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Charting the future with your customer

How Assurant Solutions implemented collaborative account planning



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This article covers how Assurant Solutions successfully introduced collaborative account planning with key clients as part of its strategic account management program (branded internally as Global Client Management). Assurant Solutions is the largest of four operating companies within Assurant Inc. (NYSE: AIZ), a global provider of specialty insurance and insurance-related solutions and services. Assurant Inc. is a Fortune 500 company with over \$20 billion in assets and \$7 billion in annual revenue. Assurant has more than 13,000 employees worldwide and is headquartered in New York City's financial district.

Assurant serves the needs of an array of global clients that are leaders in the financial and retail industries. In late 2005, Assurant introduced its Global Client Management program, in recognition of the evolving needs of these clients to include more ongoing collaboration and proactive planning. Previously, Assurant had evaluated a broad slate of consulting firms and selected Performance Methods Inc. (PMI) as its strategic account management consulting partner. In the first stage of program development, PMI began an assessment of

the company's strategic account management best practices as seen through the eyes of Assurant's own client-facing team members, as well as from the perspective of strategic clients. The findings from this assessment brought insight into Assurant's clients' needs and expectations, as well as the requirements for Assurant to fulfill those needs.

What is Global Client Management at Assurant Solutions?

We knew that if Assurant was going to be successful in implementing Global Client Management (GCM), the clients had to see a tangible benefit. This is what seemed to be missing from so many of the other programs that we were familiar with, and it has proven to be very powerful in the traction that Assurant is currently experiencing with the GCM program. The program includes Assurant's existing strategic account management best practices that were identified by PMI during the assessment phase as well as additional best practices processes, tools and skills that were required to enable GCM to fulfill its objectives. Figure 1 on page 2 describes the overall purpose of the program.

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The voices of Assurant's clients

Perhaps no single element of Assurant Solutions' program has had greater impact on the deployment of Global Client Management than the initial feedback gathered from the client assessment interviews. These interviews revealed interesting dynamics about the supplier-customer relationships that had been developed by Assurant Solutions and its clients. After the interviews, it was clear that there were elements of both common, consistent feedback from Assurant's clients as well as feedback unique to each client that described what 'strategic supplier' and 'client value' meant to them. We captured this dynamic in the GCM program. It becomes very client-specific when it needs to be, in order to fulfill both Assurant Solutions' and its clients' objectives. Figure 2 below includes the findings from the client assessment interviews.

Changing the dynamics

Utilizing the feedback from the client assessment interviews, it was quite clear that many of Assurant Solutions' most successful strategic client relationships already had elements of collaborative planning and strategy in place. Moreover, most of the clients indicated that this was the type of relationship they desire

most with suppliers that they consider strategic. What Assurant Solutions needed was an internal process with supporting tools and skills in order to implement collaborative planning on a consistent basis, and they worked with PMI to design and develop an Assurant-specific solution.

When inviting clients to participate in the Global Client Management program, Assurant's account managers and executives meet with each of its strategic clients in advance to explain the benefits that they will experience by participating in the program as well as to determine their interest levels and answer their questions. Following these discussions, Assurant is ready to bring the clients into the program. In fact, Assurant has even been asked to speak to one of its client's internal leadership teams about how Assurant Solutions deploys the GCM program!

Implementing collaborative planning with strategic clients

Assurant Solutions worked with PMI to develop a proactive approach for engaging clients in the Global Client Management program and planning with them. Figure 3 on page 3 shows the stages of the collaborative planning process.

By focusing on what the client needs and where its business is going in terms of growth and go-to-market strategies, Assurant identifies and captures client value targets. Collaborative teams consisting of client and Assurant Solutions team members then participate in collaborative brainstorming sessions to determine levels of fit, ultimate value creation and joint action plans. One of the more fascinating dynamics of this process is that in many cases both organizations are actually striving to get to the same point – but it takes collaboration between teams and enough trust between the parties to allow for the alignment of business objectives and the pursuit of mutual value. Figure 4 on page 3 outlines Assurant's approach to the collaborative planning process.

Involving leadership in the planning process

Assurant Solutions decided early on to include an executive sponsorship component in its Global Client Management program. Findings from the initial assessment supported this decision. Assurant faces all the challenges of being a global organization and doing business across multiple business units and serving large, complex, global clients, which makes executive sponsorship even more critical. Senior leaders embraced this

Figure 1 — Mission statement for the GCM program

The objective of the Global Client Management program is to deploy an Assurant-specific process that will better enable us to collaborate with our most strategic clients in order to create incremental mutual value.

Source: Performance Methods Inc. and Assurant Solutions

Figure 2 — The first phase: listening to clients



Source: Performance Methods Inc. and Assurant Solutions

approach from the very beginning and attended training and awareness sessions that were prepared specifically to help them understand the GCM program and the role and potential impact of an effective executive sponsor.

Assurant has involved executives from every primary business unit and department within the company, and they have reacted enthusiastically. This involvement has fostered insights from senior leaders about how to better support the field and create strong levels of client value at the same time – a great return on the investment of these executives' time. The Executive Sponsor Program involves senior leaders from customer service, finance, human resources and IT all coming together on behalf of client value and in support of the

field sales organization. The executive sponsors have become involved with their respective global client teams in collaborative planning sessions. Figure 5 on this page shows executive sponsorship of collaborative planning with objectives of the executive sponsors above the dotted line and their role as defined below the dotted line.

