

Learning *What Can't Be Taught*

By Greg Beaver-Seitz

“It was a bit like ‘The Apprentice’ meets ‘Fear Factor,’” says **Michael Orrick**, vice president, Thomson West Sales & Account Management (SAM), of the award-winning Future Manager program that he spearheaded in 2005.

Putting six participants through a year of tailored classroom training, intensive real-life field management challenges, mentorship with top business leaders and a judged presentation à la “American Idol” might make for popular reality television. But the outcome of the Future Manager program wasn’t top television ratings.

Instead, a small group of people discovered through firsthand experience the challenges of the unique field manager position in the Government SAM organization, and the business held on to some of its best people.

Reading the Green

Future Manager was developed in direct response to high rates of turnover in new manager appointments to field operations. Orrick says he was first inspired to develop the program when he found himself interviewing candidates who didn’t understand the real challenges that make or break field managers.

“I saw Future Manager as a type of ‘pre-certification’ for the job of regional manager,” says Orrick. “When a graduate of the program applies for a regional manager position, they know what they are getting themselves into, and the business knows that it’s getting a well-qualified, informed candidate.”

Future Manager was framed around the idea that, just as in making a 15-foot putt on the golf course, a true leader has to learn how to “read the green,” and every leader has his or her own way of getting the ball in the hole.

“Future Manager was about learning how to lead, which is about a lot more than learning how to manage,” says participant **Blake Johnson**. “It’s not a skill you master easily. You have to learn a whole way of thinking and responding to difficult situations.”

The program, built from the ground up by Orrick and co-designer **Tom Pfeifer**, director, Field Management, included mentorship; real-life, real-time leadership assignments; and three formal training workshops.

The Deep End of the Pool

Three weeks before the first workshop, the participants received their assignments from Orrick: “Your regional manager has been hit by a bus.



Left to right: Blake Johnson, Matt Maroney, Tom Pfeifer, Lisa Schwie, Michael Orrick, Scott Foster. Not pictured: Kim DeGross, Jay Gardner, Monique Widmer.

Put together a presentation of your business plan for your region for the next year and be prepared to present it to me; **Howard Zack**, senior vice president, SAM; and the SAM management team in Eagan.”

The assignment was not as much about seeing the actual business plans as it was a chance to see how the participants responded to the kind of pressure that regional managers regularly face.

“They pretty much threw you into the deep end of the pool,” says participant **Kim DeGross**. “Just like I would imagine it’s like your first day as regional manager. That’s not something you can just be told what it’s like, you really have to experience it, and that was the great thing about Future Manager.”

“That was definitely one of the best aspects of the program,” participant **Scott Foster** says of the initial presentation assignment. “It was great pressure and simply an unparalleled learning experience.”

Invaluable Experience

For the second session, participants gave the presentation again, but this time to three general managers and a video camera. Then participants watched the videos, which were formatted in split-screen so they could see the immediate reaction of the judges.

“That was an invaluable experience,” says Johnson. “You could see the split-second reactions from each judge, and see what got them involved in what you were saying.”

In the final session, participants spent two hours in a discussion with a panel of current and former regional managers and other business leaders. They also heard candid presentations by Howard Zack; **Brian Hall**, president and CEO, Thomson Legal & Regulatory; and **Peter Warwick**, president and CEO, West. The leaders talked about their own career paths, what the business expects of regional managers and what success in the field looks like.

Real Results

Shortly after the end of the program, two of the participants were promoted to regional manager and one was promoted to account executive; one participant declined consideration for regional management at this stage, which was a potential result Orrick had anticipated and welcomed.

“We’ve gone from a 30 percent field turnover rate two years ago to zero percent in 2005,” says Orrick. He credits that to several personnel initiatives, the Future Manager program chief among them.