



Guidelines for establishing and leading regional networks Schools & Companies

with the principles of
communication-cooperation-
coordination (Co-Co-Co) for
Reality Checks | 2A1E

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REALITY CHECK
TRY IT OUT AND DISCOVER YOUR TALENT

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What are "RealityChecks"?

We develop, test and evaluate new, contemporary practical experiences in/with the real world of work for pupils in the course of their orientation for education and work.

We call these methods "RealityChecks".

They should help to find new motivation and new perspectives for their future education, training and career paths.

Content

The project Reality Check:	Try it out and discover your talent	5
Aims and objectives of the Workpackage 2:	4 Networks for RealityChecks	6
Guidelines for establishing and leading regional networks Schools & Companies		7
Part 1: Establishing		7
Step 1: Analyse the current situation.....		8
List of strategies, actions plan etc. connected to Reality Check.....		8
List existing – or new – initiative(s) / networks.....		9
Upcoming initiatives and development we recognise in our region		10
Step 2: Compose the members of the network.....		11
Possible composition of the regional network for Reality Check		11
Step 3: Define the role and function(s) of the network		12
Possible Roles of Networks Schools and Companies for Reality Checks		12
Six Possible Main Functions of Networks Schools and Companies for Reality Checks		12
Step 4: Set up Timelines, Milestones and Responsibilities		13
Timeline, Milestones and Responsibilities till End of 2023		13
Step 5: Structure the Regional Network		14
1. Status of the network.....		14
2. Membership		14
3. Resources		14

4. Governance / Coordination.....	14
5. Decision-making Processes	14
6. Working groups	14
7. Meetings	14
8. Conferences	14
9. Reporting of activities	14
10. Communication channels	14
 Part 2: Leading	15
Introduction: Leadership in Networks	16
Principles and approaches to network management	16
Success factors for network management.....	18
Documentation and transparency	19
Dos and Don'ts of Network Management.....	20
Practical tips for implementation.....	21
Combining theory and practice.....	22
Bibliography	22

The project Reality Check: Try it out and discover your talent

Aims and Objectives

- The more students live in virtual worlds, the more critical the real thing becomes. This is particularly true for developing personal skills and potential as a basis for future education, career and life paths.
- Offering students real insight into dynamic working and professional worlds is crucial for this.
- In too many areas of school education, this is not sufficiently possible. We want to achieve this with "Reality Check" by developing innovative offers and making them effective.

Activities

- "Reality Check" develops, tests and evaluates innovative offers for real experiences for students - "RealityChecks" - in the working and professional world, where it has not been possible so far.
- Regional networks are being established, as this can only succeed in cooperation between schools, companies, the economy and stakeholders.
- Integrating these actors into regional networks is a core element of the project, with a specific focus on students with challenges.

Results

- The results are innovative ways of opening the real world of work and careers to students where this was not previously possible.
- In regional networks, the conditions for successful communication, cooperation, coordination between stakeholders from schools, companies, and the region have been identified and described.
- The decisive result is the benefit for students on their education and training path. The handbook and training courses help teachers and trainers to support that.



"The school does too little; The teachers don't know; The students don't want to; everything used to be different; We would yes, but..." *(Statement company)*

"The economy demands too much; The students do not get access to companies; everything used to be different; We would yes, but..." *(Statement school)*

Aims and objectives of the Workpackage 2: 4 Networks for RealityChecks

1. Only through COMMUNICATION can prejudices be reduced, mutual knowledge of the conditions increased, understanding between the actors increased. Only then can the respective needs be recognized. This is the basis for COOPERATION so that COORDINATED activities can be achieved (Ko-Ko-Ko).

The main goal is to establish and establish long-term, a total of 4 local/regional networks for cooperation between schools and companies.

2. The aim is to promote mutual understanding between school and the world of work and to strengthen the dialogue between the actors. "Everything flows, nothing remains." According to this saying, the aim is to deal with the framework conditions in the region at regular intervals (at least 5 meetings within the project period) in order to gain a common understanding of them. These are e.g. the situation of the students at and in school with a focus on those who have special challenges; Trends and challenges in the world of work, digitization, etc. This is intended to identify the needs of students in the network.

3. The goal is to „ think outside the box", to get inspiration from examples from our own ranks and other countries and to collect them. Based on the strengths and potentials of the members, 3 RealityChecks per network are to be specified for the duration.
4. The aim is to publicly communicate and make accessible the activities and measures of the networks and findings on the establishment and management of the networks.