Measuring the impact of collaborative planning

As Assurant enters the second year of its deployment of the Global Client Management program, there is still much to be learned. But the early returns are extremely positive, with each global client team building and adopting a plan that has a set of customized metrics.

These metrics are tailored to the way that each client defines value and are in the first section of Assurant Solutions' global client plan. Figure 6 on page 4 shows an example of the Global Client Metrics section of Assurant's global client plan.

The clients tend to see the value in participating in the GCM program. They have found that they have a stake in meeting Assurant's objectives, just as Assurant has a stake in the clients meeting their objectives. By collaborating on how to measure success, Assurant has found that the clients want to help. In other cases, the clients are quick to point out when Assurant is measuring the wrong things, which is also very helpful in keeping the program on track.

Figure 3 — The building blocks of collaborative planning



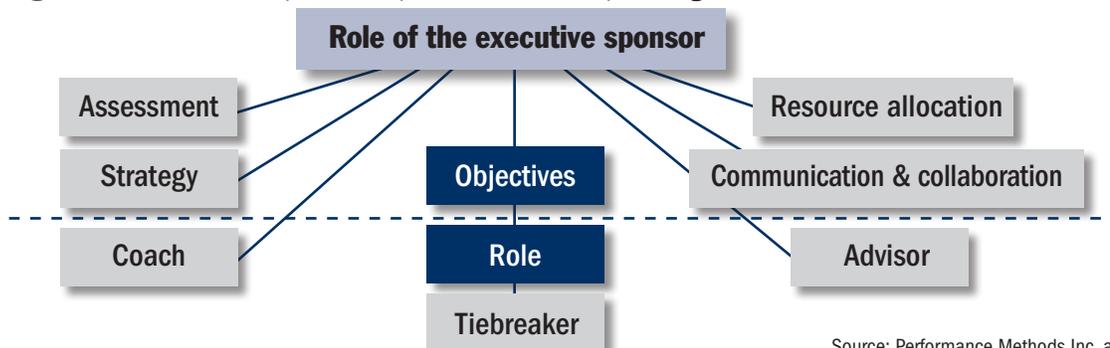
Source: Performance Methods Inc. and Assurant Solutions

Figure 4 — The collaborative planning approach

- Identify:** Assurant and the client work together to identify potential areas of value creation.
- Qualify:** Assurant and the client qualify mutual value targets for appropriate levels of fit.
- Strategize:** Assurant and the client brainstorm and strategize together to determine best approaches.
- Prioritize:** Assurant and the client engage together to prioritize value targets.
- Execute:** Assurant and the client develop and execute action plans to proactively pursue value targets.
- Assess:** Assurant and the client assess progress together and adjust value creation plans as needed.

Source: Performance Methods Inc. and Assurant Solutions

Figure 5 — Executive sponsorship of collaborative planning



Source: Performance Methods Inc. and Assurant Solutions

Conclusions

Assurant Solutions' implementation of Global Client Management strategy and process has been deemed a success thus far by its two most important stakeholder groups: the internal global client teams and the clients themselves. The early successes of the program have created a 'buzz' within the organization, resulting in people asking how to get involved, as well as when their client can get started. Much of this early success derives from the strong commitment of senior leadership to the Global Client Management program, along with the strong field relationships that exist between Assurant Solutions and its

clients. The global client teams are very focused on the overall value of the team-to-team relationship, and it shows to the clients. Assurant is presenting one face to the client much more consistently and collaborating more effectively internally to proactively align objectives and drive growth. Summing it all up, perhaps no one says it better than Craig Lemasters, CEO of Assurant Solutions: "We've proven the effectiveness of the Global Client Management program – now our challenge is to run faster and deliver this value to even more of our clients." 

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This article is based on a session that will be jointly conducted by Assurant Solutions and PMI at the SAMA 43rd Annual Conference in May.

Recommended reading

For additional reading on this subject, the editors recommend:

Steve Andersen, "Strategic Reflections: the planning disconnect," *Velocity*[®], Vol. 9, No. 1, Winter 2007, www.strategicaccounts.org.

Mike Rohan, "Fix failing account plans: six ways to give them muscle," *Focus: Account Manager*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 2006, www.strategicaccounts.org.

Steve Quick, "Aligning account management when lines of business integrate," SAMA 42nd Annual Conference, www.strategicaccounts.org.

Figure 6 — Global Client Metrics in the collaborative plan

Strategic performance category	Global Client Metrics
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement of annual revenue target • Client and program profitability
Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Execution of existing projects and commitments • Client projects completed on schedule
Account growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client penetration: number of assurant business units doing business with client • Competitive win rate vs. competition
Customer facing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of deeper client relationships within each client business unit • Client participation in collaborative planning process
People and organizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective Global Client Management team participation in regularly scheduled team meetings • Effective deployment of client growth strategy as measured by execution of action plans and closing of new opportunities

Source: Performance Methods Inc. and Assurant Solutions