

Radical reorganization: an interview with DCMN's Thomas Greiderer

Carys Morley

Carys Morley is an Independent Writer based in the UK.

DCMN, a rapidly expanding international growth marketing company, was faced with a dilemma while enjoying the success of its expansion: How does a larger business maintain its unique company culture? How could it ensure continued growth alongside future-proofing its culture? In the face of increasingly convoluted processes, how does a company remain flexible and client-centric? The company's response was radical, in 2018, DCMN removed top-down management and granted full autonomy to self-managed teams.

This drastic restructure, named "beta," removed all hierarchies from the business. Employees are given unlimited holidays, allowed flexible working, and given full control over their teams' budgets. In the absence of team leads, teams make executive decisions such as hiring new staff collaboratively. Through this, DCMN has maintained its fundamental company culture and distributed the increased responsibilities (that come with a quickly growing company) evenly between employees. Thomas Greiderer, Strategic Lead at DCMN, UK, provides some insights into the logistics of this innovative and exciting working environment.

What motivated the radical organizational restructure?

The main reason for the restructure was our phenomenal growth. Over the past four years, DCMN has grown from 20 to more than 200 staff. It ranked as the fifth fastest-growing advertising company in Europe in last year's FT 1000 from the *Financial Times*. This growth inevitably came with increasingly complicated internal processes, more hierarchies, and less flexibility in the company structure. Founders Andreas Dengler and Matthias Riedl introduced the new structure, known as beta, which is a new way of running the business, with self-organized and autonomous teams. It makes the company more agile and allows us to serve our clients better. The structure also helps DCMN continue to grow without compromising on our unique company culture, which is one of the most important factors in our success.

How did employees react to the change? Some people feel more comfortable being led – How did they manage the restructure?

How people react largely depends on the way they like to work. In general, we saw that those who flourish when they have a lot of independence embraced the change right from

the beginning. There were some people who were more concerned about the changes and questioned whether it was the right thing for moving the company forward. Often, those with reservations about the change were people who had been with the company for a long time and were used to being managers or team leads. At the same time, we have found that sometimes more junior staff might like being managed and prefer a structure where they execute tasks as defined by a manager.

Generally, we are trained in society to work in a hierarchical working environment. We are taught that our career path looks something like this: leave university, become a junior, progress to senior, and then maybe one day move up to lead your own team. When the organizational structure is completely flat, some people might feel lost and may start to question their own career progression. Of course, this is quite a challenge at first and it means that the structure will not work for everyone. However, beta also creates new opportunities. Many of the former team leads have now moved into other areas of the business or taken on new challenges. Beta allows employees with all different levels of experience to reinvent themselves and carve out a niche that works for both them and the business. All that is required is an innovation-hungry, growth-led mindset.

You describe your company culture as “unique.” could you elaborate on that? How would you describe the DCMN culture?

This can be difficult to describe if you have not experienced it firsthand. Even before beta, everyone worked quite autonomously. That really influences the culture because when people are given a lot of responsibility, they are willing to put in the extra effort. They do not see it as a nine-to-five workplace. They are really connected, engaged, and ultimately very proud of what they do. Whether in a client pitch or at a social event, the passion everyone has is very obvious. At the same time, the founders really care about creating a great environment for their staff. This approach at the top trickles down to everyone working at DCMN.

How do you think removing hierarchies affects employee performance?

Again, there are two sides to the coin here. We have found that many people embrace the lack of hierarchies and really thrive in this environment. For example, there are many team members who have jumped at the chance to take on even more responsibilities and have really benefited from not having a team lead above them. They have taken beta as an opportunity and looked for ways in which they can add value to the organization while pursuing their own career goals. Essentially, the structure brings out the natural leaders and allows them to thrive. Of course, you also have those who like to be led. They do a great job when given a task, but they do not like working autonomously. So, an employee's performance in beta really depends on their working style – we accept that this kind of structure does not work for everyone and it is an ongoing process to get it right. But for the people who rise to the challenge of beta, it is a great environment to work in.

How does it affect them personally?