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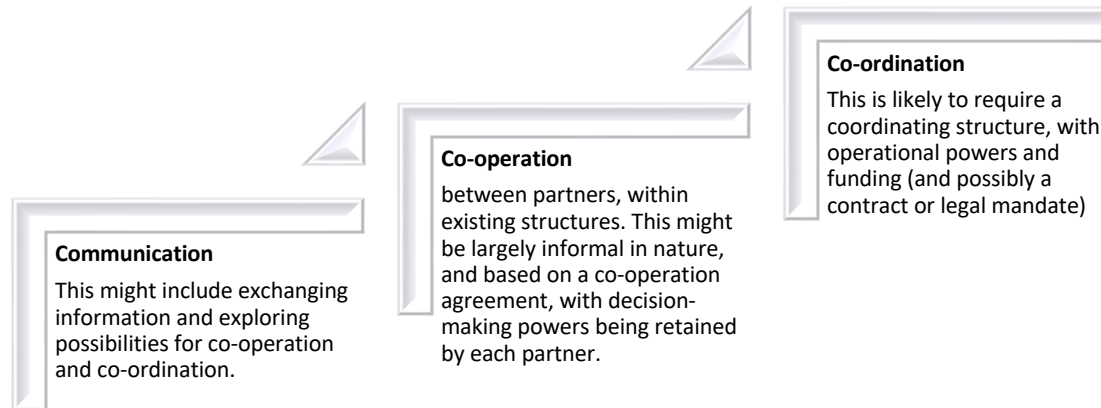
Part 1: Establishing



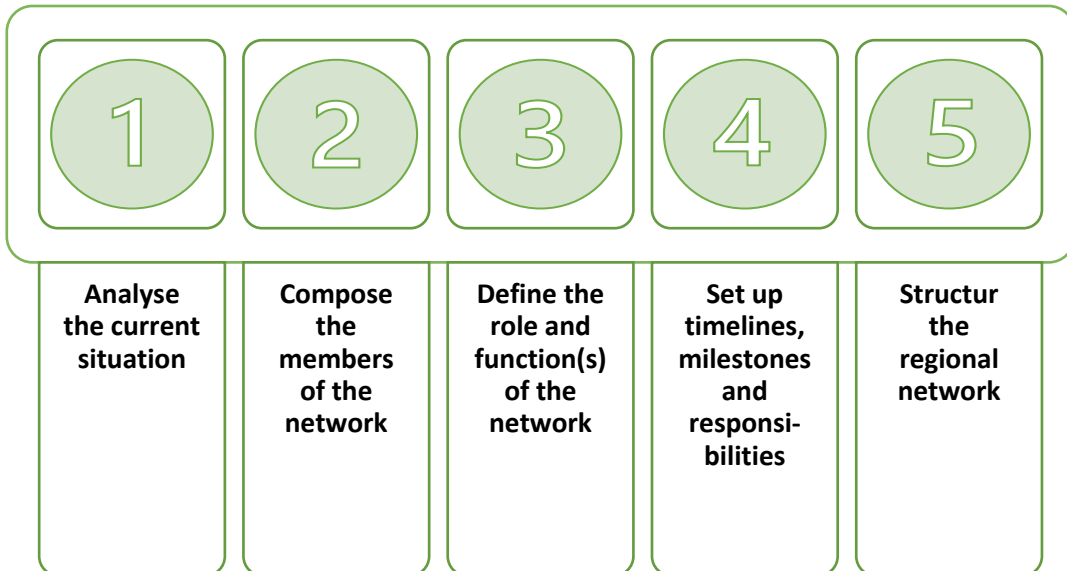
REALITY CHECK

TRY IT OUT AND DISCOVER YOUR TALENT

The establishing of the network follows the principles of Co-Co-Co:



During the phase of establishment follow the 5 steps of the guidelines.



