

MOROCCAN HIDDEN CHAMPION INTERNATIONALIZATION: LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE AT PROMARK GROUP

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ABSTRACT

Subject area: Addressing Leadership Modes is a paramount concern within all firms. In the context of hidden champions, this issue becomes more critical due to their unique characteristics, often family-owned structures, and specialized market niches. It is within the case of Promark Group that we prompt to inquire the leadership modes employed by hidden champions within the unique business context of Morocco.

Study level/ Applicability: Masters students in Business Management Science, Human Resources Management, Entrepreneurship, International Business.

Case overview: With an extensive history spanning over 40 years of experience in Foodservice Professional Equipment, Promark Group stands as a paradigm of effective leadership both within and beyond the organizational confines. In the late 1990's, the company witnessed a transition from a family-run business to a sole proprietorship led by the owner Mr. Abdelmoula, who continued to extend his operations overseas landing in Conakry. Facing both internal and external challenges, Promark Group stands as a genuine exemplar of a Moroccan hidden champion demonstrating effective leadership.

Expected learning outcomes: This case study will improve learning by capturing attention of master's students on the leadership modes within hidden champions. Learners are hence able to explore the hidden champions' concept in the context of Morocco: an emerging economy. Interestingly, learners are allowed not only to identify the leadership modes but to understand their impact on the strategic decision-making, employee's relationship and on the firm' internationalization. Finally, a reflection is initiated to gauge the students' perspectives on leadership dynamics.

Keywords: Hidden champions, Leadership modes, Internationalization, Emerging economy, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

In the bustling streets of Marrakech, an intriguing journey unfolds, woven by Abdelmoula Berrada and his company, Promark Group. It all began with a bold dream and the creation of Berrada Menage, a modest family business. Despite the challenges, Abdelmoula persisted, transforming this small business into a hidden giant, competing on the national stage. His passion, perseverance and unique leadership have sculpted a remarkable success story.

Over four decades ago, Promark Group was born, with its visionary founder Abdelmoula, emerging with exceptional proximity to potential customers and the advanced expertise of its dedicated employees. The company not only outperformed the major Moroccan corporations, but also rose to the top as the undisputed leader in professional equipment and catering. With over 125 partners worldwide, Promark Group offers a wide range of top-quality products, and provides tailored solutions and professional equipment to its local, national and international customers. Today, Promark Group specializes in the

development of foodservice solutions for hotels, restaurants and public communities through 5 divisions: Promark Equipment, Promark Diffusion, Promark Mobilier, Promark Service, and Promark Contract. Certainly, Promark Group has experienced significant performance over time; however, the success story of the Group leads us to examine the secret behind its immense growth despite its low visibility to the large public. Let's delve into this entrepreneurial adventure that reveals the keys to Promark's success in the competitive world of professional equipment and catering in Morocco.

Promark Group History

Located in Marrakesh, Promark was founded in 1982 by its owner and CEO Abdelmoula Berrada. Promark was formerly known as Berrada menage, a small store specializing in tableware and decoration, located in Jbel Lakhder, in the heart of the medina. The choice of Marrakesh stems essentially from the Marrakchi origins of Abdelmoula and his roots in the heart of tourism. The company, which at the time was family-run, decided to specialize in all aspects of CHR equipment. This has enabled it to develop a vast network of customers in the hotel and catering sector. Building on this reputation, Abdelmoula decided in 2001 to expand his business to meet the growing needs of his demanding clientele. Hence, the year 2001 witnessed the opening of the first CHR under the Promark brand, a department store that meets all the needs of restaurants owners, hotel operators and public institutions under one single roof. Starting from this year, Promark has significantly undergone international as well as national development. On the national level, several key dates have marked Promark's development in Morocco, thanks to its founder and director Abdelmoula. In 2009, a key date that marked the separation of Promark's activities. Owner Abdelmoula emphasizes his decision to grow his business by specializing in 3 distinct but complementary activities: large kitchen equipment, tableware and catering furniture. With an extensive background spanning more than 25 years in the professional catering equipment industry, the inception of Promark Group occurred in 2013. This establishment encompasses five fundamental business domains: Promark Equipment, Promark Diffusion, Promark Mobilier, Promark Service, and Promark Contract. The company's core strength lies in the development of these five businesses, each specialized in a particular field. This approach enables the company to develop cutting-edge expertise and respond effectively to the diverse needs of the market, reinforcing its global position.

Embodying its commitment to excellence, Promark Group captures its core philosophy in a slogan that speaks for itself: "The difference is in the detail". The slogan serves as a guiding principle for all the company's activities, underlining the profound importance it places on meticulous attention to every aspect of its operations. This attention given to detail serves as a driving force behind the company's success both internationally and nationally.

As the Moroccan hidden champion thrives and successfully establishes its presence in the local market, its expansion has not been limited to the local market. In 2014, it opened its second store in Casablanca, confirming its commitment to meeting the growing needs of the Moroccan market. In addition, Promark has extended its influence beyond national borders, opening branches in Tangier, northern Morocco. The aim is to reach a wider range of customers and consolidate the Group's presence on the national market. This geographic expansion has enabled us to maintain our market leadership and continue to respond effectively to our customers' evolving needs.

