



Finding the rhythm of the centre

'Finding the rhythm of the centre' is how Alex Cummings, Executive Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of Coca-Cola, describes bridging the gap between his staff working in the field and those who work in the corporate 'centre' of power. He talks about a 'natural tension' between the two parts and how they can be brought together. "The rhythms are different," he explains.

Cummings knows a few things about both 'the centre' and the field operations. The Liberian native started working for Coca-Cola in 1997 as the regional manager in Nigeria. By the dawn of the new millennium he was president of the company's North & West Africa Division. A year later, in 2001, he became president and chief operating officer of the Africa Group, responsible for 56 countries and territories across the continent.

"The people in the centre have more medium- to long-term focus, as it should be. People in the field tend to be more focused on the next quarter or next month, as they should be." He adds that there's a 'natural bridge' that everyone is working towards, driving shareholder value. "So for me, it was adjusting to the different rhythms from the operating side where monthly volume, profit, market share (are the focus) - to the centre, it's a bit more medium term," he concludes.

Now, this corporate rising star oversees parts of the business as diverse as Legal, Human Resources, Global Community Connections, Strategic Planning, Information Technology, Research & Innovation, Science, Transformational Productivity and Strategic Security. He says his core group has about 1,800

employees; globally some 3,000 people ultimately report to him.

The 50-something year-old was born into a middle class family in the West African nation. At that time, he says, Liberia was doing well. He had a stable home and attended good schools. Attending university in the US, where he studied finance and economics, started him on a path that led to his C-suite door in Coke's Atlanta Headquarters.

Early on he wanted to be a doctor or engineer. Then he toyed with the idea of politics. But his parents' reaction was, "Politics? In Africa? No!" he recalls with a smile. But returning to his home country was always the goal. After undergraduate studies at Northern Illinois University, he worked for two years in the Liberian Bank for Development and Investment.

He then returned to the US for MBA studies, which coincided with military rule and the destabilisation of Liberia. He decided to stay in the US and eventually held several jobs with The Pillsbury Company; his last role as vice president of Finance for Pillsbury International.

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As a Coke man for more than a decade, Cummings has closely studied the company. He faces his challenges methodically, including trying to find "a common thread" among his diverse portfolio. That thread has turned out to be 'functional competency' in all that they do. "We want to be sure to have a service and solutions-orientation to the business," he notes. "So that, rather than being experts for experts' sake, we actually take that expertise and apply it to the needs of the business...applying solutions to grow the business."

Having been in his current role for 18 months, he freely admits there have been real challenges to that 'thread', with oversight over so many parts of the business. There was the personal challenge of finding the aforementioned 'rhythm of the centre', which he says took him about six months to figure out. But there was a bigger task: getting everyone to understand their role in the portfolio. "We have to understand how everything we do affects others in our network, our colleagues in the field," he notes. "There's an ongoing challenge to make sure those connections are there - and the enterprise is not just working within the functions, but is working across the functions in a seamless way."

He believes that learning to manage such a complex set of challenges can only come from the school of hard knocks. "A good education helps you to think and ask questions, create frameworks and processes. But it's all, at the end of the day, on the job training," says Cummings. He adds that the combination of failures and successes ultimately gives a leader his/her ability to do their jobs effectively. To that end, he believes that fresh grads should focus on learning and having as many diverse experiences as possible in a company. "I encourage people in school who are looking to go into the workforce to spend time learning, take horizontal moves, move geographically, go into different functions and learn your total enterprise," he says. "Understand the business you work for, how it actually makes money, how it generates economic value. And then bring your skills to help enhance that."

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