

Interview with...

Eva Roza

Supply Chain Specialist



www.msf.org.uk

On dealing with extreme Supply Chain Pressure

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is an independent humanitarian medical aid organisation. They are committed to providing medical aid wherever it is needed, regardless of race, religion, politics or gender and also to raising awareness of the plight of the people they help.

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Born in the Netherlands, Eva has always travelled the world, even in her childhood.

Today, she is a Supply Chain Practitioner who has learnt her skills in unusual circumstances.

In 2006, she spent 6 months with Médecins Sans Frontières in Darfur, as the Supply Chain specialist. In this interview, she tells us about her experience in dealing with extreme Supply Chain pressure...



Q: Your role in the management of the MSF Supply Chain sounds both brave and exciting. Can you tell us what it consisted of?

A: “I was based at the MSF Headquarters in Darfur. As the Supply Chain specialist, I had 7 other people reporting to me. Overall, the Supply Chain team was about 30 people. When I got there, there were 5 projects on the go, all scattered around the Darfur region.

The projects were basically doctors, nurses and logistical managers caring for the people who needed medical help. These projects required medical supplies, food, plastic sheeting, water bowls, fridges, fuel... anything you can imagine. As there was hardly anything available locally, our role in Supply Chain was to ensure that they had everything they needed so the doctors could do their job. Ideally, my team and I were not noticed if we did our job well.”

Q: The pressure and realities associated with your role must have been enormous. What was your biggest challenge?

A: “One of the challenges was the numerous languages and cultures that had to work together. There were people from France, Italy, Canada, the Netherlands and local Sudanese staff of course, etc. For instance, we had 70 guards, but none of them spoke English! So it was vital to be organised and well structured. We also had to build good relationships to work under such pressure, yet this was not obvious when you were from different cultures.

But the biggest challenge was prioritising. If I had a day where I managed to complete half of my most important tasks, I was happy. There was just so much to do. When there were problems with convoys, I had to find alternatives quickly, such as helicopters. When there were communication problems (echoing satellites!), we had to find a solution. Everything that could go wrong tended to go wrong some moment in time.

If there were several epidemics, we had to tackle the bigger ones first and prioritise. Add to this all the constraints, from limited space to extreme temperature which meant that medicines had reduced shelf-life. From a Supply Chain point of view, it meant that we could not plan for every eventuality. So we split them with other organisations such as Oxfam. In effect, we were establishing collaborative planning processes with parallel Supply Chains.”

Q: You were involved in some major re-organisation of the Supply Chain. What change made the biggest difference?

A: “We changed the whole Supply Chain around from a Push to a Pull model. It was a major challenge because if you get it wrong, people are left dying.

In the old Push system, they used to just send replenishments of supplies. Things would either accumulate if not used or go out of date. In the new Pull approach, we centralised the requirements and we forecast ahead. So we only got what would be needed in the worst case scenario. This was vital because the lead-times were between 6 and 8 months.

As a result of the change, there was less waste and a much better use of the resources. When you have limited resources, you have to be much more efficient with them!”

Q: Is this something commercial Supply Chains could learn from?

A: “Definitely. I also learnt that if you believe that there is a solution to a problem, then you will find one! But you have to be ready to seek other people’s input because you cannot do it all on your own.

I remember the instance when we found out that the malaria testing kits were going out of date, and it was just before the malaria season. So we exchanged supplies with another organisation – a bit of give and take. It was possible because we all focused on the same goal.

“Make sure that everything that can run well, does!”

Unfortunately, people do not always behave like this within a same company. They sometimes struggle against each other rather than focusing on the common goal. They need to realise who the customer really is. In our case, it was not even the

doctors... but the patients, the people of Darfur who have lost already everything.”

Q: Getting the KPIs right is often an issue for businesses. What were yours at the time?

A: “Let me put it this way: by the time I left, our staff in the project were complaining that there were not enough eggs. This was a very minor complaint and it meant that everything else was okay, otherwise they would have complained about a lack of fuel or a leaking roof...”

Some of the KPIs related to lead-times depending where the resources came from in Sudan, which varied. So we had to keep control of them. If we could not deliver something on time, we had to find alternatives. So feedback was important. The aim was to achieve a reliable Supply Chain.

There was also an element of budget measure. Going over budget was acceptable as long as we could explain and justify what happened. This is something that I recognise in businesses nowadays through Sales & Operations Planning.”

Q: I guess the complexity of this Supply Chain compares with companies sourcing from around the world, where uncertainty is still a big part of planning. Do you have any secrets or tricks that you could share?

A: “I now believe that even an emergency can be stable. You need to plan and prepare for it. You need good administration and a good overview of what is happening. With good preparation you can usually control 80% of any critical situation, and if you are well prepared, you will have the time to deal with the other 20%.

Even more important is the fact that, if you urgently need extra material or extra capacity, the daily life must go on as well. Otherwise that becomes your next emergency. So make sure that everything that can run well, does! This is the only way to focus on the real uncertainty.

Oh, and do not go mad! Even if everything seems to go wrong, there is always a way out.”

Q: What do you miss most about your role back then, now that you are back into more ‘traditional’ Supply Chain Management?

A: “The tension. I seem to work best under pressure; I guess it must be the adrenaline. I really felt privileged there, because I saw the people living there, in refugee camps and I realised “*I’ll be home again in 6 months*”. Just seeing my “customer”, seeing what they needed and what their options were made me feel so humble.

I also miss everybody’s attitude, which was different from commercial businesses. Don’t get me wrong: I have nothing against businesses and them making money, because that is where a great part of MSF’s budget comes from, allowing us to do what we do. But it was about keeping things in perspective, understanding what is not so important and what is core. It was about looking at the cost of something and then comparing it to the benefits you will get from it. You cannot make good decisions if you have lost sight of the goal, whether it is making money or saving people!”

Hughenden would like to thank Eva Roza
for sharing her amazing experience

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