

>> The regionalization of DirComs: Between dependency and autonomy

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INTRODUCTION

Latin America and the Caribbean face a tougher reality than they did just a few years ago. Growth prospects are poor and it is likely that the gradual deceleration of China's economic activity will contribute to keep low prices on raw materials. However, the complexity of the situation does not modify the attributes of a region that, some time ago, earned itself a place on the global market.

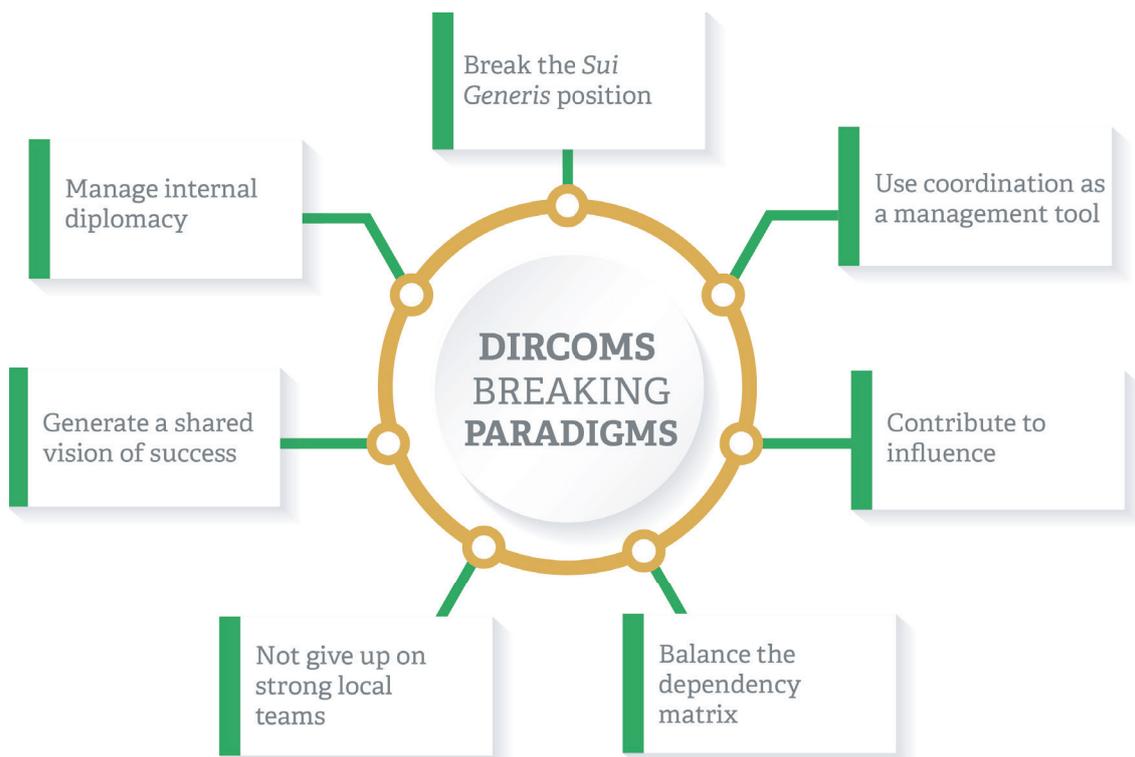
Undoubtedly, Latin America's political stability has triggered a decade of economic growth, which, in turn, has attracted foreign investment, favored industry diversification and prompted the internationalization of local companies. The 59 financial operations that have moved approximately \$17,200 million in the first quarter of 2016, are a sign of the optimism reigning in the region.

Both the internationalization and expansion of companies have brought about changes in their corporate structures in order to respond to an increasingly complex and geographically diverse

market. Matrix schemes were created and replicated according to specific regions and markets. That is how business structures for Latin America were born, consisting of a corporate core, support areas and country directors.

The matrix concept by region and sub-regions responded to the need for cross-disciplinary managers and for replicating good practices. Within this framework, it was necessary to count on a leader who would bring in a global approach, handling the communication needs of the region as a whole while, at the same time, supervising local implementation.

However, this role is still being consolidated within the organization: his duties and functions continue to evolve, as well as his interactions with the rest of the company. The regional Dircom must face the general challenges of his job, earning himself a place at the negotiation table, but he must also meet the challenges that arise from the position itself and the still heterogeneous idea of the region.