On the international level, recognizing opportunities beyond national borders, the company has ventured into Conakry, Republic of Guinea. The decision to open a group subsidiary in Guinea was a strategic one, taking advantage of its strategic geographical

position and the interest shown by local partners in their business model. In other terms, this choice was not made at random, but rather the result of an in-depth analysis of the African market and its growth opportunities. The Republic of Guinea offers interesting potential for economic development, particularly in the hotel and catering sectors, due to the boom in tourism and industry. By establishing a local presence in Conakry, we have been able to position ourselves strategically to meet the growing demand for CHR equipment in the region. Interestingly, Abdemoula has prospective plans for future expansion in Congo by 2024, with the planned opening of a new subsidiary in Brazzaville.

This strategic growth not only reflects the company's accomplishments but also underscores its commitment to staying close to potential customers across the world, demonstrates Promark Group's ability to adapt to emerging markets and seize growth opportunities wherever they arise, and thereby stamps Promark Group's history of national and international expansion. Today, with more than 125 partners and a sales area of over 2,000 m² and a wide range of products, Promark group is a leader in its field on the Moroccan market.

Abdemoula, the founder

Born and raised in Marrakech, Abdemoula has been building a notable entrepreneurial legacy since 1982. Four decades ago, he established his first project, "Berrada Menage", a modest store in Jbel- Lakhder near by the medina. Abdemoula's Marrakech origins strongly influenced this family project, which specialized in the sale of silverware and household products. His strategic vision was clearly demonstrated by his proactive response to the emerging and ascendant needs of the hotel and catering industry, stimulated by the development of tourism in Marrakech. Indeed, Berrada Ménage's evolution to Promark is an eloquent illustration of Abdemoula's unwavering determination as owner and CEO of the Moroccan brand. As the company evolved, he remained the only constant pillar, fighting for the continued expansion and growth of its business. This transition to Promark Group today has consolidated the company's position as one of the most successful companies in Morocco, gaining unrivalled expertise for 40 years. Abdemoula's focused leadership has created a unique corporate environment, skillfully blending professionalism and family values. Today, Promark Group remains a symbol of entrepreneurial success in Morocco, testifying to Abdemoula's far-sighted vision and ability to turn emerging opportunities into lasting successes. His trajectory illustrates not only the growth of a company, but also the power of perseverance and long-term commitment in the business world.

Towards Human Relations at Promark Group

Promark Group's human capital represents an essential asset for the company's performance and the maintenance of its market position for 40 years. The relationship linking Abdemoula to his staff is characterized by a deep symbiosis, establishing a unique professional ecosystem that extends far beyond conventional boundaries. Today, Promark stands out as a successful hidden champion. This achievement is due to the efforts of its founder Abdemoula, initiated by the careful selection of his staff to work with. He states: "For me, the employees are the pillars of the company. And today, Promark Group could never achieve and maintain this market leadership without its human capital". The reason why Abdemoula is heavily engaged in recruiting staff, he claims: "Generally when all the interviews have gone well, I have to personally review the person chosen". To get the right person in the right place, Abdemoula focuses not only on the candidates' academic background, but also on their attitude to work, given the nature of the company's activity. According to him, "our profession cannot be taught or learned in schools or universities", so

he looks for people who will add value to the company. His focus on adding value at work reflects a genuine concern for creating an environment where employees are not only competent but also aligned with Promark's values and vision. As a result, Abdelmoula's commitment to his employees is expressed from their very first day with the company. The recruitment of young academics, architects, engineers and technicians is part of a leadership strategy focused on developing national skills. This thoughtful approach guarantees not only the competence of new team members, but also their suitability for the demanding nature of the work.

To ensure a flexible and dynamic working environment, Abdelmoula encourages free expression of views, skills and knowledge. The flow of information from one person to another is ensured, so that everyone is heard. This vision contributes to a corporate culture where trust, transparency and mutual understanding are the pillars of a fulfilling professional relationship:

I feel very attached to my employees, as they are the main means of developing and maintaining our company's competitive advantage. Personally, I encourage a pleasant working environment for all employees, so that there is mutual trust and loyalty at work.

This active listening to employees is a catalyst for innovation and creative solutions to everyday challenges, reflecting an employer-employee relationship where recognition of individual value is at the core of Promark Group's culture. Creativity is thus encouraged within the company, "what makes the difference between a person who is going to evolve or not, is the degree of their commitment and their creativity, it's both their know-how and their interpersonal skills" Abdelmoula adds. Promark's evolution over the years has been shaped by the skills and expertise of its employees since 1982. This is the result of the manager's focus on internal and external staff training; and his investment in their ongoing professional development. Abdelmoula affirms:

We train our people ourselves, and that costs us a lot of time, a lot of energy and, above all, a lot of money. For example, a candidate arrives with his or her own general background, and we intervene in his or her training according to customer needs. Also, we call on external training through specialized companies to provide training for our staff. We are currently engaged in an ISO certification process, calling on the expertise of companies specialized in this field. The aim of this certification is to open up opportunities in more demanding markets, both nationally and internationally.

