



Why pharma needs a new leadership culture

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Pharmaceutical(/biotech) development is a highly specialised business. We need specialists and top experts in a variety of different disciplines. We love to talk about how specialised, unique and different we are. And yes, we have some of the most advanced science, research, equipment, projects, production methods, rule-sets and IT-solutions there is.

But we are also a very complex business to run. Both from a managerial and leadership perspective (I do think these are two different things and I believe we need both, but we will use the term “leaders” in this article for people in management and/or leadership positions. It is difficult to run a multidisciplinary, highly scientific and regulated business. Very difficult. Yet leadership is the one discipline where we generally *don't* have specialists. Or we do, they are just not specialists in management and leadership.

What we keep doing is promoting the top specialists to leaders. Then we set the number one expectation to our leaders to be the “rolled-up” knowledge of their teams. Both in the specific discipline and when it comes to status and details. As a leader you are supposed to be the top specialist in your area and know the status and details for everything that goes on. Leaders do as they and any other employee do (and should do): they try to deliver what the company expects and rewards, i.e., being the top specialist and being involved in everything in order to be in control. To be able to meet this expectation, they in turn set the same expectation on the leaders reporting to them, and on it goes.

In my view, a leader should not be the rolled-up specialist of their teams. A leader’s role is to help their team perform, deliver and develop, plan, prioritize and lead the work, set direction and strategy, put each individual in a situation where they can deliver their very best *and* grow. We know this. So honestly, if we say we are scientifically driven then why don’t we listen to science and expertise when it comes to this area?

I know there are many really talented leaders out there, working extremely hard and doing a great job. But the culture; acknowledgement of what leadership and management is and how much time it must be allowed to take, is desperately missing. This too is a specialist profession. We need people with leadership and management as their number one skill, passion, interest and focus. Not leadership as a side-gig on top of being the number one specialist. If you have leadership responsibility, this should be your main responsibility, focus and priority and the one where you spend the majority of your time. Before *anything* else.

I believe we need a massive culture change in how we look at leadership and management. We need to accept and endorse what leadership is and what it can and *needs* to do for us. We need to get professional leaders in here. We need to acknowledge leadership talent and foster it, we must (we absolutely must) give leadership and management the time, place and recognition it deserves and requires. If not, we will not only limit our growth and development as a business, but we will start (or continue if you like) to go backwards. People are not able to deliver at their best, they will not grow, they will not enjoy their work, they will be frustrated (at best, and sick at the worst) and they will leave.

This is not a quick fix: it will involve a leadership program, some courses and team-events on the junior or mid-level leader level. This is a fundamental culture change – from the top.

These things are, of course, not changed in a day, but recognising good leadership, placing it on the agenda, and starting to allow it the time and place it deserves can start as soon as you have finished reading this article.

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