

# **Learning to work with interdependencies effectively: the case of the HRM forum of the Suppliers Teams at Volvo Cars Gent**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to profile the way that Volvo Cars Gent (VCG) Belgium and its suppliers succeed in managing their interdependencies on HRM issues through a shared HRM collaborative, called the Suppliers Team Volvo Cars HRM forum (STVC-HRM).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The case study approach is used to develop understanding of the critical factors that contribute to the forum's success.

**Findings** – It was found that the critical success factors concern the way STVC-HRM members enacted trust, common ground, leadership, shared responsibility, and representative-constituency dynamics.

**Research limitations/implications** – To understand the Toyota system of successful collaboration and learning with suppliers, it is necessary to look into the actual assembler-suppliers relationships and practices developed.

**Practical implications** – Building lasting manufacturer-supplier relationships is considered to be one of the elements that contribute to Toyota's competitive advantage in supply chain management. However, other organizations struggle to improve manufacturer-suppliers relationships despite applying seemingly similar principles. This paper helps in recognizing and managing the main collaboration issues at hand.

**Originality/value** – Our work informs how to build and maintain deep mutually beneficial manufacturer-suppliers relationships through the VCG-suppliers case. Other organizations that want to develop those much-needed relationships may learn from the successful VCG-suppliers way of doing things.

**Keywords** Supply chain management, manufacturer-suppliers relationships, automotive industry, managing interdependencies, case studies, critical success factors

**Paper type** Case study

## **1. Background**

The automobile industry today is characterized by Customer Ordered Production (COP), meaning that production planning is based upon the wishes of the customer ('pull', build-to-order) instead of the possibilities of the car maker ('push', build-to-stock) (Miemczyk and Howard, 2008). COP created for VCG an explosion of car variants, for which it was both physically and financially impossible to keep all components in stock. Taking the customer as the starting point implied also low cost manufacturing, high quality products, technological complexity, short product life cycles, quick delivery times and small buffers of assets or time lags. This demanded from VCG flexible ordering systems, quicker and more direct communication with suppliers and customers, a flexible attitude, innovativeness, retraction on core business and outsourcing to reliable suppliers (VCG, 2006). Other original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) that

have gone through a similar evolution all experience increased interdependencies with suppliers that have to be managed effectively (Morris *et al.*, 2004).

The automobile industry is one of the more active in developing supply chains and manufacturer-supplier networks (Pérez and Sánchez, 2001). By 1980, the role of supplier relations in the superior quality of Japanese products had been noted all over the world (Womack *et al.*, 1991). It has been widely acknowledged that the competitive advantage of Toyota over its biggest three U.S. competitors (Ford, General Motors and Chrysler) is for a large part the result of Toyota's competence to develop and manage mutually beneficial supplier relationships (Dyer and Hatch, 2004). Inspired by the Japanese model, car manufacturers all over the world have refocused their supply chain activities towards developing closer and more long-term relationships with fewer suppliers (Cousins and Menguc, 2006). However, Toyota's competitors seem as yet unable to duplicate and implement the way that Toyota has been collaborating with its suppliers (Dyer and Hatch, 2004; Wee & Wu, 2009).

Why is it so hard for most organizations to create those much-needed relationships with suppliers? To deal with strengthening interdependencies between assemblers and suppliers (Morris *et al.*, 2004), most Western firms have been reacting with increased formal commitment with suppliers, i.e., commitment enforceable through the legal system, and more management control systems. Mudambi and Helper (1998) showed that this increase in heavy formalized contractual relationships has little value because it has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in informal commitment and mutual trust. Likewise, Liker and Choi (2004, 106, italics added) have proposed that "American companies created supply chains that superficially resembled those of their Japanese competitors, [but] they didn't alter the *fundamental nature* of their relationships with suppliers."

These authors see the key answer to be found in the *unusual way* Toyota and its suppliers develop and manage their relationships in a network form. Learning to work effectively with increased interdependencies requires a new way of non-hierarchical organizing, either to solve existing problems, to take opportunities or to structure new developments (Vansina and Taillieu, 1997). By presenting a case study, we describe how VCG and its suppliers succeed in managing their interdependencies on important HRM issues through a shared HRM collaborative, called STVC-HRM.