Fostering a supportive workplace, stimulating open communication, a spirit of sharing and increased creativity is all driven by the realization that the cost of losing an employee is significant, underlining the fundamental value the company places on its human capital. As a result, this environment gives rise to a motivated, committed and cooperative workforce, with managers who, testifying to the team's stability, have been recruited since the company's early years. As Abdelmoula testifies: "There are people who have been working with me for 40 years". The team's collective expertise is not only the driving force behind innovation, but also the cornerstone of Promark's positioning as one of the undisputed leaders in its sector.

Promark Group's decision approach

Used to running his business alone since the 1980s, from his first business Berrada Menage to the creation of Promark Group, Abdelmoula is the first and last decision-maker in all matters concerning his company. But that doesn't prevent him from admitting that decisions at Promark Group are taken according to their nature and importance. At Promark Group, with its 5 main divisions, each entity has its own specificities and competencies, generating a range of decisions from day-to-day operations to strategic and investment choices. The decision-making process is structured in levels. Commercial, strategic and

investment decisions are taken by managers, directors or committees according to their impact. For Abdelmoula, some decisions can be taken individually; however, and in the majority of cases, other decisions are taken by top management under Abdelmoula guidance. He adds: "a salesman, for example, with a customer, has the flexibility to offer a discount or a payment deadline. But if the project is more important and the sales turnover is huge, the salesman has to receive authorization from his hierarchy". In addition to individual decisions, there are also collective decisions taken by a group of people or a committee, depending on the nature of the situation. Although employees are listened to, their ideas are not systematically integrated in certain circumstances. Meetings are hence organized to pose problems, share ideas and proceed to the solutions. This approach reflects the importance placed on diversity of perspectives within the company, contributing to its dynamic decision-making and success as a hidden champion on the Moroccan scene.

The task to be tackled is to solve the case based on the success story of Promark Group and its founder Abdelmoula. The aim is to provide a subtle analysis of emerging leadership styles, offering an in-depth understanding of organizational dynamics:

Firstly, according to McClelland's Needs Theory, examine the entrepreneurial profile of Abdelmoula.

Secondly, explore cultural' dynamics of Abdelmoula, identify the nature of employee relations and dive into the decision-making process at Promark Group. Explain how do these elements interact, and their impact on organizational dynamics.

Thirdly, based on Abdelmoula's profile, his own culture, his relation with employees and his decision- making process, identify the leadership modes emerging in managing the Promark Group.

Fourthly, on the basis of all the information provided, assess the possibility of the coexistence of two modes of leadership within the same company. Consider whether such coexistence is right or wrong, and what reasons support your perspective.

Finally, in the context of Promark, define what a hidden champion is according to your understanding of the case studied. And what specific characteristics of the company reflect this status?

TEACHING NOTES

Learning objectives of the case study

Learners are asked to solve the case of a Moroccan Hidden Champion's leadership mode. "Hidden champion" is a specific type of exceptional global successful leaders operating in specific niche markets. They have their own world vision and develop a unique corporate culture difficult to imitate. Their colossal success belies their low profile. Therefore, Hidden champions occupy a leadership position by excelling in highly competitive environments.

Deep-diving into the leadership dynamics within these firms opens up valuable insights into the factors behind their long-lasting competitiveness. Undeniably, a new wave of 'hidden champions' is emerging in Morocco, stimulating the interest of understanding leadership modes within such rising Moroccan firms. The case of Promark Group leads us to uncover the leadership modes adopted by Moroccan hidden champions for a sustained growth. The objectives, in an emerging economy context, are as follows:

Introduce the concept of the "hidden champion" and how Promark Group illustrates this concept in the Moroccan context;

- Examine how personal characteristics of a leader corroborate with the success and sustainability of Promark Group;

- Identify and describe the prevailing leadership modes within Promark Group and their impact on the company's competitiveness on an international scale;
- Deduce the role of the leadership modes and the entrepreneur' culture on: employees' relationship and strategic decision-making;
- Examine how Abdelmoula's leadership modes have influenced Promark Group's internationalization;
- Extract lessons to be learned from the case study of a Moroccan hidden champion;
- Challenge the learners to rethink how two or more modes of leadership can coexist within the same firm.

The earlier discussion on Hidden Champions was in the 1990s by the German professor Hermann Simon, which suggests that this concept is relatively recent on a snapshot. Over the years, a great array of researchers has undergone studies on this phenomenon (Voudouris et al., 2000¹; Schenkenhofer, 2022²); yet, little is known on hidden champions (Witt & Carr, 2013³; Audretsch et al., 2018⁴). Interestingly, few publications on the leadership modes within hidden champions exist (Simon H., 2009⁵; Saginova et al., 2014⁶). The case study of Promark Group fill this gap in the context of an emerging country and seek to uncover the leadership dynamics within Moroccan hidden champions by expanding the boundaries of analysis, encompassing psychological, and behavioral dimensions, and offering insights that can inform successful leadership strategies in similar contexts.

