

Empowering Country Managers to Drive Growth



JF Hillebrand Group How can you create a platform for change, when for the past 10 years the business has been growing steadily? This was the challenge faced by the CEO at JF Hillebrand, a global logistics company with a loyal customer base and a reputation for service quality. Despite the business performing well on both revenue and profit targets, the CEO and Executive Board were concerned that ongoing economic volatility and rising competition could spell tougher times ahead.

Some of the specific concerns were that the company's focus on quarterly profitability had been undermining more long-term investments, and that there was insufficient market segmentation or business planning. Additionally, the shifting customer and competitor landscape called for a broader approach to the service portfolio. As one board member described it, "We have a narrow perspective on our capability that makes it difficult for us to look at opportunities beyond our traditional business."

As a decentralized company with a network across 91 countries, any efforts to ignite growth would ultimately lie with the Country Managers, who became the focus of the programs to drive change.

A new set of expectations for Country Managers

As a first step, Group HR redefined the Country Manager role to include a revised set of expectations around business planning, driving growth, service delivery, talent development, resource management and collaboration across the group. For many of the Country Managers, the new expectations simply codified what they had already been doing. For others, it was helpful to have a framework that could guide a more systematic approach.

One of the areas where the Executive Board felt they needed to provide more specific support was around business planning. Country-level business plans were inconsistent and some lacked data and analysis. Previous efforts to build capability in this area had proven ineffective.

Time to try something very different

To bridge the gap, the leadership team began to plan an offsite that would bring the Executive Board, Area Directors and Country Managers together to re-set expectations and provide a hands-on opportunity to practice business planning. JF Hillebrand partnered with BTS to craft a three-day experience that would enable Country Managers to:

- 1 Practice gathering and evaluating market data to prioritize business opportunities
- 2 Create actionable business plans for growth and align their resources accordingly
- 3 Take short-term risks for long-term development of the business
- 4 See the value and long-term payoff from comprehensive and data-driven business plans

Intense, immersive, realistic

The experience included Leadership led know-how sessions and a robust, customized business simulation, application sessions and more. Before attending the event, Country Managers were divided into teams and received a detailed case study and market report for a fictitious country that they would be managing over a three-year period.

The offsite then began with an intense business planning process that mirrored real life. Teams were able to invest their limited resources into acquiring customer and market data, which they used to discuss and prioritize opportunities, and make forecasts. They used large format table maps to align as a team and formulate their strategy.

The Country Managers then executed their strategy in a competitive business simulation. Over three rounds of decision-making, teams built up new service capabilities, opened new market segments, and launched initiatives that would drive long term business growth. After each round, teams went back to revise their business plan based on the market realities, their competitive position, and additional data that they received.

Genuine excitement for driving change

The offsite was the first time Country Managers had gathered together as a cohort and discussed business planning with their peers. By working on it in teams, they were able to gain insights and learn from each other's experiences. They were able to experience first-hand how business planning is an essential prerequisite for sustainable growth. The workshop helped Country Managers become more supportive of the business planning process, and created excitement about the next opportunity to go through the steps in reality.

At the end of the three days, participants shared their experience:

"An amazing adventure and state-of-the-art experience"

"Opened new horizons in the process of managing my job"

"Outstanding experience. Well designed and very well facilitated"

"Excellent, very informative and I can't believe how fast the time passed"

"I go home with a heavy tool box; thanks!"

"The hands-on approach by doing it in a simulation game worked out well. BTS really grasped the essence of our business and made it a real-life experience."

– Leendert Vis,
CIO at
JF Hillebrand

This sentiment was shared by the Executive Board. "The impact of the exercise is significant," said Leendert Vis, CIO at JF Hillebrand. "We have been trying to pass this training message to our teams through PowerPoints, meetings and endless Excels. This time with the simulation, the colleagues really got what we were trying to say before. The hands-on approach by doing it in a simulation game worked out well. BTS really grasped the essence of our business and made it a real-life experience."

So, what happened when the "rubber hit the road"?

JF Hillebrand's leadership team knew that the weeks and months immediately after the training were crucial for changing behavior in the long term. As Frank Dam, Group Head of Leadership Development summarized, "The program has helped us to build the foundation for driving growth in the future. It is up to us now to develop this further into an embedded sustainable process." This included a series of coaching calls as the Country Managers then went through the real-life process of business planning, and a new initiative to strengthen the company's feedback culture.

2016 was a challenging year for the economy, which meant tougher trading conditions for logistics companies including JF Hillebrand. Nevertheless, the company managed to meet its annual growth target. BTS followed up with several of the Country Managers a year later to learn what had been the impact of the initiative on them, once it was back to business as usual.

There were two main areas that the Country Managers described they had seen noticeable change:

- 1 **Mindset:** Country Managers described genuine empowerment about defining their market and setting priorities. They talked about going back to the ideas and themes of the workshop, such as really thinking about which segments have the greatest potential and aligning their resources appropriately. Business planning is now seen as a core and integral part of their role, rather than a separate administrative task.

"It's really changing the way that we do business," said Carolina Hours, Country Manager for Spain. "The planning, the analysis, creating winning plans and concentrating, being more concise. It's great."

- 2 **Common Language:** Country Managers and Area Directors are able to communicate clearly about business planning by using consistent terms and frames of reference. One of the Area Directors described the change he had observed: "We are speaking the same language irrespective of our countries, which is very good. It [business planning] was not a top priority, this is not the case anymore."

As Norbert Modla, Group Head of HR, summarized, "We see definite progress in Country Managers making big bets, backing them up with adequate resources, and being systematic about new business, customers and segments."

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