders can embrace this quality to create a more positive and relaxed working environment within partnerships.
- **Extroversion/Introversion:** Whether a leader is naturally extroverted or introverted can affect their style of communication and engagement with others. Both personality types bring unique strengths to leadership, and while these traits cannot be taught, understanding how to leverage them effectively can enhance a leader's impact. For example, extroverted leaders may excel in networking, while introverted leaders may offer more reflective and thoughtful insights in discussions.
- **Ethical Standards (Personal Values):** While ethical standards can be taught from a legal standpoint, personal ethics are rooted in an individual's core values and cannot be imposed. Leaders with strong ethical standards are more often trusted and respected, which is crucial in building long-term partnerships. Their commitment to doing what is right for the greater good ensures the sustainability of the partnership.
- **Enthusiasm:** A leader's genuine passion and enthusiasm for their work can be contagious, inspiring others to commit to shared goals. Enthusiasm cannot be taught but plays a vital role in motivating teams and driving the success of partnerships in VET. Leaders who are enthusiastic about their vision for sustainable improvement in vocational teacher education will inspire others to stay engaged and committed.

In summary, the interpersonal skills of leaders, whether teachable, enhanceable, or non-teachable, contribute uniquely to fostering effective and sustainable partnerships. For the LeadVET project, these skills were found to be integral to ensuring the continuous improvement of vocational teacher education. Teachable skills provide the necessary foundation for collaboration, enhanceable skills allow for growth and flexibility in dynamic environments, and non-teachable traits define the personal qualities that build trust and rapport. Together, these skills shape the kind of leadership needed to navigate the complexities of vocational education and training (VET) partnerships.

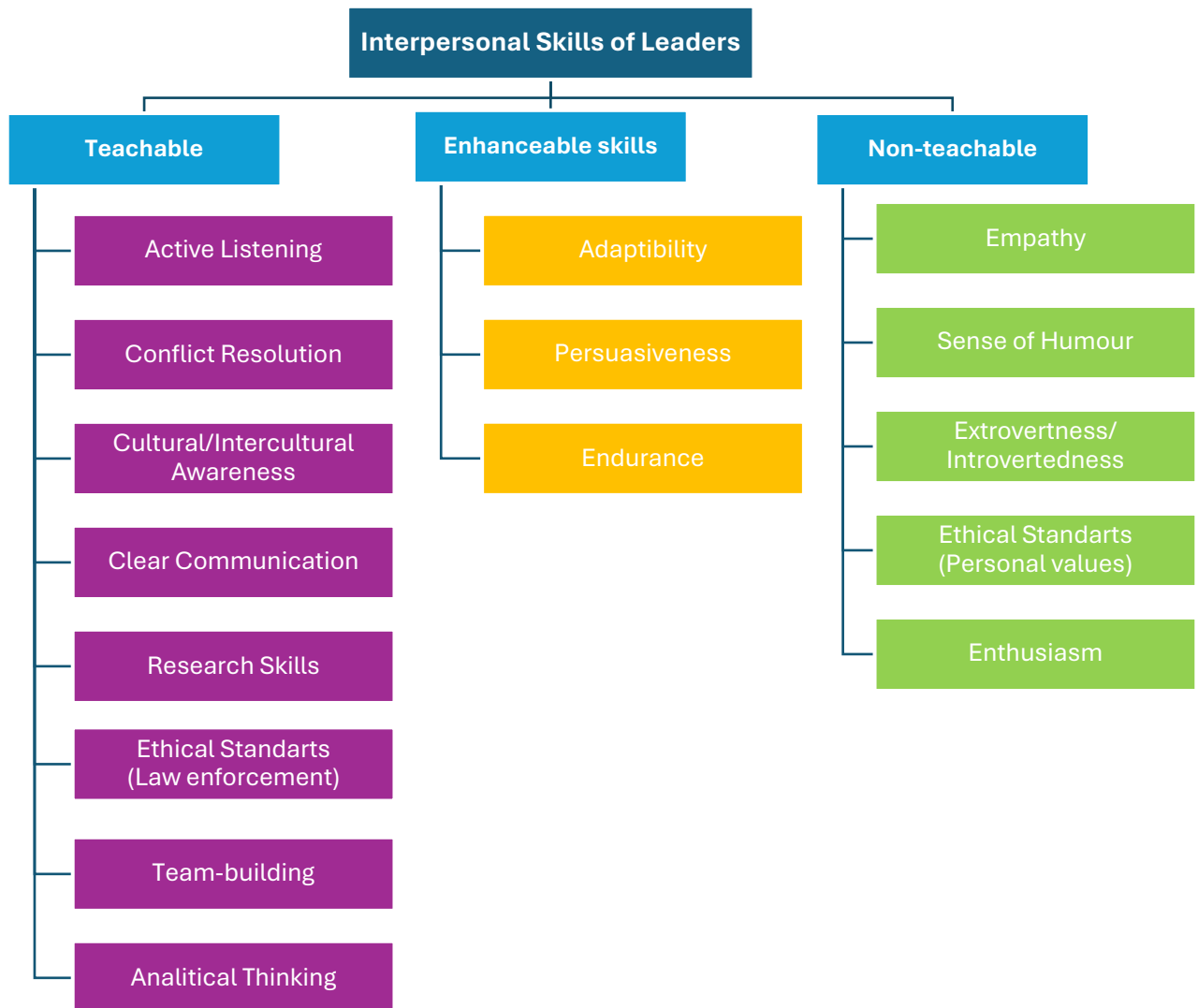


Figure 7 Interpersonal Skills of Leaders

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