VCG is located in the industrial area of the city of Gent (Belgium). The plant was inaugurated in 1965 as the first Volvo plant outside Sweden. Today Volvo, a Fortune Global 500 company, constructs more than 50% of its passenger cars in Belgium. About 4.500 people, working in shifts, assemble about 240.000 cars yearly, consisting of different models: C30, S40, S60, V50 and V70 (VCG, 2008). The different models provide flexibility for the company and stability for the workforce, by making the plant less dependent on the life cycle of a single model.

## **2. STVC-HRM**

STVC-HRM is an outgrowth of the Suppliers Team Volvo Cars (STVC). It is an inter-organizational workgroup between VCG and some 20 suppliers, situated on and off the operational site, all of them linked together by the JIT method of operating. It functions as an information, advice, and coordination taskforce with regard to issues such as recruitment, selection, evaluation, promotion and dismissal, work and vacation planning, wage comparisons, training and quality management, dealing with industrial relations, grievances and strikes, and other interdependencies between the network partners.

Up till about 2000, STVC used a few on site suppliers and regulated the interdependencies by strictly adhering to contracts concerning sequential delivery and quality. Whenever one of the partners failed with regard to delivery or quality, a contractually defined penalty was imposed. There was a system of plant manager meetings on an irregular basis (1-3 times a year). As the JIT system became more prevalent with more suppliers, the VCG management realised that this state of affairs, could hardly be called a partnership. Gradually the plant manager meetings were complemented by a number of coordination workgroups (HRM, Quality, Logistics, Finances and IT).

Our study focuses on the HRM platform because (a) manpower issues affect the whole network, (b) its unique style of working together in a collaborative, and (c) the platform became exemplary in the network and is envied by competitor car makers.

The following elements led the plant managers to install STVC-HRM. The initial platform, which operated with contractual rules, was perceived as insufficient to handle the partnership between VCG and its suppliers. In 1999, the production from a Dutch plant was transferred to Gent. As a consequence, the scale of operations increased and the number of JIT suppliers went from 6 to 14, involving 22 products, components or modules. Around 2000, for the first time since 1965, strikes with the suppliers halted the assembly line at VCG, putting 3.000 people out of work. This dramatically showed the JIT system to be the Achilles heel of the production line.

One of the production line HR managers (the convenor) was assigned to take action and initiated what became STVC-HRM. Reducing the vulnerability of the total network (experienced strongly in the strikes of 2000) and improving joint learning were crucial elements to establish the forum. The convenor invited the HR managers of each of the JIT suppliers. Whenever new suppliers became operative, the HR managers were personally approached, introduced to the site and invited to take part in the network. Very soon all the JIT suppliers became and remained member of the forum.

## **2.1. Activities and identity of STVC-HRM**

Over the years, there was a growing stream of daily bilateral operational information generated between individuals in the network by using telephone, mobiles and e-mails. The collective activities of STVC-HRM which materialized, can be grouped into some categories. Since a couple of years external speakers are invited about pressing issues:

youth employment and training, the Belgian Generation Pact (keeping people longer employed), systems of time-credit, bottle-neck jobs, policy of the governmental employment agency and of the interim employment offices in the region.

A second set of activities concern taking stock of each other's practices and share the learning: e.g., dealing with absenteeism, training of first line supervisors, turnover of personnel, job-fairs. Very often a sub-group is formed of partners willing to explore and discuss these issues. There is no obligation to participate in these special projects.

A third set of activities are project-oriented: an annual overview of wages and benefits among the partners (voluntary participation), a system of price reduction for all workers of the companies, a common protected parking, a joint child care centre, a benchmark of interim employment offices in the network, the job centre for collective recruitment. These project activities are open for everybody, but nobody is obliged or pressured to take part. Developing the projects often involve subgroups with separate meetings, organized and chaired by one of the partners.

As to the common activities, about every six weeks a forum session is planned. The Volvo convenor and all the JIT supplier HR managers attend. There is an annual theme which is followed through and evaluated. For each session there is an agenda and an open 'varia' at the end. Any subject can be brought in. If something is too sensitive, that will be made clear at the table by the participants: "Is this something we should discuss here?" Attendance is and stays high over the years. One of the HR managers told that "the first year I needed permission from my plant manager to attend the forum", now "I have to ask permission not to go to the forum, for example when urgent operational matters need my attention." Attendance is experienced as important because of the "learning harvest", in terms of knowledge, expertise and relationships." The meetings are task-oriented but informal, starting at about 9 am with coffee and cake in the facilities of one of the partners who take turns at hosting the meeting. Either the convenor or the host HR manager chairs the meeting. Quite often the host conducts a visit to the installations, gives a presentation or has invited an external person, related to a particular project or event in his plant (e.g., managing self-steering teams, training on the job, youth employment). At the end of the meeting the acting chairperson proposes some agenda points for the next meeting, and asks who will host the next meeting.

