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40f

Babylon



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SRK Epilogue

BROKEN ENGLISH

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.

SRK's 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 claspings their knowledge tightly to their chests, but by sharing it professionally — and at Friday night sessions, a habit that spread around the globe, reflecting the firm's unique, egalitarian corporate culture.

Steffen, Robertson and Kirsten did not have a formula for 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 some pretty impressively 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 Blanchard, Alan Randolph and John Carlos, laid it out: share information with everyone, create autonomy through boundaries and replace old hierarchies with self-managed teams.

“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.”

SRK grew out of an overachieving, intellectual individualism, a work-hard-play-hard professional camaraderie within a loose communal framework whose shape and direction was self-determined.

Kirsten thought the relationship with academia was critical in attracting the best and staying at the forefront. “We set out to take on young people every year so that we could continually bring the latest technologies into the business,” he says. “In year three, we invited an overseas professor to do a sabbatical at our offices and this became an ongoing practice. Those two initiatives resulted in professionals in the practice being exposed to top-class academics.”

The man who became the company's acknowledged patriarch emphasised that a number of stars came into alignment to generate the success that SRK achieved.

“Some of it was luck of the draw,” Steffen says. “My father was a good businessman and my brother expanded on what he built, so I grew up with a good business ethos. Meeting up with Andy and Hendrik — who could have predicted that? And over the years, all those who came aboard — so many people made such wonderful contributions to the company, made SRK what it is. That was really good fortune.”

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, organisational way and not encouraged charismatic leaders with world-class capability.

“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 is a season. Even the grand old man of SRK passed on the torch when his time came.

The world has changed tremendously in the last 40 years, and SRK’s clients have changed just as much. Issues around the environment and human impact on it are paramount where once they merited not even an afterthought. Regulation is ubiquitous. Where mining was once dominated by those with flair and the freedom to do pretty much what technology allowed, now the industry is dominated by technologists and driven by statutory guidelines. There were few design codes when SRK was formed; their work and that of others across the mining and consultancy worlds developed a lot of what is now laid down in codes. Building the kind of tailings storage facilities that were erected even into the 1970s would be impossible today.

SRK is no longer the start-up company of adventurers that Steffen, Robertson and Kirsten and the others founded. It has reached corporate middle age and has become much more institutional than it was in

its days when every project was a new adventure. And while its core culture remains, it has also adapted to new circumstances — in China, Russia or Chile, for example, where the specific histories and the particular ethos of those nations has led to unique but authentic expressions of the firm’s values. As a result, SRK 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 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 firemen arriving to do the work will not suffice.

In spite of the cultural and language differences, though, there remains an ineffable, unifying feeling and force within SRK.

“At the end of the day, there is an SRK culture,” Neal Rigby maintains. “I won’t say for one minute it overrides local cultures. But it’s infectious. When I interact with the Chinese professionals, when I interact with the Russian professionals, there is an ‘SRK-ness’ that we’ve developed. It’s not the resistance-is-futile Borg of Star Trek. It’s a British SRK, a North American SRK, a South African SRK ... around the planet they all have their own expression of a shared culture.”

In spite of occasional personality challenges, SRK

RIGBY:
“AT THE END OF
THE DAY, THERE
IS AN SRK
CULTURE”

found a way to empower individuals and conduct business guided by mutually shared values grounded in transparency, integrity and fair process. The unique nature and character of the company was not a product of Steffen, Robertson and Kirsten alone. The credit went to a larger group of which Middleton and Rigby were part — a rough dozen or so key professionals who joined SRK over its first decade and found a common cause.

The best and the brightest were attracted by the romance and challenge of engineering in those days — today it is the spectacular salaries of financial work that lures too many of them. One of the key drivers of consolidation within the engineering and consulting industries is the dearth of top people.

In the beginning, when the small community of big mining firms looked around for expertise, there were a handful of men who had the experience and the academic and practical skills that fit the bill. Everyone knew each other. A career was about personal relationships. It still is, but the community has expanded beyond SRK. It is still about relationships, a body of work, gaining the respect of one's peers and making responsible contributions to professional and regulatory policy discussions.