BREAKING UP WITH THE SUI GENERIS OF THE POSITION

The newness and, to a certain point, the large scope of the position, generate confusion, hindering the empowerment of the DirCom. Moreover, the regional structure establishes a new reporting line for each country that did not exist before. In that sense, the period of connection and recognition of the position could be long.

It is important that the DirCom defines his functions, team and communication lines with the rest of the organization from the beginning, in order to get integrated into the daily structure of the company more easily. Sharing the regional plan and rapidly involving the teams in each market makes the sui generis become one more piece of the puzzle.

USING COORDINATION AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL

The independence between operational management and the communication efforts of the companies is one of the realities that regional DirComs will face within their role. In regional communication departments local tasks must coexist with regional reports in order to be able to make recommendations from a global business point of view. However, opposition arises as employees refuse to recognize their failures for fear these may transcend to the corporate level.

Within a complex matrix structure, coordination is key to the success of the regional strategy. A regional vision including common denominators that bring the company closer to its stakeholders must be one of the DirCom's priority tasks.

Those responsible for ensuring a regional positioning have created communication policies that allow to define reporting lines for operational and communicational incidences, parameters that determine whether or not they should be reported to the corporate level, regional action plans to be implemented locally, and management and measurement indicators that are strictly aligned with business objectives.

CONTRIBUTE IN ORDER TO INFLUENCE

Since the purpose of the regional DirCom is to have a voice and a vote in the local strategies and be able to intervene in critical processes, he needs to demonstrate that his position exists to facilitate the tasks for the various business units, that is, he must position himself as a tool at the service of the company. DirComs are tempted to fall in a line of reporting and approvals that will generate resistance and end up stigmatizing their function and associating it with oversight. However, if the regional team contributes with content and specific tools, local managers will see them as allies and allow greater interference in the day to day operations and strategic vision.

BALANCING DEPENDENCY ON THE MATRIX

The success of positions such as these greatly depends on the grade of autonomy they are granted. Large corporations have managed to develop a structure that responds to regional business objectives, which, in turn, is led by a communications director who works autonomously from the matrix but in a consistent manner, executing plans that help leverage results in the individual markets. The global communications headquarters develop the policies, the storytelling, the pillars of action and the speech, but it is the regional leader who is responsible for adapting them to the local realities.

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This arrangement allows the DirCom to customize the local plan depending on the needs of the CEO, the limitations of the market, the information environment, the regulatory framework and many other contextual aspects that determine the communicational tasks.

However, this situation is not necessarily replicated in other corporations. Generally, the DirCom is limited by having to report constantly and implement plans that work well for the matrix but are inefficient for the individual countries, either because of their peculiarities or because of limited resources.

High dependency leads to a slow decision-making process and to the low status of the DirCom, who looks like an intermediary without any decision-making power, encouraging markets to reward the preceding situation.

DON'T NEGLECT STRONG LOCAL TEAMS

Unfortunately, the regionalization of the communication practice has been confused with the need to eliminate or reduce local teams, thinking that strategies can be effectively implemented in different territories from a single hub, with the added excuse of a common language. Precisely, the regional DirCom needs to “fight” for his job to be respected and provided with the appropriate resources, particularly at the local level. Instead of generating savings, the regional position must provide strategic focus so that the local capacities can succeed.

GENERATE A SHARED VISION OF SUCCESS

The unfinished business of communication managers continues to be measurement, which becomes more complex when we talk about regional results. Nevertheless, when defining metrics for more than one country and acting as a region, there is higher incidence on local results and the practice becomes aligned with other areas, using the same language at the negotiating table. This allows for the DirCom to gain ground, as well as establishing a dialogue about local performance based on objective criteria.

MANAGING INTERNAL DIPLOMACY

One of the greatest challenges, if not the greatest one, regional DirComs face is the management of internal diplomacy, that is, managing the relationship between those who report to them and those they report to. Undoubtedly, the tension between them is one of the consequences of having created a regional position. Nevertheless, the challenge for DirComs is to position themselves as indispensable for the business, and to generate indicators that are linked to country and corporate goals.

DirComs are engagement orchestrators who have in their hands the possibility of generating positive dynamics between collaborators, allowing greater productivity and closer proximity to the stakeholders, turning the business relationship into one of trust. In short, DirComs' survival and success depends on their ability to consolidate the regions as productive business units aligned with corporate goals.



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