This pedagogical case study portrays a real-world scenario for master students, business school professors, entrepreneurs, managers and academic researchers.

Exploration of Hidden champions' concept: Presenting of a meticulous definition of world markets leaders "hidden champions" and their distinct features, exploring the hidden champions' growth within emerging countries.

Deep-diving into Hidden champions' leadership modes: Identification of the different modes of leadership (Likert, 1972⁷) by delving into the entrepreneur' character traits and culture, employees' relationship and decision-making.

Initiating perspectives on combining two or more leadership modes: rethink the way that two or more modes of leadership can coexist within one enterprise, and their impact on a firm' internationalization.

Teaching notes

Hidden champions' exploration

In early 1990, the business world has been amazed by the rise of a new company type which has reshaped the global economic landscape, shifting the focus not only of businessmen but also of researchers towards small and medium-sized enterprises (Audretsch et al., 2021⁸), known as "Hidden Champions".

The concept "hidden champions" encapsulates a fascinating phenomenon, denoting relatively unknown, yet highly successful companies that excel within niche markets. Coined by notable German professor Hermann Simon, this concept introduces a paradigm shift, redirecting our attention from the well-known corporate giants to these inconspicuous champions that often operate in regional or specialized sectors. Three decades ago, Simon became interested in studying Germany's economic success. Although its small size, Germany was one of the world's leading exporters. By deep-diving into the findings, Simon discovered that the secret behind this immense success were small and medium-sized companies that no one else was aware of their existence, and are so-called hidden champions. Through extensive research and empirical analysis, Simon unveiled the distinctive characteristics that define these enterprises: global market leadership, discreet yet substantial market presence, and a relentless focus on innovation and specialization. Thus, the first

Simon's publication on hidden champions was in 1990⁹ followed by a series of books and articles in 1992, 1996a, 1996b to date. A hidden champion according to Simon (1996a¹⁰) is:

- a) One of the world's top three market leaders, or the number one leader on its own continent.
- b) It must be small or medium-sized and normally, its sales revenue would not exceed 1 billion US dollars.
- c) It must have a low visibility profile in the public domain.

Over the years, research on hidden champions has extended promptly and caught a growing attention of several renowned authors in the field. Although this increased attention to the hidden champions' research, less is known on the hidden champions' phenomenon. We especially lack evidence on the growth of these enterprises and especially their management modes. Against this backdrop, the current case study fills this gap by delving into the leadership modes of hidden champions but for the first time, in the context of an emerging country: Morocco Simon, (1990).

The Hidden champions' concept has emerged from Germany, its birthplace. Consequently, a large number of publications (Logue et al., 2015¹¹; Kamp, 2019¹²) have led readers to believe that the phenomenon of hidden champions is a typically German-speaking affair, whereas this is not the case. Simon went on a tour of Europe, USA, South Africa and New Zealand, and has thus discovered numerous hidden champions. He notes that these companies are strikingly akin from one country to the next, adopting almost identical approaches. They share the same attitudes and values. According to him, hidden champions are more closely matched from one country to another than they are to the big companies in their own country Simon, (2012). The reason why the concept has spread from Germany to many countries including Morocco, our study field.

Promark Group, a Moroccan hidden champion

The case study of Promark Group, a Moroccan enterprise founded in 1982 illustrates the hidden champions' definition. Promark Group operates in the field of food service professional equipment and is specialized in Table Art and Decoration. Abdelmoula Berrada, the founder and CEO of Promark Group, has opened his first small company named "Berrada Menage" 40 years ago, located at Jbel Lakhder-Marrakech. Over the years, the progression of the company's endeavors has evolved incrementally, culminating in Promark's current specialization across five distinct yet mutually reinforcing activities: Promark Equipment, Promark Diffusion, Promark Mobilier, Promark Service, and Promark Contract. To date, Promark Group has become a leader in its specialist field through long-term success. Hidden champions are single-product companies whose competitive advantage lies in operating within a niche market for the long term. These companies evolve by specializing in their own market segments rather than engaging in broader competition (Simon, 1996b¹³). They target specialized and often neglected niches in order to gain a thorough understanding of their customers' unique needs, enabling them to provide highly customized products or services. This focus enables them to build customer loyalty and maintain a competitive edge. In addition, Michael Porter's seminal work on competitive strategy emphasizes the importance of differentiation as a key element of success (Porter, 1985¹⁴). Operating in niche markets enables hidden champions to differentiate themselves from larger, more generalist competitors. Their ability to offer distinct, tailor-made solutions contributes to a perception of expertise and excellence in their chosen niche. And Promark Group fits in this definition, the company initially specialized in a niche market, selling kitchen equipment to local authorities, hotels and restaurants. As the company has evolved, so has its activity, giving birth today to 5 main business divisions. Moreover, by definition, hidden champions are often

medium-sized; however, the more they expand, the greater their size evolves. In his book "Hidden Champions of the 21st Century: Success Strategies of Unknown World Market Leaders", Simon (2009) analyzed 1,300 hidden champions. He concluded that their size had tripled within 15 years. As a result, many former hidden champions, having achieved considerable size and recognition, may no longer fit the third "hidden" criterion, and may have a broader specialization than in their early stages. Given Promark's presence in the market for over four decades, the company has evolved from a medium-sized enterprise to a large corporation. Interestingly, the firm's size growth involves development of new products and consequently, diversification of its activities (Simon, 2009¹⁵, 2012 ; Lehrer & Schmid, 2015¹⁶; Din et al., 2013¹⁷), which corroborate with Promark Group's vision of developing 5 complementary activity poles.

