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BECOMING A GENERAL MANAGER: Career Planning Advice for Supply Chain Leaders

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This issue of *CSCMP Hot Topics* summarizes a research report with valuable managerial implications.

OVERVIEW

The most successful supply chain leaders are deeply engaged in the details of their companies' operations and are able to manage highly complex organizations. To position themselves for senior general management roles, however, these leaders need to actively build a broader set of skills and experiences.

What do I need to do to make the leap into general management (GM)? It is a question supply chain management (SCM) leaders ask often. In fact, the SCM function can be an excellent training ground for general management roles. Drawing on many years of experience advising and recruiting supply chain leaders and general managers, we offer the following advice for supply chain leaders aspiring to general management.

VIEWING BUSINESS ISSUES FROM A GENERAL MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

SCM professionals are more likely to be seen as having general management potential if they consistently look at the bigger picture and find ways to help the business create value. One way to cultivate a general management perspective is to observe how strong general managers think about the business and approach problem solving.

Several senior executives who have come up through the SCM function told us that mentors helped instill a general management orientation in them, and this influence was especially powerful early in their careers. Supply chain leaders who develop this macro-level view of upstream and downstream cause-and-effect relationships are better prepared to create value for the business—and position themselves as growth drivers.

Supply chain leaders aspiring to general management should avoid overspecialization within the function, which can prevent the development of the broad perspective on the business that GMs need to have, and strive to build portfolios of experience, both within and outside of supply chain.

Even when operating within supply chain positions, it's important to also try to take a general business perspective in cross-functional meetings and practice the general management mindset. We go into detail on what techniques seem to help in this regard.

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DEVELOPING A BROAD UNDERSTANDING OF OTHER FUNCTIONS AND BUSINESS UNITS

Cross-functional experience is critical for building the influencing skills and developing the broad-based business perspective that a general manager needs to have. General managers must be able to ask smart questions about all facets of the business and collaborate across functions, most of which have their own vocabularies and priorities. Exposure to other functional areas and business units early in one’s career develops this important knowledge base and builds a valuable network of relationships across the company.

While some companies have formal programs for rotating high-potential supply chain professionals through other functions, such programs are the exception. Therefore, supply chain professionals should be prepared to seize opportunities to participate in cross-functional projects or work in another function, even if it means accepting a lateral move or being flexible about the location.

“If you want to build a generalist career, it’s going to take a sacrifice on your part. You’re going to have to take some lateral assignments across the organization to get that experience,” advised a former supply chain leader who is now CEO of a US food product company. “Take advantage of every opportunity you can to get cross-functional experience.”

UNDERSTANDING WHAT DRIVES THE CUSTOMER

The CEO and other general managers must be champions of creating value within the enterprise. Supply chain executives who understand what drives the customer—and, by extension, what drives the business—are more likely to be viewed as general management material. Supply chain leaders can gain insight into the customer by spending time with customers in the field: joining members of the sales team in customer meetings or immersing themselves in customer accounts or customer management. In consumer-facing businesses, where the customer is the consumer, supply chain professionals should learn as much as possible about marketing and the changing preferences and behaviors of consumers—some of which have implications for the supply chain, including the desire for more information about where products are sourced.

SEEKING OUT MENTORS

Mentors can expand your perspective on the business, serve as models for specific leadership skills, provide important advice about navigating challenges, and open doors to new opportunities. A strong sponsor also can be a powerful force in overcoming the cultural inertia that can prevent a supply chain executive from moving into general management. Take advantage of formal mentorship programs if your company offers them, but bear in mind that the best relationships tend to be those in which chemistry develops between the mentor and mentee. Finding mentors in other functions can also be beneficial for broadening your perspective and widening your network.

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About CSCMP Hot Topics

Each issue of *CSCMP Hot Topics* is initially released as a member-only benefit. Each edition may include early results from ongoing research being conducted for CSCMP or other organizations; new supply chain practices, thought-provoking ideas, or emerging trends; discussions of changes in the broader business and regulatory environment that may affect supply chains; or summaries of academic journal articles that have valuable managerial implications.

BUILDING THE BEST TEAMS

A strong leader has confidence and a healthy sense of self, surrounds him or herself with good people, and invests in them through mentoring and training. Successful general managers are able to create an integrated team of highly trusted individuals from different disciplines who come together to create something larger than themselves. Supply chain leaders aspiring to general management will want to surround themselves with exceptional talent, including marketing, sales, and finance talent who can cross-pollinate ideas and inject a commercial mindset into the function.

BEING YOUR OWN CAREER ADVOCATE

In a world of increased specialization and fewer “small” GM opportunities, supply chain professionals can ill afford to be complacent about their careers. Supply chain leaders shouldn’t wait to be tapped on the shoulder for new developmental opportunities, but instead actively manage their own development. Many organizations do not have formal programs to rotate supply chain leaders in different functions, immerse them in key customer accounts, or pair them with a mentor, so supply chain leaders who want to broaden their knowledge and skills should create their own opportunities.

Ask to join your counterpart in sales on a handful of sales calls. Seek out a marketing leader to learn more about segmenting and targeting customers, or the CFO to discuss ideas for driving value in the business. As one executive explained, “You don’t have to spend months in a department to show interest and let the CEO know that you want to earn additional responsibility.” Make sure to communicate your interest in broadening your knowledge base to your boss. Have a formal conversation about your career and the opportunities that interest you at least once a year.

CONCLUSION

Supply chain professionals who aspire to become general managers should cultivate an insatiable interest in the broader business and its customers. They should identify the gaps in their knowledge base and proactively seek assignments, projects, and opportunities that will broaden their experience and perspectives. By doing so, supply chain leaders will not only increase their visibility as potential general management candidates, but will become more successful leaders.