Business simulation transforms Oracle Sales Managers

When Oracle, the world's largest enterprise software company, wanted to implement a complete training package for their sales managers across Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA), they turned to Elgood Effective Learning to devise a suitable business simulation.

Oracle wanted to address the fact that their sales managers across Europe needed better sales management training. Peter MacNaughtan, from the Oracle project team, explains, "There were many sales skills workshops, presentation workshops and the like, but when you appoint a new sales manager, whether through recruitment or promotion, he or she would ask themselves a range of questions like *"What have I seen that works? What do I think is the right thing to do? What have I done elsewhere? Who do I look to as role models?"* There was no great consistency or sharing of experiences between sales managers. To address this, we set up the Manage Your Sales Business (MYSB) workshops."

The logic behind MYSB was that first line sales managers have the single biggest impact on the business. Oracle recognised that their sales managers do a great job of motivating and directing salespeople and driving forward opportunities. In light of this, a conscious decision was made to implement a structured development process for sales managers, particularly around the tools and processes of their job. How can these be used to improve the effectiveness of the sales manager? How can we raise the capability of the average to be as good as the best?

Core to MYSB was the bringing together of sales managers from different countries with differing experience. Over the course of a 2 ½ day workshop, a wide range of topics could be covered with a significant amount of useful discussion and interaction. There was a lot of sharing of information and ideas and the sales managers left with their own check lists which outlined how they could improve their sales teams.

The idea of bringing in Elgood to develop a business simulation for the MYSB seminars came from Martyn Lowry, Oracle's Vice President of Sales Readiness, who had used the company a year before for a specific event.

Peter MacNaughtan then volunteered to manage the MYSB project; "We knew the topics we wanted to cover, but were unsure about what a business simulation would look like. We didn't know how we could bring together the business concepts, so we approached Elgood and asked them to create a business simulation for us."

 Christine Elgood, Managing Director of Elgood Effective Learning, personally oversaw development of the MYSB business simulation. She said, "For those with knowledge of a small area business simulations promote understanding by demonstrating how an individual's specific part interacts with the other parts in the organisation . This improves cooperation and effectiveness. For those with wider responsibilities, it demonstrates the inter-dependencies between the key components of a system and enables them to take decisions that will have maximum benefit for the whole organisation."

Over a series of meetings the form of the simulation began to crystallise. There was a systematic dissection of specific business issues and each of these was then addressed in the simulation in order to help the learning process.

As Christine Elgood explains, "The game takes the essence of a problem or challenge and creates a vehicle for discovery. It provides a solution to a business need through communication and training. There are holes people can fall down if they don't get the message. Teams that do well, or not as the case may be, have a realisation of why. Individuals and teams develop a perception of different ways of doing things."

Peter MacNaughtan, "It was a fascinating process. We'd have these conversations where we'd talk about what we wanted to say, and Christine Elgood would keep pushing us to define it more and more clearly. At the end of the process, we had a much better understanding of what we were asking people to do and why. As a result we had a tangible development programme with logical stages that could be run as a business simulation that accurately reflected real business practice."

A good business simulation will be enjoyable for the participants, particularly where teams compete against each other and there is a game element, however, it will also have a serious purpose , in this instance the simulation enables the participants to try some of the

ideas that are explained during the workshop. It has three sections on territory planning and one on account planning. The participants are asked to explore each activity as a sales manager, not as a salesperson. They are also asked to respond to demand generation initiatives and manage opportunities as they arise. This element of multitasking simulates the pressure to keep lots of balls in the air and particularly the need to balance long term demand generation with more immediate opportunity management. The winner of the game is the team with the maximum revenue and the maximum pipeline. Throughout the process the participants are exploring the ideas and learning by doing.

Prior to the business simulation being developed, Oracle had a lengthy   PowerPoint presentation on territory planning alone. The planning process covered five stages and the work with Elgood drove Oracle to think through more clearly the detail content and a framework for working through each stage.

To date, Oracle have run the MYSB workshops eight times and the business simulation has always been tremendously well received. Peter MacNaughtan provides an example, "At the very first MYSB workshop we had the entire group together and kicked off the programme. It starts with two fairly heavy PowerPoint presentations and you can tell the attendees begin to suspect that they're in for 2½ days of this. After the second presentation we started the business simulation in which they actually do the first two stages of planning outlined in the presentation. We began by telling them what the game is about and how it's played then we gave them the materials and off they went. Within a few minutes there were animated discussions in the teams and you could actually see people learning by doing. That for me was really one of the seminal moments in underpinning how important and how useful the game is."

"We regularly take feedback and it's always extremely good on the game. - very, very positive in fact. It's not just because it's an enjoyable activity, the sales managers have come away saying the game really helped them understand what it was they needed to do and to share ideas. You can't ask for more than that."

Phil Codd, one of the workshop participants from Ireland, agrees, "The business games have been extremely well received. They've been very well put together and I think they're very applicable and I'd actually like to run them, perhaps in a modified form, for my own sales team at some stage. Finally, I think as always with these courses, I feel motivated. When I return back to Ireland there are a couple of things I'm going to try out perhaps tomorrow, or if not, next week."

The outcomes of the exercise have had real and lasting benefits. At the conclusion of the workshops a number of participants asked for copies of a spreadsheet used in the territory planning exercise. Oracle developed their own and it is now being used in many of the business units across Europe. Many sales managers are now using it as their regular planning and review tool with their sales teams. They're using it to decide their plan for target companies; which ones they are going to invest time in; which ones are being viewed in an opportunistic way and why. That territory planning activity is now firmly built into the way in which most of the countries now work and it's come directly from MYSB and specifically the business simulation.

Each business simulation will be tailored and Oracle's will be quite different from another company. The processes are different. The real benefit of a business simulation is being able to take a business situation and a target audience and create something that'll achieve what the company wants.

Peter MacNaughtan sums up his view on the whole programme; "The power of being able to develop a simulation that reinforces a message of a particular training or development programme is shockingly powerful. I was amazed at the effect it had."

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Oracle (NASDAQ: ORCL) is the world's largest enterprise software company. For more information about Oracle, visit: http://www.oracle.com

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