In fact, the hidden champions prompt to expand their activities into foreign territories, but in a well-considered way. Their strategy is based on a dual paradigm: concentration on a niche market and international expansion (Johann et al., 2022¹⁸). In parallel, Promark Group extends its operational footprint beyond Marrakech, establishing a presence in strategic locations such as Casablanca, Tangier and Conakry in Guinea. A forthcoming expansion is slated for Brazzaville in Congo, exemplifying the company's commitment to broadening its geographical reach and reinforcing its position in diverse markets. Notwithstanding its substantial national and international expansion, the Promark Group remains largely less known by the large public.

Hidden champions' leadership modes

Abdelmoula's entrepreneurial profile

The personal characteristics of entrepreneurs have an influence on the type of firm that will be created, and on the way that it will be managed. Abdelmoula's entrepreneurial journey is marked by resilience and determination. He embarked on entrepreneurship as a young man in 1982, setting up his first company "Berrada Ménage", a family business specializing in household products. Despite the dispersal of the family and conflicts of interest between its members, Berrada Ménage evolved from a family to a non-family structure. Undeterred by the complexities, Abdelmoula ventured out on his own to create Promark. This initiative demonstrated his perennial commitment to entrepreneurship and his ability to navigate complex family dynamics. Today, Promark is a major competitor in the Moroccan equipment and catering market, successfully challenging the large corporations.

As the owner and CEO of Promark Group, Abdelmoula's entrepreneurial profile fits perfectly with McClelland's needs theory, and seems to belong to the achievement, power and affiliation profiles of entrepreneurs (McClelland, 1961¹⁹; McClelland, 1965²⁰; McClelland, 1969²¹). This theory postulates that individuals are motivated by three fundamental psychological needs, namely the need for affiliation (the need for positive interpersonal relationships), the need for power (the need to control and influence others) and the need for achievement (the need to succeed in challenging tasks). Abdelmoula's character, his entrepreneurial behavior and his management mode are associated with these needs. Firstly, his commitment to the company's development and his ability to bring together national and local skills demonstrate the need for achievement. He is constantly seeking to expand Promark's activities and respond to market needs, demonstrating an intrinsic motivation to succeed in stimulating challenges. Abdelmoula implies collaboration within work teams, indicating a pronounced need for affiliation; while maintaining a controlling eye on decisions. He has succeeded in building a diversified team by bringing in young talent and fostering a positive working environment, to which all staff from the youngest to the oldest

testify, underlining the importance of interpersonal relations within the company. Finally, Abdelmoula's involvement in the recruitment process, and the fact that he conducts face-to-face interviews with candidates prior to their selection, demonstrates a need for power. By making strategic decisions and influencing the company's management, he seeks to exert significant control in the sector.

Leadership Modes

To identify Abdelmoula's leadership styles, we refer to Likert's typology (1972, 1974²²). As a leader at Promark Group, Abdelmoula's leadership mode at Promark Group reflects a nuanced mix of participative and authoritative approaches, contributing to the company's success as a Moroccan hidden champion.

Abdelmoula, the Moroccan

Over the past few decades, the existing literature on culture has flourished, exploring its multiple dimensions across a variety of disciplines. Hall ET was among the first researchers to tackle the question of culture within companies. In 1976, he introduced a dichotomy between individualistic and

Collectivistic cultures. However, the most influential classification remains that of Geert Hofstede²³, published in 1980, which identifies five major cultural dimensions based on data from over 100,000 questionnaires in more than 50 countries. These dimensions include hierarchical distance, control of uncertainty, individualism and collectivism, the male/female dimension and short-term/medium-term orientation. This approach has largely inspired another research, including the GLOBE study.

In fact, if we can describe Moroccan culture, we can say that it is both simple and complex (Allali, 2008²⁴), distinguished by its unique characteristics, often rooted in religion. Contrary to Hofstede's models, the notions of individualism and collectivism may be ill-suited to Moroccan reality. Indeed, priority is often given to the family rather than the individual, with Moroccans generally motivated by deep-seated family interests. As Hofstede (1984) points out, this preoccupation with family welfare sometimes comes at the expense of self-interest.

Abdelmoula perfectly embodies the Moroccan spirit, marked by traditional values and a deep attachment to his culture. As a Moroccan, he is influenced by social norms and customs that shape his personality and leadership. First and foremost, Abdelmoula values authority and respect for elders, reflecting the deep-rooted social hierarchy of Moroccan society. He recognizes the importance of consulting elders and following their advice, valuing their wisdom and experience accumulated over the years. Moreover, Abdelmoula's perception of time is characteristic of Moroccan culture, where flexibility and tolerance of planning deviations are commonplace. As a result, some former employees are still working for the company for over 40 years. Moreover, Abdelmoula's perception of time is typical of Moroccan culture, where flexibility and tolerance of planning deviations are commonplace. As a polychronist, he understands and accepts occasional delays and last-minute changes, adapting flexibly to unforeseen circumstances. This approach to time reflects the notion of "Inchallah" ubiquitous in Moroccan daily life, where fate is believed to play a significant role in future events.