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Step 1: Analyse the current situation

List of strategies, actions plan etc. connected to Reality Check

Please list strategies and actions plans etc. which can be connected to Reality Check topic and can be used in the regional network

Name of Strategy or Action plan	Possible Connection to Reality Check in	Relevant in the context of e.g. useful for mention it; could be essential part

List existing – or new – initiative(s) / networks

Name of initiative	Tasks and content of the initiative	Would it be possible to link the Reality Check regional working group to the initiative?	If yes – is it possible to make a sub-group for the Reality Check working group and who is missing for that?
		Yes No	
		Yes No	
		Yes No	
		Yes No	

Upcoming initiatives and development we recognise in our region

Please list all upcoming initiatives and developments. which can be connected to Reality Check topic, and which should be considered in the regional network

Name of initiative	Tasks and content of the initiative	Should we integrate in Reality Check?	Remarks

Step 2: Compose the members of the network

Possible composition of the regional network for Reality Check
Who should be in the involved in the regional network

Kind of Stakeholder (Schools, companies, chambers, school authorities, Universities ...)	Name of Organisation / Person	Why? What is the added value / contribution for the Network? (short-term target – more operational level)	What concrete long-term effects do you expect? (more on strategic – political level)	Arguments used or will be used to convince to be member of the Network

Step 3: Define the role and function(s) of the network

Possible Roles of Networks Schools and Companies for Reality Checks		<i>is intended or not (Mark in green)</i>
Dialogue and cooperation	A platform / network where actors and stakeholders come together to exchange and discuss information and opinions. The main result is the creation of a common understanding and voluntary coordination of activities.	
Consultation	A body that primarily serves as an active advisory body (sounding board) for government initiatives and their strategies.	
Policy development	A proactive forum to promote lifelong guidance through concrete strategic proposals and initiatives.	
System Development	A place for the development and implementation of concrete, practice-oriented questions within a framework of lifelong guidance (e.g. quality assurance framework or offers for cooperation between education and business).	

Six Possible Main Functions of Networks Schools and Companies for Reality Checks		<i>is intended or not (Mark in green)</i>
Improving communication	Providing a forum for discussion of key strategic issues; establishing a common definition of reality checks;	
Promoting cooperation	Stimulation of interdisciplinary cooperation and coordination for specific activities (events, projects, research); cross-cutting initiatives on multi-sectoral issues.	
Identifying citizens' needs	Identification of existing offers and identification of supply gaps; Implementation of client surveys and public participation processes (Voice of Users)	
Improvement of offers, including quality	Development of quality standards and Quality assurance systems	
Influencing regional development processes	Development of better structures and strategies for supporting and promoting cooperation between education and business as an integral part of national education, employment and social inclusion policies; Seeking political support to fill gaps in existing lifelong services.	
Taking advantage of international cooperation	Supporting national participation in European and international innovation and good practice	

Step 4: Set up Timelines, Milestones and Responsibilities

Timeline, Milestones and Responsibilities

Main responsible person:

Tasks / Months								
Task 1								
Task 2								
Task 3								
Milestone 1								

Tasks / Months						
Task						
Task						
Task						
Milestone						

Step 5: Structure the Regional Network

1. Status of the network
2. Membership
3. Resources
4. Governance / Coordination
5. Decision-making Processes
6. Working groups
7. Meetings
8. Conferences
9. Reporting of activities
10. Communication channels

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Part 2: Leading

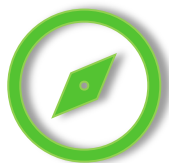


Introduction: Leadership in Networks

Leading regional networks as part of *Reality Check* is a balancing act. It is fundamentally different from classic hierarchical leadership models, such as those known from companies. Networks thrive on the diversity of members – schools, companies, chambers, politics, sometimes also NGOs or parents' associations – and this diversity can only become productive if it is connected through communication, cooperation and coordination (Co-Co-Co).

It is therefore less about "setting the tone" and more about **designing joint processes** that offer orientation, create commitment and have a long-term effect. In the scientific literature, this is described as "**distributed leadership**" (Normann, 2012; Carter & DeChurch, 2012; Saz-Carranza & Ospina, 2011). In this understanding, leadership is not a characteristic of individuals, but arises in cooperation. This means that every school, every company, every institution bears responsibility for joint success – and the management takes on the role of moderating this process, making it visible and keeping it flowing.

An example: If a company offers a reality check, such as a workshop tour or a career exploration game, then the management is not only with the company itself. The network ensures that the school is prepared, that follow-up work is organised and that other companies also learn from the experience. In this case, leadership means **creating framework conditions** in which different actors work hand in hand – without anyone having the feeling that they are just "suppliers".



