Technology Company Leverages Assessment Centers to Develop Senior Leader Capabilities

A leading U.S-based, multinational open source software provider has been growing rapidly, with 7,500 employees bringing in over $1.5 billion in revenue in the last fiscal year. During the company’s early years, it developed a culture of transparency, a willingness to provide and accept feedback and a key strength: the notion that great ideas can come from anywhere in the organization. While this culture still remains, friction has increased as the company works to accelerate product development in a larger, more complex corporate environment. Much bigger than it was just five years ago, the company recognizes a need to build new skills and capabilities to lead it into the future.

Due to this rapid growth, the company has had to increase the hiring of external people at senior levels – creating the need for a form of onboarding with which the company has had little experience, as historically it had tended to promote from within. Additionally, the changing business climate and increase in organizational size resulted in leaders focusing on their individual areas, not collaborating across functions or geographies.

To tackle these issues, the company undertook a holistic approach that started with diagnosing the current capabilities of key leaders, then accelerating their development into senior roles. Having partnered with BTS in the past on a program for mid-level leadership development, it reengaged BTS to create an assessment experience for 14 key senior directors and vice presidents. The goal of this experience: to identify each participant’s development needs, create development plans for each participant, and leverage BTS’s assessment practice coaches to address those development needs.

Developing a Virtual Assessment Center to Address Real World Challenges

One of the key challenges in creating this assessment experience lay in the organization’s particularly complex set of success criteria, which was based on approximately 50 different capabilities and behaviors. Designing a powerful way to measure these key criteria, replicating the organization’s work environment, and identifying development opportunities for each individual within a realistic simulation of the company would all be crucial to the program’s success. To address these components and evaluate many
elements of this multilayered capability model, BTS embedded within the assessment center career interviews, written challenges and role plays. These components provided participants with opportunities to demonstrate key capabilities, such as strategic thinking, business acumen, collaboration, persuasion and influence, trust, and more.

Pre-work exercises were designed to prepare the participants for the assessment center simulation, while series of follow-up coaching sessions reinforced learning and on-the-job application of concepts well after the participants completed the simulation. The assessment center itself was an individual web-based virtual experience. During the five-hour business simulation, participants experienced a live inbox of written challenges, conducted a business analysis, wrote a strategic business plan, and participated in role plays with peers, direct reports, customers and managers. At the end of the assessment center experience, participants met with their executive coaches – senior-level individuals with whom they had been paired – to debrief on the simulation experience, talk about what they learned and create a development plan for the future.

Through three additional coaching sessions, participants took targeted action to address their development needs. A key component of the overall program, the coaches were figures with whom participants would continue to work after the duration of the assessment center experience, meeting for feedback sessions, continued learning opportunities and more. This one-on-one development journey jump-started participants’ growth and put them on the fast-track to significant success. Participants’ real-life managers, along with the organization’s learning team members and the program’s executive sponsors, also participated in a series of follow-up meetings with participants and coaches.

**From Assessment Center to Individual: Purposeful Design Leads to Personal Development**

The highly positive feedback received after the program highlighted its success. Participants rated the relationship between the business simulation challenges and their job four out of five, and all described gaining new personal leadership insights as a result of the assessment. As one participant said, “The challenges in the business simulation were a perfect match for my job. Different names and different subjects, but otherwise I deal with this every day.” All participants agreed with the feedback they received during the program, and everyone saw a logical connection between the recommendations of the program and the skills and qualities needed to be successful at their real-life role in the company.

The results from the pilot program have demonstrated such positive change – for example, since completing the program, one participant has taken over leadership of an entire business unit – that the client has decided to repeat the program for another cohort of 10 leaders. Recognizing the value BTS can provide in post-assessment accelerated development, the client has engaged BTS to implement a group-based strategic and business acumen simulation that will provide additional assessment and learning opportunities after the virtual assessment. Additionally, the client is looking for opportunities to expand the program to a broader audience at the senior and, in a more scalable fashion, junior levels.

While this initial program targeted only a small number of key leaders, the successful, personalized leadership growth it achieved has proved instrumental in accelerating a cultural shift at every level of the organization. The positive momentum is expected to continue, and BTS will continue to serve as a strategic partner going forward.
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.

For more information, please visit www.bts.com.