INTERVIEW WITH

Rüdiger Süß

BY DON COHEN

Rüdiger Süß is the project manager for corporate strategy and international relations for the German Aerospace Center (DLR). DLR is the national research center for aeronautics and space research and the German Space Administration. He and *ASK* Managing Editor Don Cohen talked in Long Beach, California, after NASA's 2011 Project Management (PM) Challenge.

COHEN: What is your current work at DLR?

SÜß: My main task is to coordinate the long-term orientation of DLR. Every five years, we update the work we have to do to improve things, the kinds of initiatives we need, and figure out where we want to be in fifteen or twenty years. My job is to get the bosses and researchers together to coordinate all this, to work from the vision to the mission, from goals to implementation.

COHEN: How long have you been in this job?

SÜß: This is my ninth year. I'm an aerospace engineer with a master in strategic management, so I understand both worlds.

I can talk with engineers in more or less every aerospace field, but I also understand the administrative guys.

COHEN: What led you to take that master's degree?

SÜß : Even as a student, I recognized that I was most interested in how we cooperate. I got interested in how, for example, Airbus, a company located politically in four countries, can make one big thing—how the whole political system works. I did the master's degree in France and saw that they're more strategic thinkers than we are. We say, "Oh, we have a problem, we have to fix it." They first think about the strategies and the positions of what they're going to do. As an engineer, I want

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to understand the problem and then solve it right away. With strategy, it's more about how we position ourselves, how to improve, how we work with partners.

COHEN: A very different kind of challenge from what an engineer does.

SÜß: When I hear people talk about participating in the Cassini mission or working as a thermal engineer for a satellite mission, I envy them. For a strategy guy, it's always talk, talk, talk, and you see the impact two years later; sometimes it's hard to see at all. The result is not a product but a behavior.

COHEN: And results like those are hard to measure, except anecdotally.

SÜß: You can't prove it. It's all "perhaps." Maybe you can talk about how many people came to DLR because this particular institute person was teaching. Or how much more money is made because of the certification of an institute. But these are secondary indicators. If an electronic device on a satellite goes wrong or the gyros

are wrong, engineers can figure out why. For us, it's always, did I say something wrong, wasn't he well informed? Why didn't it work? Sometimes you can't figure it out, sometimes you can, but it's not like an engineer coming with a screwdriver. I can't screwdrive a strategy.

COHEN: What have you learned about how to do the work over the years?

SÜß: When I started this job, I went to people and said, "This is our new strategy; you have to help me implement it and figure out how to measure your work." A lot of times I came out with a bloody nose. They'd say, "I've been in this job thirty-five years and now a greenhorn is telling me what I should do?" Or they just smile and say, "Yes, we'll do everything you want," but nothing happens. I hadn't considered the personal impact. I began to understand about communicating with people. I understood I had to address their needs and fears—why they had this resistance. I had to ask, "How can we help you?" Then I could say, "This is what you want and this is

the strategy; let's do something together that will give you what you want and the boss what he wants." I turned from focusing on technical strategy issues and KPIs [key performance indicators] to communications management.

COHEN: Can you give me a specific example?

SÜß: Working with someone on resource planning in space research, he and I made a lot of lists, but he saw that his boss was against what we decided. He saw the resistance from above, and nothing happened. So I addressed his boss via my boss to explain what kind of benefit he would get from the strategy. His boss got more and more informed and said, "OK, this is a good thing; I understand it." The next time we met, he said, "I got the go from my boss." He needed an official goal from his side.

In another case, I was working with two guys on developing strategies and their own KPIs. Then nothing happened. They said, "When we did all this, we hadn't talked to the CEO." I said, "I'm just here to serve you. I'll step back. You talk to the big boss. If he doesn't want it, he'll tell you. If he wants it, go for it." That's the kind of thing I've learned.

COHEN: When you're new at a job, you think you should do everything yourself, but you learn there are better approaches.

SÜß: Exactly.

COHEN: Are there ways in which your technical background has been important to this work?

SÜß: It's important to be accepted by the technical guys *as* a technical guy. They say, "Oh, you're an engineer," and they're more willing to listen. When we wanted to integrate a little research center into DLR, I needed my technical knowledge because it was about materials science. If I had no clue what they were doing, I couldn't have supported it. With a technical background, I could explain what part of the scientific chain from molecular research to application this technology competence is and why it's important.

COHEN: Part of your communications job must be to communicate within DLR what the strategy is and what it means in practical terms.

SÜß: There have been good changes in our communication policy. Now we put a lot of our strategy on the intranet, where everyone can read it and see what the KPIs are. There are also events for top performers and future leaders where we come in and say, "This is the strategy, let's talk about it." Mr. Wörner, our new CEO—he's been CEO for four years—has gone to every DLR location and said, "This is our strategy; this is what we're planning to do. What are your questions? Challenge me." I was with him the whole time. By being transparent and closer to the people, we get more acceptance. Also, now we say [to senior managers], "We want to go in this direction. You sit together and define the goals and how you think we'll achieve them." That makes it *their* strategy. That changes the commitment. It becomes their own idea.

COHEN: How would you describe your current strategic direction?

SÜß: On the corporate side, we want to be more visible externally, recognized as an excellent partner to industry and government. We are putting a lot of effort into innovation, which is a shift from years ago. The ministry of technology and economy has said, "Whatever you do, it has to serve industry." This means a mind shift. We want to consult more for the government. We are being asked to research, not only to develop interesting things—we want to deliver solutions for problems that the society has. We also want to increase scientific excellence.

COHEN: What are you doing to improve the science?

SÜß: We want to roll out quality improvement to our institutes, including a certification program that will mean people can say, "I know what my job is and I do it right."

COHEN: That sounds like another communication effort.

SÜß: It's partly communication. We have introduced a graduate program to train PhDs in communication and project management skills. We want to create alliances within DLR and with external partners so people can work better together and share information. We're hiring someone for knowledge and information management. All the heads of our institutes are professors at universities, but so far it's only the heads. We want more of our

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staff teaching at universities so they get challenged and we attract the best people.

COHEN: What are your knowledge management plans at this point?

SÜß: One guy who is very into IT [information technology] has proposed using more and more social media applications within DLR—a wiki and Twitter and such things. We asked, "How do people know about these things?"

His answer: "We send them e-mail."

"Did you ever speak directly to them?"

"No."

He is not aware that most knowledge management happens when people are together talking face to face. We told him there are three things in knowledge management: technology, OK, but also organization and people. Especially people. If they want to use electronic devices they can do it, but first they have to meet. You start with the people and finish with the iPad, not the other way around.

COHEN: Have you learned anything at this PM Challenge that can help you in your work?

SÜß: I'm a project manager, so I can directly apply things like how to evaluate projects. I saw one session about using the balanced scorecard approach to evaluate projects, and think maybe I should introduce that, slightly changing the notions and figures. For us, before, it was just asking, "What do you think?" You make project evaluation much more systematic here—sometimes too systematic, but it's valuable. You ask the experts—the strategic management committee and the planning management committee—to judge a project rather than just judging it yourself. I will perhaps apply this method, evaluating to decide which of all the projects we want to do is the best.

COHEN: What do you see as a major difference in how NASA and DLR function?

SÜß: One difference is how you treat finance, scheduling, and money flow. You have to go to the Congress and get the money. We are associated to the Federal Ministry of Economy and Technology. Our government-funded research follows a five-year budget plan. Our scientific projects may take longer to approve, but when they're implemented, we can be sure to get funding for most of them for the next five years. We are therefore not as flexible as NASA is, but we may be more stable in the long term. ●