

Executing a "One Company" Strategy

Building Leadership Skills and Business Acumen through a Business Simulation Experience



Sabre, a key software and services technology solutions provider to the global travel and tourism industry, recently became publically traded after seven years of private equity ownership. As a result, leaders at Sabre found themselves focusing heavily on the demands required of a public company – hitting financial targets, reaching growth objectives and more. At the same time, they realized that in order to achieve their long-term objectives, they needed to devote attention to developing the next generation of Sabre's leaders.

Setting up the company for the future required bringing to life the vision of the organization as "One Sabre". Both business acumen and leadership development would prove vital to this effort. To truly embody "One Sabre", Sabre's leaders would have to be aligned to the broader company-wide strategy, have an enterprise view of the business, and possess the right knowledge and capabilities to convert these principles into actions.

In partnership with BTS, Sabre outlined a solution: a customized business simulation for high-potential leaders. This simulation would not only help participants understand how they fit individually into driving results for the overall business, but also jumpstart the development and expansion of each individual's leadership capabilities. By intertwining business acumen and leadership development components, this business simulation experience would take a holistic approach to building core capabilities and setting up these high-potential leaders for success.

Developing Business Acumen & Leadership Skills Using a Customized Business Simulation

Together, Sabre and BTS created a unique, three-day simulation-based experience customized to fit Sabre's values, strategic initiatives, business models, and market dynamics. The business simulation itself combined market analysis, strategy creation and the execution of technology, sales, operations and human capital decisions.

The unique design of this team experience caused participants to grapple with not only resource allocation issues, but also with leadership and management styles – within

the simulation environment as well as in real-time. In addition, the knowledge-building sessions interwoven through the simulation rounds heavily involved leadership skill building and self-reflection – seamlessly integrating leadership and business acumen learnings.

At the beginning of the program, participants were divided into simulation teams. Each team, or “company,” competed against other teams in a highly competitive and dynamic marketplace. Participants transformed into the leaders of a fictional company called Simitar – a leading technology solutions provider to the global travel and tourism industry, unique in its global span and key role to a broad range of travel suppliers and buyers. The simulation reflected Sabre’s main business units as well as its core technology and support organizations. As in the real world, customers in each market of the business simulation had unique priorities that would evolve over time – leading to a dynamic competition around who could serve those customer needs most effectively and efficiently. Everyone started in the same position, but as each team came up with unique execution plans and made decisions, each company began to take a different form within the marketplace.

Over the three “years” of the simulation lifecycle, the companies battled for market share, revenue and profits. Each company had a common goal: to maximize revenue and profitability while outperforming the other companies on customer satisfaction and employee engagement. Key business challenges included balancing long-term and short-term goals, achieving One Sabre by overcoming a history of managing in silos and developing scalable technology.

Unexpected events and unforeseen occurrences disrupted business operations, forcing participants to think on their feet in a manner representative of reality. Their ability to collaborate and define a strategy, then focus on and execute that strategy consistently throughout the three years of operation, determined their success. Following each round of simulation, participants received an analysis of their team’s and their competitors’ decisions in a debrief session. This session revealed the results of the past simulated year and linked the decisions made in the simulation to the financial results that participants achieved.

Leadership Development as “Multipliers”: An Integral Part of the Business Simulation

The knowledge-building sessions held between simulation rounds gave participants the chance to acquire new leadership tools and frameworks while exploring different aspects of their own leadership styles. Facilitators introduced the idea of “multipliers,” a unique concept that helped encourage participants to expand their own leadership capabilities and learn how to create an environment where integrity, accountability, creativity and collaboration can thrive. This engaging, actionable content, provided by the Wiseman group, contrasts effective, inspiring leaders – “multipliers” – with “diminishers,” or those who view intelligence in an elitist way that causes shut down amongst employees.

Multipliers manage five key areas differently than less effective leaders:

1. Talent – Multipliers do not simply introduce new talent and leave these hires to put their pre-established skills to work, but look for talent everywhere, taking the time to understand each individual’s capabilities and develop talent at every level within the organization.
2. Culture – Multipliers foster a productive environment, are tolerant of mistakes, and promote learning, while diminishers demand results in a way that often builds anxiety and shuts down bold thinking.

3. Strategy – Multipliers set direction and propel growth by focusing on what the group might learn and pushing employees to look beyond what they already know, as opposed to diminishers, who force their own point of view upon the group.
4. Decision making – Multipliers do not make decisions alone, but rather give everybody a chance to weigh in, engage people in rigorous upfront discussions and encourage debate.
5. Execution – Multipliers see themselves not as heroes with all the answers, but as coaches and teachers who let people own their results and reward employee success and self-sufficiency.

Participants explored this “multipliers” concept and developed actionable behaviors by spending time identifying each person’s “native genius,” and looking for ways to employ that genius within the simulation as well as in real life. They also worked on uncovering “accidental diminishers” – the personal leadership behaviors we all demonstrate occasionally that, though well-intentioned, can diminish the capability and effectiveness of the team, peers and direct reports – and explored specific “multiplier behaviors.” After these discussions, team members were given opportunities to practice decision making, applying these concepts not just in exercises, but also in situations within the simulation where their decisions would impact the broader team and results.

97% of participants would highly recommend the course to a colleague

Actionable Concepts, Impactful Results

The entire business simulation experience ultimately focused on broadening participants’ perspectives, equipping them with new knowledge and skills, changing behaviors and driving business results. Throughout the program, participants were given time to reflect on key learnings and plan the actions they would commit to back on the job. The feedback and results received after the program highlighted the effectiveness of the concepts taught. The program was initially delivered three times to a total of 75 Sabre leaders with extremely positive results and feedback.

In ranking the statement, “I developed new insights into my leadership approach, and have embraced some new approaches to managing the talent around me,” participants gave it an average of 4.57 out of 5, with 5 being “strongly agree.” As for the statement, “I can more easily identify how our business units and functions must collaborate to create improved returns for shareholders,” participants ranked it an average of 4.48 – highlighting the immediate impact and efficacy of the program and its key learning points.

Many participants also provided detailed comments as part of their feedback. The majority of leaders cited the engaging nature of the program, the idea of “multipliers,” and the mix of leadership and business acumen concepts as the most beneficial aspects of the program. Others spoke about the program in general. One leader called it, “the best business and leadership training Sabre has ever offered me.” After receiving such positive responses, Sabre’s talent development leaders decided to internally market the program and scale it amongst a wider group of leaders.

About BTS

BTS focuses on the people side of strategy, working with leaders at all levels to help them make better decisions, convert those decisions to actions and deliver results. At our core, we believe people learn best by doing. For 30 years, we’ve been designing fun, powerful experiences™ that have profound and lasting impact on people and their careers. We inspire new ways of thinking, build critical capabilities and unleash business success. It’s strategy made personal.

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