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How Andy Miller Transformed the Executive Team at Polycom in Under Six Months

By John Shinal

Andy Miller wanted his own team in place, and fast.

Hired as chief executive in May by Polycom Inc., a Pleasanton, Calif.-based maker of teleconferencing equipment, Miller believed the company's market was moving too quickly to dawdle. He needed to jump-start Polycom and grow sales quickly to avoid being squeezed out by new rivals, which included networking giant Cisco Systems Inc. after it acquired Tandberg, Polycom's chief competitor, in April. So Miller asked Polycom's board of directors, which he had just joined, to approve the hiring of six new vice presidents -- simultaneously.

"These were positions I knew we needed to scale (Polycom) to a multi-billion-dollar company, quickly," said Miller, who spent more than a decade as a Cisco executive.

The proposal was bold. New CEOs typically spread out hiring their new, directly-reporting executives over several quarters. Trying to do too much too quickly risks overloading the new boss's plate while he or she is also taking on new duties. That much abrupt change at the top can also make a company's corporate culture an insecure one.

"That's not often done because it's not easy to do well," said Andrew Carges, a hiring consultant and executive recruiter for technology companies. "In fact, it's really, really hard," said Carges, who wasn't involved in the Polycom executive searches.

"Buckle Up"

Once approved, Miller's plan got a mix of double-takes and concerned expressions from those he shared it with, some of whom urged caution. Even the management consultant he'd hired to help integrate the incoming team had no illusions about the task ahead.

"I laughed and said 'buckle up' when he told me," said Barb Bridendorf, a management consultant with Crenshaw Associates who specializes in integrating new executives.

Now, less than five months later, after the candidates endured a combined total of more than 100 interviews, Miller has his six-person team in place. The last two started their jobs at Polycom on Oct. 11,

less than a week after Cisco and Logitech International SA, another rival, unveiled new videoconferencing products. Also a week earlier, Skype SA, another new Polycom competitor, named a former Cisco executive as CEO as it prepares to raise a \$100 million IPO.

"The recent announcements reinforce that the video communications market is at a tipping point," Miller said.

To get the team he wanted, Miller had to persuade yet another former Cisco executive to leave a top post there and join him at Polycom. He also had to woo a former Oracle Corp. executive to a key post -- then wait three months for her to start while she fulfilled a promise to her family.

"The speed with which Andy did this is not typical," said Steve Winings, a recruiter at Korn/Ferry International who led the team that placed five of the six new executives at Polycom. "Usually something like this takes six to nine months," said Winings, who's been a corporate recruiter for 11 years.

Moving the Needle

The first and most high-profile candidate that Winings referred to Polycom was Joseph Burton, who had been the chief technology officer for Cisco's unified messaging business.

"He popped out of the database right away," said Winings, referring to the information that recruitment firms collect and keep on potential executive candidates. Like Miller, Burton had worked a long stint at Cisco, where he oversaw the development of video conferencing products that compete with Polycom's own line. When he was contacted by Korn/Ferry, Burton broke with his usual routine merely by listening to the Polycom pitch.

"I only listen about twice a year," said Burton, who added that, while at Cisco, he was getting calls from headhunters every week. "I was excited and flattered" by the interest, Burton said.

But while he and Miller shared a Cisco entry on their resumes and admired each other's work from afar, the two men were not well acquainted.

After a meeting with some of the new team and some long-time Polycom executives went well, Burton was invited to dinner with Miller on a Sunday night in August. The two men met at WaterBar, overlooking San Francisco Bay. Over plates of halibut and glasses of wine, during a dinner that stretched into the night, Burton listened to Miller articulate his vision for Polycom. Of major importance to Burton was the way Miller planned to make decisions.

"The thing that really sold me was a phrase he repeated several times: speed and precision," Burton said.

While Cisco is known for acting quickly when it enters new markets, the company's size and its corporate philosophy means that all decisions must be vetted by several parts of its management matrix, according to Burton.

At Polycom, Miller told him, Burton would be able to act more quickly in rolling out new products. He also began to believe that he could have a bigger impact at Polycom, that he could "move the needle" in a way he couldn't at the much larger Cisco.

"After three or four hours, I went from 'maybe it's possible' to 'I think I can do this,'" Burton said.

The New Line-up

Burton was the final player in Miller's new line-up, which also included Sudhakar Ramakrishna, a former Motorola executive and now Polycom's chief development officer; Alan Rudolph, formerly with Xerox unit Affiliated Computer Services, who is now Polycom's senior vice president of global services; Ashley Goldsmith, previously with pharmaceutical maker F. Hoffmann-LaRoche and now senior vice president of human resources; Gary Rider, a former NCR executive and now president of Polycom's Europe, Middle East and Africa business; and Susan Hayden, formerly of Oracle Corp. and Monster.com, now executive vice president and general manager of Polycom's small and mid-sized business unit (SMB).

The hiring of Hayden to run SMB is a key part of Miller's strategy, which includes selling more customers an entire suite of products -- and the services that go with them -- rather than making product-by-product purchases.

Another key component of Miller's strategy is to sell more products to SMBs, which already comprise close to 80 percent of Polycom's revenue. The market-research firm Gartner Inc. predicts the SMB market will be the fastest-growing segment of the unified communications market during the next five years.

For that sales task, Miller wanted Hayden, and he didn't need a corporate recruiting firm to find her.

"Sue came to mind right away," he said of the former group vice president of sales at Oracle.

Worth the Wait

Hayden was intrigued by Miller's overture, but she had just down-shifted from a corporate pace after 16 years and started her own management consulting business. She was in "a flexible, project-focused mode" that allowed her to spend more time with her two teenagers.

"There's only a few years before I'm an empty nester," Hayden said. Anything that got her back on the corporate track would have to be pretty compelling.

"I told Andy it would have to be really special -- a seat at the (executive) table and something with strategic impact, the ability to make a difference," she said.

But when Miller offered her just that, she told him he'd have to wait -- for three months -- while she fulfilled a promise to her family.

"We had activities lined up for a long time, summer plans that had been in place for months. I wasn't about to disappoint them," Hayden said. For Miller, it was a tough choice: Go with another candidate

and lose the person he felt was "a perfect fit," or wait an entire quarter while the market was changing around his new company.

In the end, Miller, who wanted expertise from outside the company, "people with a fresh look at unified communications," decided she was worth the wait.

Although it took him slightly longer than expected, Miller has in place the team he wanted to help transform Polycom. Asked whether he would do it again, and whether he had succeeded, however, Miller was circumspect. "Would I do it again, now that it's done? I'm not sure," Miller said. "Ask me again in a year."

Write to [John Shinal](#)