As Simon (2009) said: "The real difference between good and bad companies lies not in machines, plants, processes or organization, but in corporate culture". Abdelmoula, as a Moroccan manager, is confronted with a corporate culture that is often marked by masculinity, where traditional roles assign positions of power and decision-making to men. Despite progress towards gender parity in the business world, the predominance of men in

management positions remains a reality in many Moroccan companies, including Promark. What's more, Abdelmoula also embodies the humanistic values and hard work characteristic of Moroccan culture. His commitment to the community and his desire to contribute to the well-being of his employees and his company testify to his inherent compassion and generosity. His perseverance in the face of challenges and his dedication to achieving his goals despite obstacles reflect the tenacity and determination often associated with Moroccans. Most importantly, the notion of family occupies a central place in Abdelmoula's life and profoundly influences his worldview and approach to leadership. In Moroccan culture, the family is considered the pillar of society, and Abdelmoula embodies this value by integrating several family members into the Promark company. This family dynamic creates an environment of trust and collaboration within the company, where family ties reinforce professional relationships.

This cultural diversity extends beyond local boundaries to national and international levels. On a national level, Promark has had to navigate the distinct cultural subtleties of Morocco's different regions. For example, the attitudes and behaviors of people living in Marrakech may differ from those of people living in Casablanca or Tangier, due to historical, geographical and socio-cultural factors unique to each region. For Abdelmoula, understanding and respecting these cultural differences is essential to building strong relationships with stakeholders in each region. He recognizes that Marrakchis may have different expectations of products or services than residents of Casablanca, and adapts his business strategies accordingly. This culturally sensitive approach enables it to develop a relationship of trust with different communities, and to respond effectively to their specific needs. On the international front, Promark's expansion into foreign markets introduces another level of cultural diversity. Abdelmoula has to navigate through the cultural nuances of target countries, taking into account differences in language, religion,

Values and social behaviors. In this context, Abdelmoula adopts a cultural adaptation approach, where he seeks to understand and respect local traditions, while integrating Promark's core values. He invests in cross-cultural training for his team and surrounds himself with local advisors to better understand the specificities of each foreign market.

Abdelmoula, the Partner

In examining his relationships with employees, Abdelmoula adopts a participative leadership mode, valuing the contributions and ideas of team members. As a partner, Abdelmoula builds bonds of trust with its employees, where open communication, a spirit of constant support and sharing, and the encouragement of employees' active participation in decision-making are the pillars of a healthy relationship and a favorable working environment, where employees- from the youngest to the oldest feel listened to and recognized. Abdelmoula's vision is geared to the ongoing development of the skills of his human resources, who for him represent an asset not to be lost and which must be valued and protected. To this end, he invests continuously in internal and external training programs, and in building up his team's skills, underlining the importance he attaches to individual growth within the company. The marrakechi partner encourages the active listening of staff and values their proposed solutions for problems, which creates a participative and collaborative environment.

Abdelmoula, the decider

On the other hand, the decision-making process at Promark Group also reveals elements of an authoritarian leadership mode. As a decision maker, Abdelmoula becomes more authoritarian in making his quick decisions and direct control over processes within his

company. This approach is distinguished by a strategic orientation defined by the leader himself, firmly directing decisions towards the predetermined objectives. This decision-making is hence directive because the majority of its choices are often made individually, initiated by the leader himself, reflecting confidence in his own judgment and expertise in the field that dates back to 1982. On crucial issues for example, particularly those relating to strategic planning and major investments, Abdelmoula takes charge and ensures that decisive action is taken. This authoritarian approach ensures that decisions are taken quickly and efficiently, which is crucial to the company's growth and competitiveness in the marketplace. This approach is illustrated in the organization chart of the company. It shows that there is a single general direction and a single administrative and financial direction that controls the five companies: Promark Equipment, Promark Diffusion, Promark Mobilier, Promark Service, and Promark Contract. On the other hand, at the level of the sales department, we understand the existence of five sales departments led by five separate commercial managers.

Coexistence of two leadership modes

A balance of Participative and Authoritarian leadership

The coexistence of two leadership modes: a participative mode and authoritarian mode testifies to Abdelmoula's ability to adapt and his strategic vision. By embedding participative aspects, he fosters a constructive corporate culture, encouraging innovation and employee commitment. At the same time, authoritarian aspects underline the need for decisive action in critical aspects of the business. This blended leadership culture contributes to the agility and ongoing growth of the Promark Group as a hidden champion in the Moroccan marketplace.