Principles and approaches to network management

Effective network governance is built on four central principles (McGuire & Sylvia, 2009; Carter & DeChurch, 2012):

1. **Activation** – Motivate members to contribute their ideas and take responsibility.

Example: A teacher develops a project for a company with her students. The network management provides support by establishing contact and removing organizational hurdles.

2. **Framing** – goals, rules of the game and expectations are clearly communicated.

Example: At the beginning of a school year, it is jointly determined that three reality checks will take place. Everyone involved knows who is contributing what and which dates are fixed.

3. **Synthesis** – bringing together different competencies and resources.

Example: The strengths of the schools (pedagogical preparation), the companies (practical insights) and the chambers (overview of job profiles) are combined to form a coherent overall offer.

4. **Mobilization** – create resources to actually implement activities.

Example: A company provides rooms, a school takes over the organization of transport, and the network is looking for sponsors for accompanying materials at the same time.

In all these steps, the management takes on the role of a **moderator**: it holds the strings together, ensures that no one is forgotten, and in case of doubt, also brings conflicts openly to the table. Leadership here does not mean making decisions on your own, but **rather providing frameworks**,

Guidelines for establishing and leading regional networks Schools & Companies

promoting dialogue and making a common line visible (Saz-Carranza & Ospina, 2011).

Success factors for network management

For networks to function sustainably, some success factors are particularly important (Daly, 2010; Chapman et al., 2010; Díaz-Gibson & Civiš, 2011):

- **Regular communication:** Networks thrive on exchange. Whether monthly meetings, digital platforms or short phone calls – continuous discussion spaces are needed. A successful example is "Jour Fixe" appointments, where schools and companies informally share experiences, e.g. on the question: *"What worked particularly well in our last reality check?"*
- **Decentralised structures:** A strong network distributes responsibility. Working groups, for example on topics such as "Digital Tools" or "Inclusion in Reality Checks", make it possible for several members to drive forward priorities in parallel. This relieves the management, and everyone feels involved.
- **Transparent decision-making processes:** Who decides what? Clear rules prevent misunderstandings. A consensus principle on important issues – such as the selection of the next reality check formats – creates commitment and trust.
- **Trust and appreciation:** Without trust, every network remains a loose collection. Trust is built through openness, by taking concerns seriously and through a culture in which mistakes are seen as learning opportunities. An example: If a reality check does not run smoothly organizationally, this is not a reason to apportion blame, but to reflect together: *"How can we do better next time?"*
- **Evaluation and quality assurance:** Annual reports, feedback rounds or short online surveys of pupils and companies help to make

successes visible and identify weaknesses. In this way, quality is not left to chance, but systematically developed (Victorian Department of Education, 2025).

- **Sustainability:** A central issue is the question: *What happens after the end of the project?* Sustainable networks secure themselves at an early stage through alternative financing models – be it through regional funding, sponsors or institutional anchoring (Normann, 2012).



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Documentation and transparency

A central aspect of network management concerns the **question of documentation**. Especially in international and regionally different contexts, it is neither sensible nor expedient to make uniform specifications as to what reports or minutes should look like. Experience shows that the **culture of the country, the region and the institutions involved** plays a decisive role. While some partners rely on highly formalized documents with signature lists, others prefer short, informal minutes or digital summaries.

The Reality Check *network manual* therefore deliberately focuses on **flexibility**. The aim is not to standardise all forms of documentation, but to ensure transparency, traceability and trust – in a form that is practicable for the members. This prevents formal hurdles from overshadowing the actual purpose: cooperation and exchange between school and the world of work.

Scientific studies confirm that **overly rigid structures in networks can be counterproductive** because they do not sufficiently take into account the cultural and organizational context of the members (Chapman, Earl & Katz, 2010; Daly, 2010). The decisive factor is not how a protocol is designed or how many pages a report contains, but that the results are documented in an accessible, understandable and trustworthy way for all parties involved.

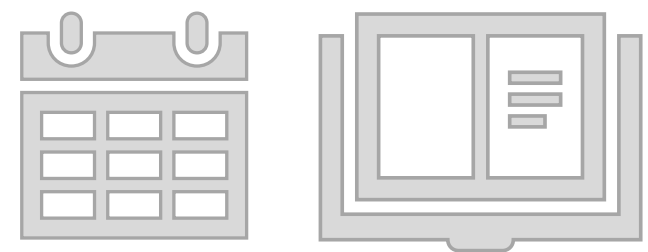
Equally important is the **protection of privacy**. Networks only work if there is trust – and trust also arises from the careful handling of sensitive information. This means: **no publication of unnecessary data**, no long lists of signatures or personal details that could fuel mistrust. Instead, the principle applies: **as simple as possible, as transparent as necessary**.

