

Experiences shared by leading experts

Jens Kruger - Supply
Chain Leader

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Jens Krüger is a Zurich-based Supply Chain leader covering the EMEA market. He started his career in Germany in Logistics and moved to Switzerland in 2005 to work for large Logistics service providers, such as Kuehne + Nagel and DHL, before joining the manufacturing/retailing industry with companies like Estée Lauder and Migros.

As a Supply Chain (<https://www.emerecruitment.com/procurement-and-supply-chain>) leader, what are your key challenges when it comes to transforming Supply Chain Management organizations?

According to my experience, the challenges around Supply Chain transformations can be clustered into the human factor and technological limitations. These two aspects are linked by their common challenge: how to estimate the potential success and, later, to measure the success of a Supply Chain transformation.

Supply Chain Management is still a relatively young discipline and has constantly evolved over the last 25 years. Hence, systems and technology are not always up to par with the requirements of businesses and their Supply Chain functions.

Scattered systems - sometimes only linked by manual processes - can still be found in larger companies. This limits the ability to analyse meaningful performance indicators, let alone execute a system-supported process simulation.

When talking about the human factor, there is sometimes a sentiment that people's dislike of change is the biggest challenge; but I don't think this is the case, as I have rarely come across people who are resistant to change by nature.

If we leave aside that a lack of knowledge could be the reason for the resistance, I think it is critical how the need for change is being explained and what data is available to support that argument.

Supply Chain professionals are mostly down to earth; presenting them with a new concept, which is purely based on a fluffy vision, without supporting data, might simply not satisfy them and ensure their honest buy-in. Hence, time needs to be invested for building a compelling business case and an alignment on assumptions to deal with data gaps. This will also help with achieving stakeholder alignment or receiving funds for such initiatives.

Thus, starting off a transformation journey with an honest assessment of the company's Supply Chain capabilities - despite incomplete data - and getting to an understanding that the company can and will benefit from an elevation of the Supply Chain capabilities is perhaps the biggest challenge of the journey.

How can leaders create diverse teams?

Many things have already been said about creating diverse teams. However, the motivation that working in a diverse team can create a competitive advantage is not so often talked about. Therefore, diversity is sometimes perceived as a soft HR topic, and not as something that can create economic benefits for the company and for individuals. We live in a complex world and, even if no one likes to admit it, we often look for solutions inside our own box.

Within a diverse team, different backgrounds, mindsets and experiences can be brought to the table, and better solutions can be found. For example, Supply Chain Management has typically international, if not global, touchpoints. Having team members with roots in different areas of the world allows better interaction with business partners around the globe, and factors in the particularities of other regions when designing solutions.

Having diverse teams can certainly create challenges. These challenges need to be addressed through careful management and a set of rules. One of the most prominent challenges is that misunderstandings are more likely occurring within a diverse team. Hence, I keep encouraging my teams to prevent misunderstandings by asking questions.

Diversity shall not create insecurity; constantly thinking about avoiding mistakes will hamper interaction and kill creativity. At the same time, we should strengthen everyone's self-esteem so that an unfortunate miscommunication blunder does not mean the end of the world.

I think, if we created a relaxed atmosphere that allows mistakes in interactions and talked more often about the benefits of diversity, it would be easier to sell the concept, and people would adopt that idea more rapidly.

Is Switzerland a good place to live and why?

Switzerland is certainly a good place to live, and my personal history is strong evidence for that. When I moved to Switzerland, it was originally intended to be just a stopover for two years. After living in Switzerland now for 15 years and acquiring Swiss citizenship, I can without doubt call Switzerland my home.

Switzerland is located in the heart of Europe and has a diverse culture, due to the country's history. This diversity is enriched by people who come from all over the world to work and live in Switzerland.

On top of that, the beautiful nature, plenty of cultural events and civil liberties, the extremely well-functioning administration and infrastructure makes life here pleasant.

As a collective, what have you learnt from your previous managers? What good methods have you taken from them and, adversely, what negative approaches do you ensure you avoid?

I'm privileged that I have had several exceptional managers in my professional career so far.

One of the commonalities of all these great leaders has been that they all gave me challenges that were way outside my comfort zone at the respective stage of my career. They explained what needs to be achieved and fostered my self-confidence, so that I could succeed. Investing into employees' skills was also high on their agenda. Confidence and the right skillset should go hand in hand, or - as one of those leaders used to say - "confidence without competence leads to disaster".

It needs to be stressed that all of that was done with a clear business target in mind and not to facilitate personal fulfilment. All these leaders set ambitious goals; good was rarely good enough. They all showed a high commitment to their targets and were prepared to lead the team through stormy weather themselves.

I can't think of any particularly negative leadership approach, but I would say that it would require you to keep the two elements mentioned above in balance. Strongly prioritizing one over the other is either not producing the results the company needs or is burning out their employees.

I had mentioned before that I appreciated it when leaders stepped out of their comfort

zone for me. Unfortunately, I have experienced what I would call the imbalance of loyalty. This is when bosses were requesting loyalty, but being loyal to their team only as long as there was smooth sailing.

I think that this is one of the true leadership tests - to stay on course and keep agreements intact, even if outside conditions have changed. Having said that, I appreciate we live in a rapidly changing world and that it can sometimes become impossible to live up to these principles. Being transparent about the situation, acknowledging their own failure and looking jointly for ways to remediate it is a form of loyalty that a leader owes the team.

What does the future hold for Supply Chain and Operations (<https://www.emearcruitment.com/operations/>)?

Sustainability and social responsibility are already high on the agenda and will continue to be so. I believe that actions to accelerate reaching net zero carbon emissions and achieving other ESG [Environmental, Social and Governance] targets will go in parallel to Supply Chain Management, facilitating new business models around the circular economy.

As mentioned earlier in our conversation, Supply Chain and Operations still need to catch up when it comes to applying technology. I expect that AI (artificial intelligence) and IoT (internet of things) will together allow amazing solutions that are just starting to be discussed today. Technological advancements will also allow better process integration and collaboration along the linear and, soon, circular value chains.

This will improve Supply Chain's ability to give the business a competitive edge by satisfying the customer's specific demands at lower cost in an agile and responsive way.

Thank you to Jens for speaking to Neil Cope (<https://www.emearcruitment.com/meet-our-team/neil-cope/87>), Associate Director in our Procurement & Supply Chain recruitment division in Switzerland.

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