Mars in Hungary learns to work, rest and play

In the space of four years the Team Management Profile has helped to transform Mars’ pet-food business in Hungary into one of their top ten operations in the world. Gábor Szabó, plant director, explains how.

In 2007 Mars executive Gábor Szabó was promoted to the role of plant director of Mars’ pet-food business at Csongrád-Bokros in Hungary. Just 40 years old, he’d enjoyed a stellar rise since joining Mars 13 years earlier. A Hungarian national and a mechanical engineer by training, he’d taught at his old university in Budapest before joining Mars in a maintenance role.

His natural leadership style quickly became apparent and Mars set him on the promotion ladder. But his love of teaching and learning never left him. He held jobs in Human Resources and operations and spent two years in England before becoming plant director at Csongrád-Bokros. His experience stood him in good stead for the challenge he faced in his new role.

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He recalls: "My first task was to recruit people to fill those roles, turn them into a functioning team and integrate them into the very distinct Mars culture - which is very different from the prevailing Hungarian culture."

He ended up with two Polish, three British and five Hungarian executives, and spent the next 18 months “fighting the legacy”, as he puts it, and coming up with a vision that would enable an already successful business to become even more successful: to be the best. He implemented a highly effective strategy-deployment tool, and two years after taking over he had an engaged and productive team.

However, this success had come at a cost. "The emphasis had been so tactical and I’d driven people so hard that we were suffering high burnout and turnover levels," he recalls. "I knew that if this business was going to be sustainable we needed to think longer-term and more strategically and establish pillars for growth."

He knew what he had to do. "Our leadership style was command and control, which is consistent with the Hungarian leadership culture, so they accept that. But I wanted to shift our style towards one that was more democratic, coaching and empowering," he explains. To help him and the team make the shift, Gábor enlisted the help of executive and organisational coach Carissa Bub, who had coached him since 2002 when he was based in the UK. The tool she chose to effect the change was the Margerison-McCann Team Management Profile.

"The Team Management Profile was extremely useful, from both a personal and a team point of view," recalls Gábor.

Personally, he benefited from the structured feedback the Team Management Profile provided about his strengths, comfort zone and areas for development. It helped him to identify where he could best add value to his team, what aspects he needed to use more, where he needed to
adjust his approach and, as he puts it, “work out what kind of leader I wanted to be and the positions I might want to target in the future.”

And from a team perspective, seeing where everyone sat on the Team Management Wheel meant the team was able to allocate roles more consciously and effectively. “The exercise revealed that 70% of the team had a more extrovert preference, so we had to work out how to involve the other 30%. We recognised that because they had a more introvert preference, they may need more time or quiet space to think and come up with ideas,” he explains.

“I like the concept of the Wheel and the fact that it shows both major and related roles. It emphasises preferences, but indicates that you can do other things too. It’s not about good or bad. It’s not about labelling people or putting them in boxes.”

However, while he uses the Team Management Profile to cross-check when building a team, “I’m careful not to over-use it because of the very fact that these are preferences, not a definitive guide to what people can and can’t do.” He sometimes uses the definitions from the Team Management Profile in succession planning though “as part of what someone needs to aim for in a development plan, what they should aspire to, where their gaps are and so on.”

Carissa facilitated sessions in which the executive team felt safe to provide honest feedback about how they all related to each other—something, says Gábor, they had previously been afraid to do. “This led to more open, trusting and collaborative relationships.”

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An element of this feedback was directed at him: constantly driving for change and innovation, he was demanding too much of the team. Carissa recalls: “The forum allowed the team to say ‘please stop and allow us to stabilise for a bit before we do any more change’. As a result of that, he consciously adapted his pace-setting leadership style to one that is more facilitative, allowing others to step up.”

Three years after the first round of Team Management Profile workshops, Carissa facilitated another round, because the top team had changed. Mars is in a state of constant flux, with people naturally moving around the business quite quickly, but a reorganisation from a central to a more regional structure speeded up this change. And in 2012 most of the expatriates at Csongrád-Bokros had been replaced with Hungarian nationals.

“I couldn’t work out why people weren’t talking in management meetings,” recalls Gábor. “Were they shy? Didn’t they understand? Were they passengers? Of course. I realised when we did the Team Management Profile again that the balance of the team had completely altered, with most people (70%) now having a more introvert preference and only 30% having a more extrovert preference.”

Understanding the reason for the new team dynamic, Gábor changed the format of team meetings. “We switched from action-oriented meetings to ‘green’ meetings, which are less structured,” he says. “While people with a more introvert preference like to talk and see what comes out, those with a more introvert preference need space to think it through and then act. This new style of meeting has been extremely successful. We do a lot more brainstorming, consciously observe each other and respect the different styles. That really helps our understanding of what’s in people’s minds.”

From the second Team Management Profile exercise Gábor also realised that his own leadership style had shifted. “I used to be a Thruster-Organiser, but now my major role is Assessor-Developer. They’re next to each other on the Team Management Wheel, but I’ve moved from being heavily action-oriented, controlling and directing, towards giving longer-term direction and empowering others to break that down into short-term actions.”

The work he’s done with Carissa over the past ten years has taught him to put his natural leadership style of ‘learn, lead and leverage’ to better effect. “I’ve tried to ensure that I put into practice what I’ve learnt, teach others and use what we’ve collectively learnt to improve the organisation,” he reflects.

There have been tangible benefits. Over the past four years Gallup engagement scores for the management team have risen from an already high 4.3 or 4.4 out of 5 to 4.9 or above. For the factory as a whole engagement scores have risen from 4.1 to nearly 4.7 – the best score of Mars II factories in Europe, and among the top ten of Mars’s 113 factories globally.

Gábor explains: “We’ve shifted from a highly productive but less positive and engaging environment to a highly productive, highly positive and highly engaging environment. Our culture has changed: we used to work in silos, but we’ve been breaking down departmental boundaries, and fostering greater collaboration. We now spend more time celebrating success, having fun, recognising achievement, and everybody’s mood is very different as a result.”

People still work hard, he says, “but they do it because they want to, not because they are told to, and they enjoy the challenge. They feel part of the organisation, that their opinions count, that they have influence, can make decisions and make their views known. They see success as something that the team as a whole achieves, not just management. In the past they described Mars as a good workplace, but now they say it’s like a big family. The difference between engaged employees and satisfied or committed ones is that the engaged employees make discretionary effort.”

Interestingly, what the Team Management Profile has helped Gábor and his top team at Csongrád-Bokros to achieve is entirely consistent with the five Mars principles (see box).

It’s no coincidence that in addition to the $100 million Mars has invested in Hungary over the past 15 years, it is investing a further $16 million in Csongrád-Bokros this year to help it with its ambition to be the best.

“We’re almost there,” says Gábor. “Being recognised as one of the best factories in Mars last year has given us the pride and self-confidence to drive this further.”

Mars has always had stretching internal financial objectives, but growing external competition combined with global recession has meant that the company, in common with so many others, has had to do more with less over recent years.

“We’re harnessing our labour and investment very well in order to sustain our financial competitiveness on the global stage, and the Team Management Profile has helped us do that,” concludes Gábor.

The Five Principles

QUALITY the consumer is our boss, quality is our work and value for money is our goal

RESPONSIBILITY as individuals we demand total responsibility from ourselves, as associates, we support the responsibilities of others

MUTUALITY a mutual benefit is a shared benefit; a shared benefit will endure

EFFICIENCY we use resources to the full, waste nothing and do only what we can do best

FREEDOM we need freedom to shape our future: we need profit to remain free

Further information: www.mars.com | www.tmsdi.com