SRK Consulting: 40 Years in the Deep End

On the eve of its 40th anniversary, SRK had matured into a global group with more than 50 permanent offices in 23 countries on 6 continents. It boasts more than 1,500 scientists, geologists, engineers, specialists, managers and support staff — experts in exploration, resource evaluation, due diligence, geotechnical services, water, environmental management, project evaluation, tailings, waste, extractive metallurgy and mineral processing. It is a multi-specialist consultancy, owned by the staff, with the long list of internal shareholders produced as an appendix in each annual report.

Broken English

Epilogue

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The tower of Babel - Babylon's remarkable feat of engineering and construction — had to overcome the challenges of language, communications and co-operation.
Kris’ work has embraced everything from the largest mining projects on the planet to a water system with hand-laid pipe for small African villages. SRK consultants have been involved in diamond mines from the Canadian Arctic to equatorial Africa, in massive copper and iron open pits high in the Andes, landmark South African railway tunnels, the historic sale of British Coal and the unprecedented environmental remediation of Eastern Bloc uranium mining.

By any measure, the firm was a remarkable achievement for the three ambitious and audacious young men who sought success not by clamping their knowledge tightly to their chests, but by sharing it professionally — and at Friday night sessions, a habit spread around the globe, reflecting the firm’s unique, egalitarian corporate culture.

Steffen, Robertson and Kirsten did not have a formula for their success — if anything they believed there were no formulas or rules. Everyone was thrown into the deep end to sink or swim. Although that was never quite true — there were always pretty impressive credentialed lifeguards watching over and mentoring, and there still are. Nevertheless, the true legacy of SRK’s founders is about an approach, a way of doing things, a set of values that they and that first generation championed no matter where the firm opened an office. The managerial handbook, Empowerment Takes More Than a Minute, by Ken Boddie, John Carlos and John Date, laid out in shared information with everyone, create autonomy through boundaries and replace old hierarchies with new: share information with everyone, create autonomy, by Ken Boddie, John Carlos and John Date.

Kirsten thought the relationship with academia was critical in attracting the best and staying at the forefront of the firm’s business ethos. Meeting up with Andy and Hendrik — the man who became the company’s acknowledged patriarch emphasised that a number of stars came into our offices and this became an ongoing practice. Those two initiatives resulted in professionals in the practice being exposed to top-class academics.

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"Some of it was luck of the draw,” Steffen says. “Fatherhood may have pulled some remarkably talented people in the right direction. Others were drawn to us by the idea that we would go and do something new, something big, where once they merited not even an afterthought. They were drawn to the idea that they could be exposed to top-class academics. They were the best people in their field. "That worked.”

SRK grew out of an overachieving, intellectual individualism, a work-hard-play-hard professional ethic, with its origins in the early 1970s; it grew as an international company, whose shape and direction was self-determined. That work was impressive, credentialed lifeguards watching over and mentoring, and there still are. Nevertheless, the true legacy of SRK’s founders is about approach, a way of doing things, a set of values that they and that first generation championed no matter where the firm opened an office.

"We were very fortunate in that each of us — Oskar, Hendrik and I — were able to conduct our practices and manage the company fairly easily because we had a small, select group of people who shared our values and had reasonable business acumen,” Robertson says. “That worked.”

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The genius of SRK was in recognising the difference between practices and businesses. It could have become only a business of businesses, stuck strictly to running things entirely by Wall Street principles in a top-down, hierarchical way and not encouraged charismatic leaders with world-class capability.

“If the challenge over the years was really getting the best people in their field,” Steffen explains. “That’s what mattered: attracting the best and keeping the best by giving them the freedom to grow. At the end of the day, for us it was providing people with opportunities they want to take — no matter where they are on the globe. I’m proudest of the fact that the people at SRK have delivered exceptional work and earned respect on six continents. It’s the people — and everyone in the company feels like it’s their company.”

Still, for everything — and everyone — there are limits. We were never quite true — there were always pretty impressive credentialed lifeguards watching over and mentoring, and there still are. Nevertheless, the true legacy of SRK’s founders is about an approach, a way of doing things, a set of values that they and that first generation championed no matter where the firm opened an office. The managerial handbook, Empowerment Takes More Than a Minute, by Ken Boddie, John Carlos and John Date, laid out in shared information with everyone, create autonomy through boundaries and replace old hierarchies with new: share information with everyone, create autonomy, by Ken Boddie, John Carlos and John Date.

"At the end of the day, there is an SRK culture.”

SRK is not the original start-up company of adventurers that Steffen, Robertson and Kirsten and the others founded. It has reached corporate middle age and it has become a polyglot, multi-racial conglomerate, a veritable United Nations of specialists.

"As somebody once said, the language of international conferences is broken English,” Brian Middleton reflects, “and that is probably the language of all our meetings — Chinese English, Indonesian English, Australian English. That is a challenge for us as an organisation: to assimilate different languages and different cultures.”

The practices were all different — some required outside support in terms of services from other practices; others were large, full-service operations. Local markets around the world are very different; the professional requirements are relatively similar, but you need local knowledge to build a practice — you can’t fake that, and a storefront with international f’remen arriving to do the work will not suffice.

In spite of the cultural and language differences, though, there remains an ineffable, unifying feeling and sense of purpose among the folders. When I interact with the Russian professionals, there is an ‘SRK-ness’ in what we do. When I interact with international firemen arriving to do the work will not suffice.

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thoughtful and engaging. And it wasn’t size that mattered, it was something ineffable — that feeling of camaraderie and sense of professional integrity that animated that band of adventurers nearly half a century ago. That is what Steffen meant when he said SRK would never be swallowed — and what Robertson and Kirsten committed to — a vision of a company that emphasised individual excellence, a culture of encouraging that kind of thinking and practice; not a giant consultancy, no matter what its size, but rather a global network of practices under one roof.

That is what we think would make SRK different, what would make it unique and ensure its success.◆

As big as SRK might get, the sense is that it should always feel like Europa House circa 1978 — small, intimate, like a family, bustling and alive with promise and prospect.