

## CASE STUDY – STRATEGIC PARTNERING

*“It all started with a cup of tea in a hotel in Newmarket”*

Consultancy is about a number of things:

- △ Training provision
- △ Business interventions
- △ Specialist resource and advice
- △ Strategic partnering

This is a case study concerning the relationship between Agrovista and Obsidian Consulting that developed through all of these stages.



Agrovista UK was formed on 1st January 2001 following the merger of the Profarma Ltd and Crop Care Group of companies, to provide specialist agronomy and crop protection products to British agriculture. The business is part of Agrovista BV, a leading European organisation in the field, itself part of the international Marubeni Corporation. This makes Agrovista UK a significant UK supplier of crop protection inputs and advice, with around 20% of the crop protection market.

Agrovista currently have 100 agronomists in the field and the company has developed its business year by year and now has an annual turnover in excess of £100m with a profit of almost £4m. This has been achieved by a combination of increased sales, careful cost control, good management and competent and committed employees. This has been supported by a heavy investment programme in logistics, IT and staff training.

Obsidian Consulting is a medium sized business consultancy, with an experienced team of consultants based in Newport near Cambridge. We specialise in business strategy and process, team development and individual development.

At the time of the Agrovista merger Obsidian was supplying support to Crop Care in the form of sales training for their team of Agronomists. Following the merger David Downing, the consultant supplying the services arranged to meet with James Robertson who was to become the Managing Director of Agrovista. They agreed to meet in a hotel in Newmarket “over a cup of tea and a sandwich” to discuss the situation.

Ultimately it was agreed that Obsidian would share the provision of training with another provider for a period of one year when James Robertson would then decide which company to use as their main provider. The rest, as they say, is history. Obsidian was chosen to be the preferred provider and went on to provide much more than training.

One of the key factors in the development of the relationship was the common values shared by the two organisations. The development of skills and capability in all employees was seen as a vital ingredient in the development of the Agrovista business by James Robertson and his management team.

Obsidian also believes that individual and team development is necessary to support organisational development. Many of their consultants have worked in organisations to achieve this and much of their current work is providing this support to a wide range of clients.

The initial work concerned skills training particularly for the agronomists who interface with farmers to recommend and sell products that would help them to achieve improved crop results.

This led to recommendations for the structure of people in the business, which led to development work for Team Sales Managers whose job was to coordinate the activity of regional teams.

As trust was established between the two organisations more advice was sought and given on a range of issues that led to development work for the business and its people.

Views were taken from customers and all Agrovista staff through the use of surveys. The results of these were taken into consideration when considering the strategy for the business.

As Agrovista's business grew through acquisitions and organic growth with new departments it became necessary to integrate new people into Agrovista's policies, procedures, values and culture and align individual skills. Obsidian contributed to this alignment through training and coaching.

Development does not stop and future activity concerns the changes that Agrovista may face in the future. Succession planning needs to be considered and a reappraisal of the approach to changing market conditions needs to be undertaken as the market for agricultural products is changing dramatically and Agrovista needs to respond accordingly.

#### **Work undertaken for Agrovista by Obsidian**

- △ *Commercial skills for trainees*
- △ *Presentation skills*
- △ *Account management*
- △ *Negotiation skills*
- △ *Team working programmes*
- △ *Development of people skills*
- △ *Development of the role of Territory Sales Managers – team and people development*
- △ *Strategy recommendations*
- △ *Employee opinion survey*
- △ *Customer survey*
- △ *Job competencies*
- △ *Performance appraisals training*
- △ *Development centre for high potential staff*
- △ *Reward policy recommendations*
- △ *Personal effectiveness / time management*
- △ *Customer care for distribution staff*
- △ *Team programmes*
- △ *Business scenario planning*
- △ *Assessment of Marketing strategy/ operation and recommendations*
- △ *Business scenario planning*
- △ *Partner support (for Agrovista customers) including customer care / MD support / appraisal skills for managers*
- △ *One-to-one coaching support for selected staff*
- △ *360° feedback for senior management team*

There is no doubt that Agrovista is a successful company and the investment in developing people is an important part of this success. Obsidian would not claim to have produced the results but there is equally no doubt that they have contributed to it through raising the capability of the people they have worked with. Another factor is the effect on the morale of people when they feel they have their value enhanced by the development of skills. As David Downing says *“people who feel good about themselves produce improved results and people who achieve good results feel better about themselves and the organisation they work for”*.



David Downing's view of the relationship is very clear. *“The key to success is the fact that James Robertson is the key driver. He has an absolute belief as well as a close personal interest in supporting and developing every one of his people. The relationship is built on trust and confidence that we will deliver what is required. James and I meet regularly to discuss and decide what needs to be done. Clearly all that is done has to be driven by and aligned to the commercial needs of the company. We share an aim to provide a robust plan for the business and the people in it. James is supported by a very capable*

*management team. They are not afraid to challenge and discuss the issues; but at the end of day they accept their responsibility to do what is agreed.”*



When asked to comment on the relationship between the two organisations James Robertson said *“It is a complete relationship, Obsidian have their finger on our pulse. It is not only about courses and projects; it is about a shared vision of the future direction of the business. Obsidian are an integral part of how we do things”*