An event which had a critical formative impact on STVC-HRM was the creation of the Automotive Job Centre (AJC), a temporary organization to deal with an acute need to recruit 2.400 people for the whole network. Setting up this initiative to deal with a distributive recruitment task was the first real test for the emerging trust in STVC-HRM.

In 2004, the volume of work increased rapidly at VCG (new models, night shift). It became clear that VCG needed about 1.600 extra persons, and the partners about 800 to follow the pace. Managers at VCG realized that unless the supply network got appropriately staffed in time, the final car assembly would fail to materialise. There was a problem finding suitable employees in the area. Usually large recruitment campaigns draw people from adjacent companies (Harbour, Volvo Trucks, Sidmar Steel). Moreover the suppliers (who on average pay 15% less than VCG) were suspicious that VCG might take their best workers, and asked for guarantees.

After reflection and debate, the forum members agreed to set up a joint AJC, responsible for the recruitment of personnel for the whole network. To avoid the suspicion that VCG would take the best recruits for its own needs, it would be an open book system: each of the partners would specify what profiles they needed for their jobs, and the testing system would then match people according to the requirements of the specific company. VCG assigned almost 2 full time equivalents for a period of 18 months to the project. *Joint work* was done to specify criteria and worker profiles that were realistic for each of the 9 participating companies. About 12.000 persons were tested over a period of 18 months, on a single location. The recruitment and selection staff involved some VCG personnel and two consultants of the VDAB, the employment office of the government. As this was a multiple company operation, the VDAB could legitimately join in to set up a job fair, and to supply personnel. After the recruitment phase, some subsidies for training on the job were obtained as well.

The project was a boost for confidence and trust in the supplier's network. It strengthened the identity of STVC-HRM in the national automotive world and the forum gained visibility in the whole country. Through the joint AJC activities the suppliers experienced real co-authorship and joint psychological ownership (Pierce and Jussila, 2009) of the project content, process and outcomes: "We have made AJC together, it is OURS." We witnessed 'asymmetric giving' (Browning *et al.*, 1995) by VCG, in terms of sharing resources and expertise, as *trigger* to get the relationship going, reciprocated by more symmetrical behaviour between the partners, each contributing to the task at hand, leading to strong feelings of interdependency and shared fate.

The partner companies could verify that candidates were properly tested and matched; they had real time overview of what happened. The testing system provided a quality which few could have afforded by themselves. The collaborative task force could handle peaks of personnel influx ranging from 10 to 200 a week. The potential workers were given choices and possibilities in companies they otherwise would not be aware of.

## **2.2. Critical success factors**

In this section we focus on the critical success factors of STVC-HRM. They concern the way STVC-HRM members enacted trust, common ground, leadership, shared responsibility, and representative-constituency dynamics.

### **2.2.1. Developing trust and common ground: Respectful and authentic engagement**

In the perception of several STVC-HRM members, the joint project of the AJC generated a dividend in trust which made it possible "to openly deal with other difficult personnel issues". Remember that they succeeded in agreeing upon a number of rules which regulated the essentially distributive nature of the recruitment task at hand.

As observed by Browning *et al.* (1995, p. 128) in the case of Sematech, the US semiconductor cooperation, the joint activity turned the forum into a "moral community"

(see also Sabel, 1993, p. 1135) in which interdependence, as motive for cooperation, became more evident, and led to a willingness to attend to the well-being of all the members. Important factors are (a) inclusiveness: nobody is excluded, structuring relationships as peer relationships makes them cooperative, (b) transparency: a common agenda allows each member to participate and redirect activities, (c) asymmetric giving as trigger and reciprocity: induces everybody to make its contribution to the level that they wish others should make.

In a similar way the annual project of reviewing pay and benefits among the network members fosters openness and trust. The members are free to participate; the project is coordinated by a volunteering forum member, often stimulated by the convenor. The results are distributed and discussed, and the members are free to use that information in their HRM practices.

The acquired degree of openness and trust has led to a situation in which turnover and career switches are acceptable issues to deal with among the suppliers. When somebody of the network applies for another job in the supply network, they will call each other, have a talk to see whether or not the choice of moving is definitive. If that is the case, the person will be advised and can look for another career step in the network: “we try to keep the competence in our own automotive community, we consider that a positive thing.” Because of the ongoing outsourcing, several persons have been employed by different suppliers on the site.