Hidden champions, a specific type of medium sized enterprise, combine both the participative and authoritarian leadership modes. In his book "Hidden champions: Lessons from 500 of the world's best unknown companies", Simon (1992²⁵) has shed light on the rationale behind this unique leadership amalgamation by identifying 9 characteristics of hidden champions, including leadership that is both authoritative in its fundamentals and participative in its details. The leaders of hidden champions are endowed with a strong personality, both charismatic and authoritarian, which is the source of their excellent company management. They represent the soul of the company (Voudouris et al., 2000) and are risk-takers. They create a sense of belonging and lasting relationships with their employees, but at the same time they demonstrate agility in decision-making and execution. Simon's research suggests that these companies thrive thanks to their unique way of doing things, which sets them apart from the rest of the companies. They develop their own culture, difficult to imitate, and chart their own path with a long-term vision. To achieve such versatility, Simon confirms the importance and necessity to combine participative and authoritative leadership. On one hand, participative leadership, advocated by the famous psychologist and management theorist Kurt Lewin, emphasizes shared decision-making and employee involvement (K. Lewin, 1939²⁶). It encourages employees to put forward their own ideas, thereby nurturing a culture of creativity and commitment Witt & Carr, (2013). On the other hand, the authoritarian approach, rooted in the theories of Max Weber, provides a clear chain of command and rapid decision-making (Weber, 1922²⁷), which is crucial in a competitive environment such as that in which Promark Group operates (Simon, 1996b).

Promark Group, which operates in a volatile environment under Abdelmoula's leadership, strategically incorporates both modes of leadership to capitalize on their respective strengths. Abdelmoula the partner seeks to empower his staff and ensure that a multitude of viewpoints contribute to strategic initiatives. At the same time, Abdelmoula the

decision-maker, who takes decisive action, ensures the agility needed to react quickly to market changes. Indeed, two modes of leadership can coexist within the same firm and remain a necessity especially in the case of hidden champions who thrive in challenging contexts. Adopting such a hybrid approach makes Promark Group a hidden champion, leveraging the benefits of both participatory and authoritarian leadership to successfully navigate the complexities of its industry.

Cross-Border Leadership

From the outset of his expansion beyond Morocco's borders, Abdelmoula has skillfully combined two leadership styles - participative and authoritative - to sail through the often-tumultuous waters of international markets.

When Promark began exploring opportunities in Africa, and more specifically in Conakry, Abdelmoula quickly understood the importance of adapting to the different cultures and mentalities present on this diverse continent.

"Our managers regularly visit foreign markets, Moroccan expatriates are sent to Conakry, and I myself travel back and forth between Morocco and Congo to follow the progress of the forthcoming opening of our subsidiary in Brazzaville. Our corporate culture is used as an important coordination mechanism.", Abdelmoula stipulates.

Abdelmoula's participative leadership has played a key role in this adaptation. By actively involving his team members in the decision-making process and valuing their ideas and contributions, he created an environment where everyone felt invested and motivated to succeed. This participative approach enabled Promark Group to benefit from a variety of perspectives, and to develop more robust strategies for establishing itself effectively in African markets.

However, in some contexts, Abdelmoula also had to demonstrate firm authority to overcome the obstacles encountered during internationalization. Faced with challenges such as complex bureaucracy, fierce competition and cultural differences, he was able to take swift, decisive decisions to keep the company on course. His authoritarian leadership, far from being oppressive, proved to be a strategic tool for rapidly mobilizing resources and overcoming obstacles encountered on the road to internationalization. This harmonious coexistence of two complementary leadership styles was the driving force behind Promark Group's successful internationalization on the African continent. By combining active team participation with firm, visionary leadership, Abdelmoula has created a dynamic, adaptable corporate culture capable of meeting the varied challenges of international markets. This success testifies not only to Abdelmoula's talent and vision as a leader, but also to his ability to leverage the different facets of his leadership to overcome challenges and seize opportunities on the road to internationalization.

Opening up to New Topics

As for a Moroccan hidden champion, the following two topics could serve as possible extensions to this case study.

Internationalization and entry modes of the Promark Group?

There is also the topic of internationalization strategies and entry modes of a hidden champion to access foreign markets. Hidden champions are known for their strong international presence (Gruenwald, 2013²⁸; Landau et al., 2016²⁹). It is then necessary to understand how a Moroccan hidden champion navigates on the international markets, establishes strategic partnerships and selects modes of entry.

Corporate social responsibility: How do Moroccan hidden champions implement a Corporate Social Responsibility approach?

By focusing on corporate social responsibility (CSR), it is relevant to understand how a hidden champion integrates ethical and socially responsible practices into his business operations (Jungwirth & König, 2019³⁰; Rommelspacher, 2012³¹). Reviewing CSR initiatives assesses one's commitment to sustainability, community engagement and ethical business conduct.

APPENDIX

Notes

Promark Equipment positions itself as a specialist in large kitchen equipment, Promark Diffusion is dedicated to tableware and small kitchen equipment, Promark Mobilier focuses on indoor and outdoor furniture, Promark Services manages physical and informational flows, and finally, Promark Contracts specializes in the design of professional kitchen projects in collaboration with engineering offices and architects Appendix.

CHR equipment or national Cash & Carry is destined to public communities, hotels and restaurants Figure 1, Table 1.