In general, as a company grows it tends towards the average and loses its edge. SRK has always resisted this tendency. Nevertheless, the technical superstars who made SRK stand out from other consulting firms — the tall poppies who characterised it for at least two decades — are harder to find. As the firm faces its fifth decade, what would it look like if it survived to celebrate a half-century? Would it, could it, should it remain the same? When they got together for principals' meetings, for gatherings of the global board, for SRK internal events, for those beer sessions, everyone had an opinion.

“SRK once wrote computer codes for mining applications and led the world,” notes Louis Kirsten,

truly representative of the company's second generation. “Today computer models are ubiquitous. A lot of engineering is becoming proceduralised. I see that SRK will start more actively integrating the services it provides on a larger scale, fewer fragmented specialist services, more packaged services combined into larger integrated teams — more integrated, more managed to respond to the proceduralised demands of the client. We're certainly seeing that in South Africa.”

Others continued to worry that SRK remained in danger of being absorbed into one of the larger consultancies.

“We have all of these different practices all around the world, and we have hundreds of staff, but the danger is we're small fry for a big engineering company,” says Mark Campodonic. “In the next decade, our biggest challenge remains making sure we can compete effectively with the large players.”

Who knows what the future holds or how SRK's internal architecture will evolve. There were always pressures to collate practices into more regional groups or discussions about making practice leaders with large groups more responsive so that SRK could remain dynamic.

“One of the questions that came up recently is ‘Are the current practice leaders barriers to the growth or the aspirations of people within the groups?’” says James Gilbertson. “I think it's always something for us to keep an eye on.”

Major international law firms of similar size had found operating with large leadership committees of partners hampered them and had vested decision making in a handful of individuals. As much as anything, that ongoing internal existential dialogue is a measure of how the company continues to take the question of its internal culture seriously; it remains one of its hallmarks.

Today that culture is carried forward by the younger stars.

“I wouldn’t think that the company’s direction is likely to change in the immediate term,” muses Cam Scott, at 60. “The technology may change, the tools we use may change, but philosophically, I feel we will still be in a mining context dealing largely with mining companies, be they majors or juniors, as well as with governments, banks; doing due diligence and all that sort of thing. Mining will be mining a decade from now — only it will be bigger mines. It’s clear SRK will be part of that growth. Will we be bigger numbers of people? Maybe we need to do that.”

SRK found success when it had 3 people, when it had 30 people and when it had 300 people. It found profitability at all sizes and it managed to hang on to a set of core cultural values even as it grew and changed into a major corporation. Its secret was learning from its past. And as Steffen so emphatically underscored, there was one essential lesson that should never be forgotten: It’s all about the people — lose one of two key people and you can be in trouble. The challenge is keeping them satisfied, especially when you are dealing with those you hope are the best and brightest.

“Personal relationships are still fundamental to building a business,” says Briony Liber. “To be able to see people, see their body language, see how they interrelate. As SRK has grown and globalised we’ve lost some of that. We’re in an era where we are tied up by legislation and doing staff exchanges between offices is extremely challenging. We need to find creative ways to have more of that cross-pollination and sharing. For me, we must increase our ability to communicate with each other, to exchange those ideas, to work with each other on more projects. We must continue to emphasise the people.”

John Cowan comments: “I think our approach from early, early days was something that was carried on by partners and passed through the various departments, and I think there’s a sort of philosophy, a culture within SRK, that is very widespread. For some people, it didn’t

work very well and they moved on, but I don’t think we’ve had a particularly high turnover. But for others, it was liberating. We don’t have ceilings at SRK. People can aspire to become whatever they want.”

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.

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, dedicated to supporting professionals engaged in their practice; not a giant consultancy, no matter what its size, but rather a global network of practices under one roof. That is what they hoped would make SRK different, what would make it unique and ensure its success. ♦

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