There is a strong feeling of reciprocity between the partners of the network. Developing reciprocity informally in the absence of given rules is one of the most important collaboration issues (Gray, 1989). The automotive world is small. Integrity and transparency as a partner is a necessity: “We don’t put each other for a fait accompli, if you observe something, you proactively take action for the partner of the network.” An unusual combination of self-interest and care for the interests of the collaborative system speaks from this quote (Huxham, 1996).

In all interviews, two basic factors holding the parties together were frequently mentioned. The first is a common identity characteristic, which is often seen as a natural basis for network formation (Powell, 1990): “We are all HRM professionals eager to learn from each others practice.” The second aspect is the recognition and acceptance of interdependency (Gray, 1989): “HRM issues are highly interwoven, we are in the same boat, if something goes wrong, within 90 minutes the line stops at VCG.”

The above illustrates what Zucker (1986) has described as processes of institutionalization of trust: (a) a part of trust based upon a record of respectful interactions in the past, (b) a part of person-based trust based on some form of similarity (HRM profession), (c) a part of institution-based trust linked to formal mechanisms due to third parties (plant managers forum).

### **2.2.2. Leadership: The convenor as stand-back facilitator and shared leadership**

According to Browning *et al.* (1995), in order to create collaboration, leaders have to behave as members of a community with the superordinate goal of preserving the common industrial activity. Pro-activity as well as indirectness, i.e., inducing and stimulating others to play a prominent role, were observed to be equally important.

The HR manager of the VCG production line took the initiative to set up STVC-HRM. He was mandated formally by the plant managers forum to take up the leadership role of the network. However, in practice, leadership activities and behaviours are largely shared among the partners.

The VCG convenor makes personal contact to invite and introduce the network to potentially new members. When members repeatedly fail to attend, he inquires for difficulties and offers support. He often makes phone calls and visits to the sites of the member suppliers. He considers contact and information cues for added value which links the partners to the forum. The daily and interim contacts are unique for receiving information to which the HR managers (and even their plant managers) otherwise have no access.

Special attention is given by the convenor to turn incidents into learning material for the group. When in the dyadic contacts, he learns about difficulties related to personnel issues (e.g., turnover, recruitment, absenteeism) “I will try to convince my colleague to debate these events in the forum for the purpose of joint learning.” By stimulating discussion on difficult, and often sensitive, topics he not only creates the conditions for joint learning but he also avoids that the group becomes collusive (“we know what is happening but we don’t say anything about it”) – leading to feelings of inauthenticity (Schruijer, 2008). Over time most participants gained trust in the partners, enough autonomy in their own organization and enough personal confidence to present such issues in the forum. Chairing the periodical meetings is a part of the shared leading role. Formally, the chair coordinates the priorities of the partners, derives the annual theme, and finds a host place for the forum. He sets and updates the agenda for the meetings and introduces the theme and the speakers. Interestingly, in the interviews the role of the chair is described as “task oriented, but for at least 50% stimulating and motivating” the members and their constituencies.

The above observations are in line with what Vansina (1999, p. 48) described as the essence of leading in multiparty collaboration: “helping to create and to maintain conditions for getting most out of the diversity of perceptions, competencies and resources, while enabling the different parties to realize their objectives.”

The periodical meetings clearly allow observing the sharing of the leadership role. These meetings start with a coffee and some informal talk. The host mostly chairs the session, gives his contribution or introduces a speaker, guides an occasional visit to the operations of his site, facilitates the open-ended question session at the end, collects agenda points for the next session and finds a meeting place. After the forum meeting, the

members are invited but free to join for a lunch somewhere around. When the forum has finished a more substantial work or project (e.g., annual wages and benefits overview) “we organize a social event in a leisure resort.” This way they balance work and affection issues; a characteristic of mature groups (Mills, 1967).

The convenor and the partners watch for a good balance between individual freedom and submission to collective authority (Mills, 1967). Personal choice and responsibility is highlighted. Contractual obligations are kept minimal; each party can determine its own effort and engagement, can draw its own conclusions from meetings and projects and can freely transform and apply what it has learned. Yet, the members conform to the needs of the group: chosen tasks are completed and worked through, issues are followed up, timings of meetings and projects are respected, new types of projects are started. This visibly shows that the task dimension to get valuable output is of absolute importance for the platform.

