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## The High-Performing SAM Series

# THE SAM AS A TEAM BUILDER: FOSTERING ALIGNMENT ACROSS BOUNDARIES

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Strategic account managers are the orchestrators of multifaceted relationships across supplier and customer organizations. These relationships are typically multilevel and multifunctional in nature, and thus require the coordination and alignment of teams to create value and deliver complex solutions to strategic accounts.

In this article — the second in the series focused on core dimensions of high-performing strategic account managers — I address how strategic account managers (SAMs) can best build account teams and align complex processes across the supplier and customer boundaries.

### The nature of teams in strategic account management

Following a major redesign of DHL's relationship with one of its strategic accounts (SAs), Airbus, DHL received the "Best in Class Partner" award for their excellence in being the aircraft manufacturer's logistics partner.<sup>1</sup> When accepting the award, Marja-Liisa Turtiainen, Vice President of Engineering & Manufacturing, Aviation & Aerospace at DHL Customer Solutions and Innovation, said, "It's an honor to be recognized as best performer. Only market-leading *teamwork* makes it possible to deliver these performance levels."

Award-winning, high performance in multifaceted relationships can only be delivered by a strong account team that brings together commercial, technical, and relational capabilities in a customer-centric fashion.

Underpinning the award was DHL's approach to optimizing logistics flows, increasing end-to-end supply chain visibility, reducing logistics spend, and, overall, achieving higher levels of operational excellence, transparency, communication, and innovation. None of these customer outcomes could be realized by high-performing individuals but required high-performing teams.



Jon R. Katzenbach<sup>2</sup> describes a high-performing team as a “small number of people with complementary skills who are equally committed and hold themselves mutually accountable for a common purpose, goals and working approach.” Strategic account managers are at the heart of creating such teams in key customer relationships.

First, SAMs help distill non-trivial customer insights into common relationship goals with well-defined performance measures. As I referred to in the previous article<sup>3</sup> of this series, the SAM synthesizes key dimensions of the customer’s strategy and connects these to the suppliers’ approach to create value for the customer, and even beyond, for the customer’s consumer. One of the SAMs for Barry Callebaut, the world’s leading manufacturer of high-quality chocolate and cocoa products, assembled a key account team who, using consumer insights, new ingredients, and a streamlined supply chain operation, launched winning new products and campaigns with Mr. Cheney, the specialist American-style cookie manufacturer based in São Paulo.

Second, in order to build effective strategic customer teams, SAMs devote a significant amount of energy and time to bring about commitment and a sense of accountability in their account teams. Very often, SAMs do not have formal authority over the individuals that are part of the SA team. Thus, they have to engage informal influencing techniques; they need to create impact without authority. Allan Cohen and David Bradford<sup>4</sup> advocate for the use of alliances, reciprocity, and exchange to help individuals meet their objectives within organizations.

Third, effective teams consist of a small number of people. When executives ask me “What does small look like in SAM teams?” I often refer to the classic rule of the magical number seven plus/minus two that cognitive psychologist George Miller created. He argued that the number of objects an average human can hold in short-term memory is  $7 \pm 2$ . Ideally, a SAM team would comprise this number of members in order to ensure an appropriate span of control as well as coordination.

Fourth and final, complementary skills and multifunctional expertise need to be carefully assembled to provide a complete solution to the customer. The skills required transcend any single individual’s area of knowledge, thus requiring the engagement of teams. For example, Onyx Insight, an award-winning global renewable technology business, brings together sensing, analytics, and engineering expertise to enhance the performance of wind turbines. The SAM for a key customer, such as General Electric, involves a small number of individuals with complementary skills and expertise to create an innovative solution for a key customer.

### Why teams matter in strategic account management

Traditionally, strategic account management has put emphasis on the performance of individual SAMs, and I argue that it is the ability to assemble a high-performing team that increasingly complex customer relationships require. Teams are needed in strategic account relationships for at least three reasons: complexity, collaboration, and continuity.

**Complexity:** It is largely accepted that customer relationships in business markets have become more nuanced and complex, and that buying organizations are expecting more from their suppliers, among others, in terms of performance, compliance, and adherence to ethical and sustainable practices. No single individual can develop the requisite variety to excel across all these functional domains. Thus, teams need to be created to address the complexity of customer requirements.

A study of large industrial firms<sup>5</sup> in Europe compared the differences between supplier firms having a team and those not having a team for managing the key customers. The result of this research revealed higher key-account performance in the group adopting



team-based, key-customer management than in the non-team group of companies. Moreover, this work showed that key-customer teams can enhance customer-knowledge acquisition and better enable the dissemination and utilization of knowledge.

