

Driving Future Growth: Doubling Down on General Managers



It's no secret that leaders play a critical role in driving innovation and productivity across organizations. Developing that capability and harnessing the power of leaders to drive growth is something, however, that is more critical now than ever. Over the past 50 years, the world has changed dramatically – global economic growth has accelerated, the world economy has expanded, and per capita income has nearly tripled. Despite the booming economy, and in spite of tech innovations, workforce productivity is in jeopardy. As one McKinsey article states, "even if productivity growth matches its rapid rate during the past half century, the rate of increase in global GDP growth will therefore still fall by 40 percent, to about 2.1 percent a year."

A high-tech manufacturing company recognized this need for dramatic change in order to support real growth in the future. To jump-start this change most effectively, the company zeroed in on their general managers as the population within which to focus these mission-critical capability- and knowledge-building initiatives.

Why general managers? The general manager role was one which the organization's leadership had identified as being one of the most pivotal for the company's future success with a critical need to stratify, develop, and curate opportunities for these leaders. Already in a quite senior position, general managers (GMs) are highly likely to become senior executives, but are also at the level of influence where their leadership can either grow or completely destroy the whole talent pipeline below them.

Accelerating Change with Commercial Acumen

As individuals advance in their career from individual contributor to manager, director, and up to executive, they use technical and tactical skills less, and rely on their people and leadership skills more. The company wanted to focus on what these shifts meant for their GMs, and which specific skills GMs needed to be successful and drive growth on the job.

Of the skills discovered, commercial acumen was identified as the most critical. As such, the company oriented their GM program around developing this skill and, ultimately, helping general managers recognize how the best GMs apply their commercial acumen in the pivotal moments they face on the job. For the final module of the program, the company partnered with BTS to design and deliver a capstone solution in which general managers had to apply all the learnings, from each of the different modules, before they graduated from the course.

Simulated Challenges, Real-World Takeaways

The six-hour capstone solution was primarily comprised of a moments-based, sales simulation. The simulation brought to life the scenarios and situations general managers deal related to commercial (product launches, managing customers, driving sales, coordinating marketing initiatives, and leading sales leaders) with in the real-world, highlighting the greatest and most pivotal behaviors GMs can take in each moment. Participants worked through the scenarios in teams, competing against one another. They were tasked with selecting an option, or leadership decision, for each scenario. Every option had a distinct consequence, impacting the three key metrics against which teams were scored: driving revenue growth, improving margins, and driving customer loyalty. Participants also took breaks from the simulation to go through different knowledge building sessions, which introduced and dove into concepts such as decision making, the X>XY>Y selling method and sales leadership best practices.

Senior executives, including the Chief Commercial Officer, joined the program as observers, helping to drive key takeaways and tie it back to the business. This became an opportunity for these executives to talk to participants about the real-world application of these concepts, highlighting the practical and actionable learnings from the fun experience. At the end of the simulation, participants were not left to figure out for themselves what from the session was most applicable on the job. Instead, they received a Playbook of simple and crisp takeaways, and what great versus average general managers do on the job.

At the end of the program, multiple participants committed – in front of their peers, the HR team, and the chief commercial officer – to actions that they would take on the job as a result of the simulation debates. As one participant said, "This was a very fun but at the same time insightful exercise. Debating and learning from peers with a wealth of experience is always helpful." Equipped with the commercial acumen and sales leadership skills they needed, this general manager population is now prepared to drive growth and lead the company into the future.