The VCG convenor very much fulfils the ‘stand-back facilitator role’ described by Vansina (1999, p. 48): “Leading collaborative processes is not an up-front role but a kind of stand-back role in which one remains attentive to what is said in terms of the needs, anxieties and hindrances that stand in the way of collaboration.”

### **2.2.3. Representative-constituency dynamics: Shared relational responsibility**

Representatives in collaboratives experience the ‘dual conflict’ (Vansina *et al.*, 1998). On the one side they have to represent the interest of their constituency, and as such they can be in conflict with the other representatives, on the other hand they are closely watched by their constituency, and eventual concessions to other parties raise conflict with their own constituency. So they have an interpersonal problem to solve around the table, and to deal with an intergroup issue with their constituencies. The forum was able to overcome this ‘dual conflict’.

STVC-HRM is composed of the current HR managers of the suppliers. Not the procedural aspects but rather the style of working together became the instrument of managing the boundary between constituency and HRM forum. Drawing attention, inspiring, suggesting, persuading, avoiding to create obligatory situations, seem part of the mechanism to keep the responsibilities shared among the partners and to gain commitment for action on the basis of personal choice. Although the HR managers in the forum are representatives of their organization, they act on the basis of personal initiative and choice. They approach each other to act as their own men, and the convenor plays an important role in that dynamic, being an example of relational contracting in his behaviour. The informal and personal way the convenor approaches the members of the network is recognized to be “crucial” in building commitment and willingness to take personal responsibility for action. The effect shows in intensive bilateral contacts, and almost full attendance of collective activities. The same style also applies to the forum members dealing with diversity in interests and constraints. Members are invited to take part, “there is never pressure and obligation”, they have a real choice to participate in special projects, and their choice is respected by all.



The interviews reflect a shared responsibility (McNamee, 1998) for the HRM forum. The members actively stimulate contact, call upon their own or other plant managers to get initiatives or mandate for action, they demonstrate a real concern for the partners, they know how to handle the personal and company style differences in terms of tendencies to control, centralize, delegate, etc.

By inviting their coworkers and outsiders they keep the network open. This way ownership is extended into the network, which stimulates broader shared responsibility. The motto is that “the more dispersed the whole network becomes, the better for the community.”

### **3. Lessons learned**

This study shows *how* VCG and its suppliers succeed in managing their interdependencies on important HRM issues through a shared collaborative, called STVC-HRM. Building and sustaining deep assembler-suppliers relationships is underlined as the core of the Toyota system of collaboration and learning with suppliers. This paper provides insight in the activities and main success factors of STVC-HRM. The success factors are not ‘technical’ but ‘relational’ by nature, involving developing trust, common ground, leadership, shared responsibility, and representative-constituency dynamics.

Some very explicit lessons can be learned from the case. The VCG management experienced that the high levels of interdependency, and associated system vulnerability, could not be managed by formal contracts and procedures. In order to turn a mere transactional contract into a relational one, the VCG convenor intervenes by inviting, addressing, encouraging, stimulating; but *never* ordering or imposing what to do, but always focusing on the task of attending individual partner interests while realizing the common goal. What seems to be important is that the convenor accomplishes that STVC-HRM members work on largely self-constructed tasks and keep the responsibility shared in order to realize one’s own *and* joint interests/aims.

A power position is not striven for. The way that the convenor relates to the partners makes it possible that leadership activities become largely shared among the partners. They themselves co-create the fruitful conditions that they experience and talk about so enthusiastically in the interviews.

The convenor focuses on the system-level of the network. He induces the partners to do the same by going beyond the operational level by focusing on general HRM themes, developing aspects of a shared HRM policy and stimulating joint learning as the main priority of the network.

Probably the most important lesson has to do with the “asymmetric giving – reciprocity dynamic” that we observed. ‘Asymmetric giving’ (Browning *et al.*, 1995) by VCG seems to function as a *trigger* to get the relationship going, in that it stimulates the

partners to engage in reciprocal behaviour and develop trust through initiative and authentic engagement. Each partner contributes to the task at hand, leading to strong feelings of interdependency, shared fate and joint outcomes.

Given the above, future supply chain management research may consider studying the actual assembler-suppliers relationships and practices in terms of relational collaboration processes going on. At the same time, this paper informs other organizations that wish to develop fruitful assembler-suppliers relationships in their supply chain by showing the main collaboration issues at hand.

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