Exhibit 1

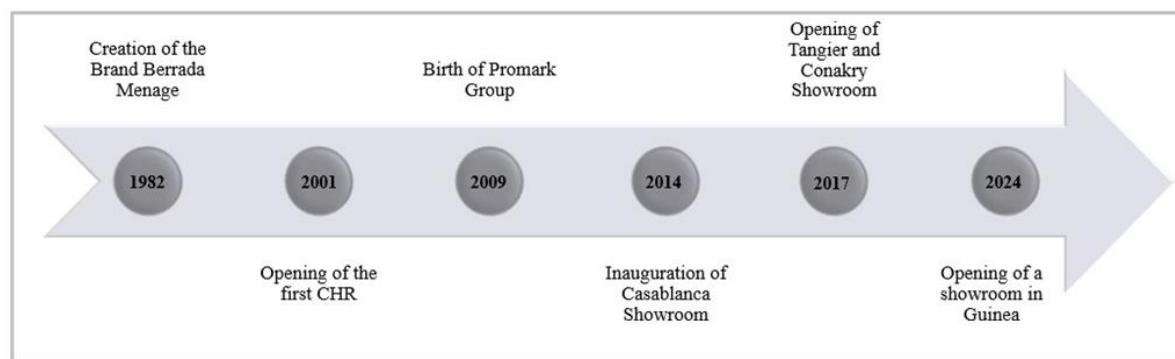


FIGURE 1
PROMARK GROUP'S TIMELINE

Exhibit 2

Table 1 COMPANY DATA OVERVIEW	
Creation date	1982
Founder	Abdelmoula Berrada
Legal form	Limited liability company
Activity	Distribution and installation of professional equipment for Chr and Collectivities
number of items	Over 2 400 products
Number of employees	80
Turnover on 2022	Over 77 000 MAD

Exhibit 3

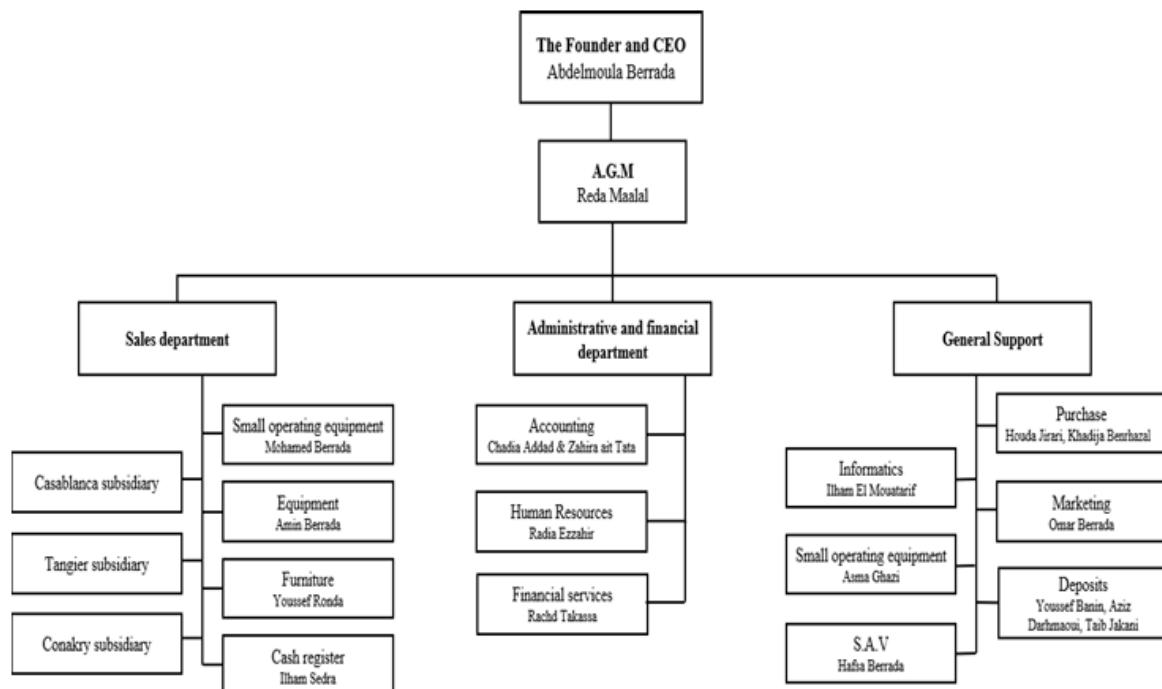


FIGURE 2
ORGANIZATIONAL CHART OF PROMARK GROUP

In order to ensure the confidentiality of Promark Group employees, the first and last names of managers in the organization chart are not given Figure 2.

Exhibit 4

Summary of an interview with an employee

Amal has been with Promark Group since 2007. She testifies to the favorable environment created by Abdelmoula:

We are listened to, and I personally approve of the feeling of belonging to Promark Group. I'm very motivated to be part of the team, thanks to our CEO and his attitude towards us.

What's more, when it comes to decision-making, Amal adds: "Yes, sometimes our solutions are taken into account".

END NOTE

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