



The Professor's Column



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LINKS Helps Army Officers Understand Business Supply Chain Challenges

As a warrior-fighter and a logistics officer during a war-time event, the decisions made to get materials and supplies to those at the front are simple. You do whatever it takes - no matter the cost. You simply make the best decisions that will get the materials moved and in place in the fastest way possible. But what we learn in SCM classes and with the LINKS Supply Chain Simulation, is that in business you never have this luxury if you expect your business to succeed.”

This is only one of the many comments about LINKS and the lessons covered as part of the MSB Supply Chain Management/Business degree program offered by the University of Kansas for officers attending the US Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) at Fort Leavenworth, KS. I am one of the KU faculty involved with this unique program. I've used the LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation [Extended Edition] in the SCM Introduction course, and have observed how effective it is in helping the officers understand the complexities of managing a business supply chain.



The officers, recently promoted to the rank of Major, are engaged in one of their first rigorous Command training programs. Nearly all of the Officers are returning from multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Those who elect to participate in the KU MSB program, which is completed in the 10 months while they are assigned to the CGSC, do so on their own time and as additional education to the CGSC curriculum. The MSB program is approved by the Army to further understanding and knowledge about supply chain and logistics principles, which may have applicability to their military assignments, but which will certainly enhance the officer's opportunities once they depart the military. And with the military's recent expansion of the use of 3rd-party services outsourcing, the program provides a solid business and supply chain experience for the officers.

Using the LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation [Extended Edition] is most appropriate for these Master's level students. They thrive on the competitive nature of the simulation, and are able to gain an understanding of the complexities of the generate demand, product configuration, and service elements of the Extended Edition. I initiate the simulation beginning with the very first class, and continue the decision rounds through the final class eight sessions later, with a total of

nine to twelve rounds. The Officers find the team work required as a natural extension of their military training, but find it important to identify the specific skill sets each has for the various performance areas of the LINKS firms. As with any group participating in LINKS, learning all aspects of the LINKS simulation is important, just as is the division of responsibilities once the simulation is in full swing. I've found the teams that perform best are those who share responsibilities, but come together to make informed decisions through sharing their ideas and suggestions for each decision round.

As an instructor, I don't spend much time in the initial stages of the simulation explaining how it works. It is important, I believe, that the officers read and gain the basic understanding of the simulation on their own. Obviously, I am available for questions at any time. Those teams that focus on a thorough understanding, which often comes from the team sharing what they have learned and what they believe are the key elements early on, are usually the most successful.

I can't overstate the competitive nature of these officers. Most have participated in military simulations and many have been engaged in logistics and supply chain assignments as part of their normal military duties. They believe they know what it takes to be effective. And certainly for military



assignments, this is true. But, being effective is only one aspect of being successful in managing supply chain activities in business. What surprises them is how complex managing the supply chain is when being efficient is also a critical component of success. Most have not experienced the large number of decisions required in the business supply chain. Most of them are least familiar with forecasting, generate demand, and service. These elements require them to reach beyond their experiences in the military and learn new relationships and the nature of how markets impact success.

LINKS is only part of the SCM curriculum of my class which also involves case studies, articles, readings and, of course, significant in-class discussion. Keep in mind, my SCM class may be one of several concurrent classes the officers are engaged with as part of the KU MSB curriculum. And remember, the KU program is in addition to the Officer training they are receiving as part of their "day" jobs at the CGSC. So, making time for reading the LINKS manual, developing their team, responding to the decision round output, and preparing for the next decision round is quite a large effort in time management. The 27 officers I had this fall worked very hard to quickly understand, assimilate, and focus on their next decision round.

Given the workload of this course and the other classes and obligations these officers have and the complex nature of the simulation, I generally don't create too many additional challenges within the simulation. I have used increases in sub-assembly component pricing or other normal market events, but it is usually enough for the officers to just get through the unique experience that LINKS brings to them.

Typically, the officers rate this class and the simulation experience quite high on the course evaluation. They enjoy the experience and the challenge the simulation provides, along with the unique competition generated through this exercise.