The great thing about the beta structure is that it allows staff at all levels to develop a new skill set that usually only comes with being a team lead. This includes leadership and strategic skills, as well as entrepreneurial skills. In the UK office, the whole team is basically in charge of running a business and has recently worked collaboratively to build a business plan and overarching strategy. Everyone on the client team was involved, from those working in media buying to the business-development staff. In a normal alpha company, such roles would only ever work toward servicing clients, without the strategic focus. Again, it comes back to the people because beta is not right for everyone, but for the people who

want to accept the beta challenge, it is a great environment to grow both professionally and personally.

What about customers? How does this structure change customer interaction and impact customer satisfaction?

As a transparent and data-driven company, we run regular surveys to measure client satisfaction. These have shown that client satisfaction has increased since beta was introduced, with our August 2018 survey revealing a mean score of 4.08 stars out of 5 for overall satisfaction, up from 3.93 in April. We also find that many clients are interested in how we work and are curious to learn more about beta.

Within our UK team, what we see is that decisions can be made quickly, and we can react much faster to client requests. Our way of working is more flexible and responsive. We have a strong team of leaders and industry specialists who are capable of making decisions on their own without having to go back to a manager and get approvals. Of course, they need to check important strategic decisions with the team, but in general they are senior enough to make operational decisions that the team can then stand behind.

Where a team lead would usually make important decisions such as hiring new members, your teams make these decisions within the team unit. What happens if there are disagreements within a team? Does this lead to longer deliberation periods?

At the end of the day, most of our strategic decision-making is now team-based and quite democratic. However, this does not mean that we override those who feel strongly about a particular topic. If someone is really unhappy with a certain hire, then the team listens to them and takes their concerns seriously. This means that we do often have engaged and long discussions, but this is important to ensure that everyone is involved and on board with the final decision. So, the process might take longer, but the rewards are greater.

The amount of freedom given to your teams obviously requires a lot of trust. How do you manage this?

Building trust is about being open and transparent. You have to be direct when needed, which means both offering praise when warranted and being willing to speak up when something is not right. We have discovered the importance of having a solid feedback process established, where people are not scared to give or receive feedback. For example, we recently organized feedback workshops for our UK team so that they could learn how to deliver feedback in the most constructive way. Importantly, we also encourage and embrace failure, and we do not play the blame game. Our teams feel supported and have plenty of opportunities to learn without the fear of consequences if things do not quite go to plan.

How is conflict managed in the absence of managers?

In the UK, we have a feedback buddy system that allows us to catch conflict as it arises. The system pairs two employees together – ideally one long-term employee and a new arrival – to provide regular feedback on both parties' performances. If conflict occurs, the feedback buddy would step in to help sort things out. In rare but more serious cases, we have our people team, or HR department, which is very supportive. And we have elected two global "trust people" across the organization, one of whom sits in the London office. These trust people are trained in handling sensitive topics and must treat the matter as confidential, unless the employee says otherwise.

How are you measuring the success of the beta program and what kind of results are you seeing so far?

So far, we are quite satisfied with the results we are seeing. One important measure of success for us is employee satisfaction. Such a high level of autonomy at work also creates an engaged and motivated workforce. Our quarterly team surveys show that more than 90 per cent of staff are likely to refer a friend or family member to work at DCMN. We are also seeing more anecdotal success stories, for example, new teams forming, such as our “innovation force,” which spearheads new product development. This is a great example of staff stepping up to test the possibilities of beta with out-of-the-box ideas that would not be possible in an alpha world.

About Thomas



Thomas Greiderer is Multi-Channel Marketing and Digital Business Specialist with more than 10 years' experience in client services, international growth strategies, and team leadership. He joined DCMN as Account Director in 2016 and was responsible for building a high-performing team of international account managers to oversee the company's rapidly growing client portfolio. Since 2018, Thomas has been based at the DCMN UK office, spearheading the strategic direction and kicking off client services for the fast-growing office. He has previously worked on both the client and agency sides, including as head of marketing at language learning app busuu.com and Head of social media and e-mail operations at daily deal website KGB Deals.

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