This is also in line with scientifically sound findings: trust is considered "social capital" in networks and is an essential prerequisite for sustainable

cooperation (Díaz-Gibson & Civís, 2011; Daly, 2010). An open but not over-regulated documentation practice creates the space for trust and enables members to work productively together despite different cultures and expectations.

Example:

In one region, it is sufficient for a meeting to be recorded with bullet points and decisions; in another region, decisions are formally signed. Both variants are legitimate – the decisive factor is that results are clear and that all members have access to them.



Dos and Don'ts of Network Management

Dos



Strengthening participatory leadership – involving all members in decision-making processes
(Carter & DeChurch, 2012).

Establish clear communication structures – regular meetings, digital tools, protocols
(McGuire & Sylvia, 2009).

Actively involve stakeholders – from schools to companies to parents' associations
(Chapman et al., 2010).

Securing Resources and Sustainability – Developing Financing and Sponsors
(Normann, 2012).

Implementing Quality Assurance – Feedback Loops and Reports
(Díaz-Gibson & Civiés, 2011).

Promoting trust – open, appreciative communication
(Daly, 2010).



Don'ts

Hierarchical control – decisions made by individuals block motivation
(Saz-Carranza & Ospina, 2011).

Unclear goals and roles – leads to inefficiency and frustration
(Daly, 2010).

Lack of transparency – weakens acceptance and credibility
(Victorian Department of Education, 2025).

Neglect of evaluation – progress remains invisible
(Chapman et al., 2010).

Underestimating resource requirements – endangers the continued existence of the network
(Normann, 2012).

Practical tips for implementation

Schedule and planning

A network gains stability when it has a **clear rhythm** :

- Start with a **kick-off meeting** in which goals, roles and rules of the game are discussed.
- **2 to 3 meetings per year**, which are not only formal, but also leave room for exchange and small success stories (McGuire & Sylvia, 2009).
- **Mid-term evaluations** that make strengths and potential for improvement visible.
- **Final conferences** where results are presented, experiences are shared and new partners are gained.

Example: A network starts with a kick-off in the fall, organizes the first reality check in the spring, conducts a reflection round in the summer and presents results in a public event in the fall.

Invitation and commitment

The acquisition of new members is crucial for the dynamic. Networks are successful when they use a **structured invitation system** :

- Personal approach by already active members.
- Digital invitations with a clear description of the role and added value.
- Documentation of feedback to ensure transparency (Victorian Department of Education, 2025).

An example: A company is invited, not only because it offers apprenticeships, but because it has developed innovative internships for students. The argument is: *"You can make your commitment visible and at the same time get feedback from young people."*

Conflict

Where many different actors come together, conflicts arise – that's normal. The decisive factor is how you deal with it:

- **Prevention:** Clear rules of the game, regular communication and participatory decision-making processes prevent escalations.
- **Moderation:** The network management acts as a moderator and ensures that conflicts are discussed objectively. If necessary, external mediation is used (Saz-Carranza & Ospina, 2011).
- **Learning potential:** Conflicts can enable growth. If, for example, a school and a company have different expectations for the duration of a reality check, a joint compromise process can lead to a new, better solution in the end (Chapman et al., 2010).

Evaluation cycles

Evaluation must not only take place at the end, but should accompany the entire process:

- **Member surveys** after each major step.
- **Peer reviews:** Networks compare their approaches and learn from each other.
- **External evaluations:** Independent feedback ensures quality and credibility (Professional Learning in Global Networks, 2023).

Guidelines for establishing and leading regional networks Schools & Companies

Combining theory and practice

The scientific basis shows: successful network management is **participatory, dialogue-oriented and sustainable**. For *Reality Check*, this means that networks are not only created by their structure (Part 1), but only unfold their effect through **intelligent, trusting and transparent leadership**.

When schools, companies and other partners take joint responsibility, when communication remains alive and when evaluation and sustainability are taken into account at an early stage – then the reality check networks become **engines for innovation, the joy of learning and real career orientation**.

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