**Collaboration:** SAM teams influence collaboration both directly and indirectly. Collaborative relationships benefit partners in at least two ways: first, an increased ability to share resources, expertise, and know-how, and, second, the partners' enhanced level of commitment to the relationship.<sup>6</sup>

Major engineering and solutions companies, like Jacobs in the UK, provide rail infrastructure owners such as Network Rail with advanced solutions to help them plan, develop, finance, design, construct, maintain, and operate smarter transportation infrastructure. The ability to produce increasingly demanding outcomes for asset owners and train operators require a variety of perspectives and areas of expertise. This needs to be supported by the coordination of a cohesive team that can engage a wider group of stakeholders to deliver against the vision and priorities for national transport infrastructure.

**Continuity:** Best-practice companies in SAM, such as Siemens, recognize in their accounting policies for intangible assets the fact that customer relationships can span up to 30 years and beyond. It would be unrealistic to expect that a key account manager would be looking after a customer for three decades. That is why maintaining the institutional know-how and expertise accumulated over such period of time needs a handover process supported by teams. Only SA teams can sustain the lifecycle of value creation throughout such protracted periods of time.

### Creating the conditions to enhance team effectiveness

Unilever is a strategic supplier to the French-headquartered retailer Carrefour. Product managers, supply chain executives, IT specialists, and finance experts, among others, come together, coordinated by an account director. Each team member contributes to the design and execution of campaigns to help this retailer grow sales of Unilever's consumer products in food, home, and personal care categories. But how can an account director effectively orchestrate these disparate resources and areas of expertise? Gregory Huszczo<sup>7</sup> provides a set of practices for achieving team



excellence that can be adapted to the context of strategic account management:

- 1. Clear sense of direction and specific targets.** SAMs will often face multiple demands. Having a clear road map for developing their relationships with their key accounts is essential. Account teams in suppliers like Unilever will craft their account strategy in a way that supports their key customers' ambitions. For instance, on November 8, 2022, Carrefour presented their 2026 strategic plan, stating as a key priority the requirement for the group's top 100 suppliers to adopt a 1.5°C trajectory by 2026. This provides clear guidance to work together toward the achievement of a specific environmental target: limiting the effects of climate change.
- 2. Appropriate talent.** Orchestrating various areas of expertise and capabilities, aligning individuals with different backgrounds in the direction mentioned above, is essential. Typically, different functional experts from Carrefour's logistics, finance, IT, and procurement departments will work with their counterparts who perform those functions at Unilever.
- 3. Clear roles and responsibilities.** In order to facilitate the performance of the SA team, individuals must have clarity in terms of the scope of the work they are expected to deliver. When clarity of expectations is balanced and blended with the needed flexibility to cater to the changes occurring in the environment, account teams perform at their best.
- 4. Efficient procedures.** Large organizations can become bureaucratic, and the need for agility, and responsiveness to deliver against customer requirements suggests the importance of reviewing the procedures that teams adopt

to ensure they are externally focused, not just internally oriented.

**5. Positive interpersonal relationships.** Although conflict is ubiquitous and the ability to handle conflict is a key skill of SAMs, constructive personal relationships are often associated with higher levels of performance.

**6. Active reinforcement.** Systems that promote continuous learning, collegiality, and alignment are part of the ingredients of the recipe for high performance in teams. Many key-account and internal-team relationships are sustained through solid social and personal bonds between the buyer and supplier staff.<sup>6</sup>

Teams are live entities that go through different phases of development. This suggests that strategic account managers need to continuously review the membership, skill sets, and practices of their account teams.

Meredith Belbin, the creator of “team roles” theory, said that “Nobody is perfect — but a team can be.” I hope this article will help you, as a strategic account manager, to build perfect teams and, in doing so, to become a bit more “perfect.” ■

<sup>1</sup><https://www.dpdhl.com/en/media-relations/press-releases/2016/airbus-honors-dhl-best-performer-award.html>

<sup>2</sup>Katzenbach, J., & Douglas, K. (2015). *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*. Harvard Business Review Press.

<sup>3</sup>Marcos, J. (2022). The SAM as a strategist: Defining the approach to transform your key customer's business. *Velocity*, 24(3).

<sup>4</sup>Cohen, A. R., & Bradford, D. L. (1989). Influence without authority: The use of alliances, reciprocity, and exchange to accomplish work. *Organizational Dynamics*, 17(3), 5–17.

<sup>5</sup>Salojärvi, H., & Saarenketo, S. (2013). The effect of teams on customer knowledge processing, esprit de corps and account performance in international key account management. *European Journal of Marketing*, 47(5/6), 987–1005.

<sup>6</sup>Arnett, D. B., Macy, B. A., & Wilcox, J. B. (2005). The role of core selling teams in supplier-buyer relationships. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 25(1), 27–42.

<sup>7</sup>Huszczo, G. (2010). *Tools for Team Excellence: Getting Your Team into High Gear and Keeping It There*. Davies-Black Publishing.

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