

## THE CHALLENGE

A major, tradition-rich European company found itself badly out-flanked by more agile and innovative contenders. Instead of profiting from its continent-wide reach and large employee base, executives from different units found themselves held back by cumbersome inter-unit communications and slow decision-making. More and more, senior executives were losing opportunities to faster-moving organizations that did not have to navigate through a Byzantine power structure.

At the time, the organization still ran on an autocratic model, in which the top executives made their decisions and measured their results against a central plan. This can be a workable model for a very centralized company, but not for a European enterprise made up of multiple country units and dispersed work-groups. Executives realized that success demanded a more collaborative culture built on a dispersed, cross-functional, unit-spanning network that encouraged employee creativity at all levels, where authority is earned not by hoarding contacts and expertise but through sharing.

To rewire the company in a way that would enable it to meet this still very common 21st century challenge, we designed an executive leadership program for 600 country leaders from the country organizations and several headquarters functions.

## THE APPROACH

We brought these leaders together in 25 sessions over eight months. The hands-on sessions were designed in an experiential way, so that participants personally saw and felt the benefits of the practice of collaboration even as they learned the theory. Much more than a conventional executive education module, our practical teaching-by-doing workshops encouraged collective cross-unit cooperation and problem-solving.

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

The program kicked off with a two-day session held in three different locations in each region. Executives were taught first about what scholars now know regarding the nature of cross-organizational collaboration based on the latest insights of researchers at INSEAD, Harvard University, the Wharton School, the University of California at Berkeley, and the Stanford Business School.

This overview gave executives a common foundation for thinking about what collaboration means and what it does not mean, along with tips about how to begin building trust between units.

Each of the three iterations of the workshop followed the same agenda. We began with a trust-building exercise in which participants split into small groups to tell each other their life stories. We encouraged them to share both their most positive experiences and their most challenging moments. Our aim was to demonstrate what researchers have long known: that sharing personal details exposes vulnerabilities and indirectly helps foster the kind of trusting environment where collaboration is possible.

Next, we focused on the concept of T-shaped leadership, the kind of leadership practiced by leaders who are good at managing their own organization (the vertical bar) while still collaborating across disciplines (the horizontal bar).

To understand how they might apply this concept to their own situation, participants filled out FIRO-B (Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior) assessments. A useful psychometric tool based on personality studies conducted at the US Naval Research Labs, the FIRO-B helps to clarify how an individual relates to a group, knowledge that usually takes a long time to acquire if it is not collected in a structured way. FIRO-B speeds up executives' insights about the best way to interact with individual team members by giving them answers to such important questions as how inclusive are you and how much do you like to be included? How much structure or influence do you like to have and how much do you tolerate? How much affection do you like to give and how much do you like to receive?

"I think the FIRO-B is a powerful tool because it helps you understand the emotional disconnections that stop people from collaborating, such as wanting to receive a lot of affection but not being able to give it, or wanting complete power but being unwilling to be held accountable," says Susanne May, CEO of MayCoach & Co. "All three groups saw important lessons that they could use to change their own team's approach to dealing with other business units."

## TEARING DOWN THE FOUR-STORY WALL

Next, participants learned about four barriers that often block collaboration in an organization:

# 1

### NOT INVENTED HERE SYNDROME

A tendency to reject any idea that doesn't arise within the home unit.

# 2

### HOARDING

Keeping information held within a particular team, either for motives of defense, power, or competition.

# 3

### LACK OF TESTED KNOWLEDGE

Companies often lack a shared framework of common concepts across the organization, making it difficult to transfer lessons learned by one part of the company to another.

# 4

### UNIDENTIFIED EXPERTS

Unimaginative companies often lack the mechanisms they need to identify the people most knowledgeable about a given issue. Executives at such companies often lament, half-seriously, 'if only we knew what we know!'

After dividing into smaller circles, leaders identified situations in their company that fit into one of these four buckets. Next, to make it easier to find experts, attendees were introduced to a simple internal collaboration tool that detailed the expertise of the 600 attendees in a searchable database.

Finally, participants applied all they had learned in the first workshops to undertake a complete bottom-up analysis of the biggest obstacles to collaboration. Once each group identified the barriers on four flip-charts, they noted how and where they saw each of these barriers and rated the relative strength of each obstacle. They came up with not just a new set of behaviors to encourage more collaboration, but a blueprint for specific future change actions – and through this collaborative act, built a commitment among themselves, the company's senior leadership, to turn the company into a single enterprise in fact as well as aspiration.

## THE IMPACT

In the end, participants told us that the program had a significant impact on their company's culture, leadership, and strategy.

**Culture:** The program helped building greater trust and openness among senior leaders across the enterprise. Many executives told us we taught them how to be less defensive, and gave them a shared understanding about the nature of collaboration and a common language for discussing it.

**Leadership:** Participants said they became more aware of how their own leadership style affected the ability of their unit to collaborate. They also looked forward to testing the variety of tools they had learned to meet their own internal and cross-unit collaboration challenges, and were optimistic about having a common action plan to help them begin making a company-wide change.

**Strategy:** Ultimately, however, perhaps the most profound impact of the workshop was a deeper understanding of the crucial role that culture can play in creating a more customer-focused, profit-oriented, strategically-driven company.

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**MayCoach & Company** is a globally operating consulting firm in the field of leadership development, cultural renewal, global coaching solutions and assessments with over 150 professionals in 42 countries and offices in Berlin (Germany) and Singapore. For further information, please visit our website [www.maycoach.com](http://www.maycoach.com) or contact us at [info@maycoach.com](mailto:info@maycoach.com).

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