

LEADING A SET OF GEOGRAPHICALLY DISPARATE COMPANIES AS ONE INTEGRATED BUSINESS UNIT

eBay Classifieds Group is an innovative leader in online classifieds, comprising many brands that span the globe. eBay has grown its online Classifieds business mainly through acquisition and growth over a period of 10 years. Over the past three years, they have focused efforts on growing the top-level brand identity of group.

We spoke to Alessandro Coppo, eBay Classifieds Group SVP, to learn more about why cultural alignment was fundamental to meeting his vision of building one integrated business unit and how he formed an effective Leadership Team (LT) to drive through this agenda.

“eBay embarked on a journey on how to lead this division. Part of the journey with Relume was how to lead the division as one integrated business unit, and not as a portfolio of separate companies”.

“I needed each LT Member to turn up to meetings not just wearing their own business hat, representing their own business and geography; but to also turn up wearing a team hat”.



EBAY HAS GROWN ITS CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING BUSINESS VIA ACQUISITION AND NEW BUSINESS LAUNCHES – CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE CURRENT BUSINESS STRUCTURE?

This division of eBay comprises a number of different classified businesses. For example, in UK, one such business is Gumtree, which eBay Classifieds Group acquired in 2005. The division has more than 20 businesses across the world, which are all geographically separate.

eBay were happy for each of these acquired businesses to have a strong degree of autonomy, and for them to be proud of their own brands. However, eBay also needed them to have a joint identity in terms of the eBay brand but also there would be major advantages if we were able to function more as an integrated business unit. Sharing knowledge on how we dealt with challenges and insights about technological innovations.

“If the top leadership is not acting as a team, then it would be difficult to get the rest of the organisation to follow”.

YOU EMBARKED ON A JOURNEY TO LEAD ONE GLOBAL INTEGRATED BUSINESS UNIT. CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THE KEY CHALLENGES YOU FACED ALONG THE WAY?

The main challenge was getting the leaders of these businesses to work as a team. I needed the LT to raise the bar in terms of how they performed as a team; they need to wear both their own business hat but also a team hat.

Before I engaged Relume, I thought that this would be an easy discussion. However, when I did have that discussion, my LT members believed that they were already a strong team and that they did not need to change.

“How do you make an effective team from people who live in different parts of the world and who only get a chance to meet in person a couple of times per quarter?”



At this point, I realised that I needed to put more investment into this, and this is when I brought in Relume to help me tackle the leadership culture; a culture which instilled an agenda of sharing information with each other. If we could get this right at this level, then we would be able to deploy this throughout the whole organisation.

Making this happen was going to be difficult though due to the level of organisational complexity:

- The top leaders lived in different countries
- Five lived in the Netherlands, one in Denmark, one in Germany, one in Canada and two in California
- They only met in person once or twice per quarter

WHY DID YOU SELECT RELUME TO HELP?

One person in the team had already worked with Relume in a previous company and they were very happy with the work that they had done and recommended them to me. I had tried out other consultancies previously, but I had not got the outcome that I was looking for. Our business is so complex, that the pre-packaged solutions of other consultancies simply does not work for us.

The only way that it would work is if they were prepared to gain a deep understanding of the specific issues that needed to be addressed. Relume were able to get very good results and achieve my desired outcomes because, from the start, they invested very highly in understanding the specifics of the issues we faced before designing their interventions.

“Creating the environment and atmosphere in which people reflect, develop self-awareness and are comfortable putting issues on the table”.



HOW DID THEY HELP YOU TO IMPLEMENT THE CHANGE YOU DESIRED?

Relume combined team sessions and workshops with the right level of preparation by speaking one-to-one with the people involved and understanding their individual observations and perspectives before coming to the table.

For example, 2-3 weeks before we were due to have an LT meeting/ workshop, I met with Relume to agree the format. During this period, Relume held one-to-one meetings with each of the LT members to help the team to understand what was going well. They created the conditions for the initial diagnosis of how we operated together to come out of the team itself, which was a great first outcome of the following LT Meeting. In this way we were able to put all the issues on the table and work out how, as a team, we would be able to address some of them.

“Relume were quickly able to gain the trust of the team members - allowing them to get into potentially sensitive discussions in an inspiring way”.

DID YOU REACH YOUR GOAL IN THE END, WITH HELP FROM RELUME?

The interventions were extremely good. The team now works together much more effectively. Relume helped us to identify where there were tensions in the team and what was causing the friction. We had some pretty hard and personal discussions – but Relume created an atmosphere where people did not feel cornered or attacked.



An example of one of these tensions was around different levels of transparency between those who worked in a corporate function for the top-level brand and those who had responsibility for one of the specific businesses. Relume created the opportunity to have a good discussion about this and we all talked about how we could ensure more consistency and transparency. We have already made great progress on this, and this is something that we continue to discuss and track.

By asking everyone to wear a broader hat than his or her day job, it has turned out that everyone loves to contribute more and have more impact. We are running processes in ways to enable people to contribute to the discussion much more than before. For example, we used to have strategy sessions on specific businesses where only the relevant people attended. Now, we have strategy sessions in which everyone attends and listens to the strategies of all the businesses. They can see they have similar problems and advise others on how they overcame these problems in the past. This also facilitates rapid learning about innovations across the business.

I think a real moment of truth that the interventions were working was when the Executive Team members agreed to sharing their businesses resources. Previously they would have kept them close as would have seen the other businesses as competition. Now they consider the business as a whole rather than their own individual companies.

“They helped us to enter complex discussions whilst keeping the atmosphere light and upbeat, where everyone was onboard and felt everything was very constructive”.

“Getting all the LT more involved in strategic discussion with the other businesses helped to connect the dots across the markets”.