

Flat management

My associates and I had all come up through the consultancy world before we founded Davidson. In this sector, unfortunately, organisational models are often based on ‘traditional’ companies. Why ‘unfortunately’, you might ask?

The Footsie 100 companies are all doing OK! They’re expanding on every continent, yielding comfortable dividends – sometimes even in times of crisis – and some of them are even quite pleasant to work for. Why wouldn’t we model ourselves on them? Why shouldn’t a consultancy be made up of teams, departments, service functions, and divisions... How could it grow, without these multiple layers of low/middle and top management, where everyone is responsible for working towards strategic objectives and reporting operational performance indicators? Well, simply because that doesn’t work – or at least not for long, in our field.

A consultancy doesn’t manufacture cars or manage inventory levels, industrial procurement or non-compliant product issues. Or that’s not its main thrust, at any rate. A management consultancy’s chief asset is the people it employs (an even more important asset than its client base).

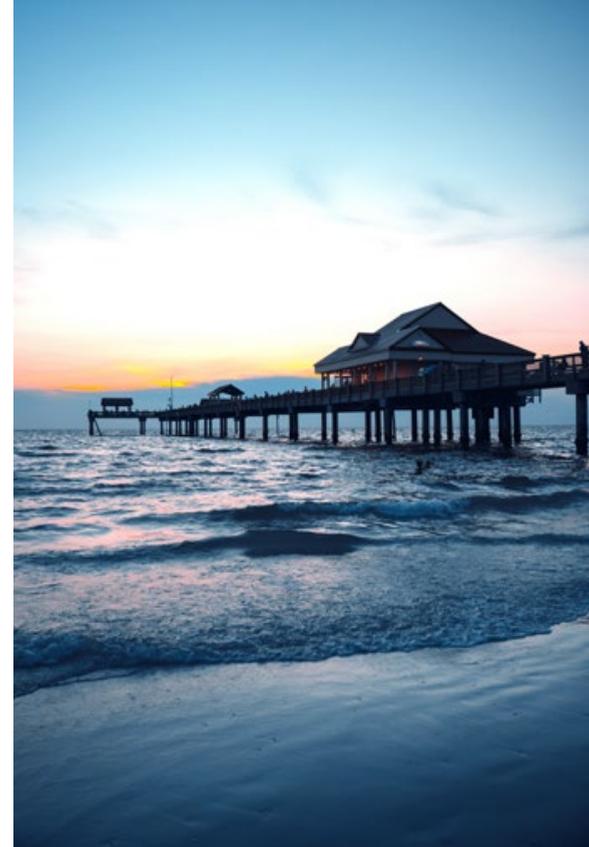
We opted for a flat management structure

because of its many advantages:

- it means we can work cooperatively across disciplines if necessary. And if not, it means we don’t have to. No ‘getting everyone up to speed’ meetings, no cumbersome decision-making process – working in small cells makes us agile. No endless meetings. The longest meeting in Davidson history lasted an hour and a half. Mostly, they last about half an hour. We hold about two a week. Other than that, communication is point-to-point ;
- by flattening the well-known ‘vertical pyramid’, it brings all the staff closer. The most junior consultant at Davidson has direct access to directors and associates ;
- we’ve all known long and arduous decision-making processes, that often have revealing names such as:
‘cascade’, which makes dealing with your line management sound like you’re trying to climb a vertiginous mountain, or
‘sign-off loop’ – a tortuous circuit of straight lines and twisting curves that leads you back to square one.

In our model, they’re pared down to their very simplest:

- the entities are kept at a size that can reasonably be managed. Each director or associate



“
Davidson is a unique brand,
its principles set a common
base, we make important
decisions together.

”

oversees between 30 and 100 people with only one intermediate grade. That way, the degree of abstraction remains minimal, especially since each director is Davidson’s main recruiter, manager and salesperson in their subsidiary. So in principle, that makes them accessible and open to listening ;

- it helps us to position ourselves clearly. The entities are broken down into geographical zones and sectors of expertise, but they’re all called Davidson X, Y or Z. Davidson is the single umbrella brand, based on shared values, and important decisions are made communally – everyone’s individual contribution is welcome and each of us can make our mark on the organisation.

If I’m being honest, I have to tell you about the main disadvantage of working this way: it needs lots of communication channels to be put in place, ad hoc to suit the circumstances, since there’s no pre-existing template of communication channels within the company. You often have to pick up the phone and have discussions with several people at once.

But isn’t that a small price to pay for bringing some humanity back into working relationships that have been gradually eroded by social media and email?

Bertrand

Feeling inspired?

Consultants

You have access to the directors, so make the most of it!

Everyone

Don't think in terms of 'cascading' communication. Most decisions can be made and communicated without getting anyone else in the hierarchy involved.

If you can avoid it, don't send an email to a colleague who's sitting a few feet from you, or even one floor up!

The shortest meetings are the best: if you're flagging up a problem, offer several strategies or a solution. Meetings are not for detailing problems, but for deciding on actions.

If there's no reason for you to be at a meeting, don't go (especially if you're just going to sit and read your text messages).

Take an interest in your colleagues previous experiences and successes in the other entities: has anyone else had to deal with this problem before? How did they solve it? If you've improved a process or a tool, make sure everyone knows about it!

