



The Successful Leader

New thinking in a rapidly changing environment

There's no doubt the leader's job is becoming increasingly difficult in today's environment. We're experiencing unprecedented levels of change – societal, political, economic and technological – and at a faster rate than ever.

Alex Bennett, CEO at the RSA Group, invited Jim Kennedy, an international CHRO to consult top executives on leadership and talent issues currently facing Life Sciences leaders.

Long gone are the days of predictability. Today, there are fewer reference points available for leaders to identify and with which to navigate the way forward for their organisations. Meanwhile, established models of leadership are becoming increasingly irrelevant, as are traditional leadership development programmes taught in lectures and classrooms.

How is the Life Sciences sector adapting?

What defines great leadership within the worlds of drugs, diagnostics, therapeutics, devices and healthcare provision? What is demanded of leaders to ensure that the life sciences sector continues to thrive and fulfil its potential

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to contribute to physical, mental and economic health? And where are the great leaders? Are their skills innate or are they developed? Or both? These are the kinds of questions that I explored with senior leaders from a range of organisations representing different industries within the life sciences sector.

A helpful shorthand to express collective view of the people interviewed is to borrow from the

title of Marshall Goldsmith's book, “What got us here won't get us there”. I'm suggesting that those in positions of authority can no longer base current decisions on examples of wisdom and certainty that were successful for them in the past. Also, that leading from the front at all times and expecting to have all the answers may be an increasingly misguided approach to leadership. As the CEO of a start-up biotech said, “Things are changing so much that we need novel approaches on how to deal with emergent technologies, economies, products and services. We operate in an era in which we can no longer provide proven theories to generate answers to current challenges. We can only provide means and techniques to find good questions to ask.” What I believe they are telling me is that leaders are adding sense-making to their roles as skilled technocrats.

What this means is that successful organisation leaders need to become comfortable in admitting they don't have all the answers. This acknowledgement should eventually bring about even higher levels of trust and credibility in the eyes of the leaders' followers. Successful organisational leaders encourage leadership at all levels, where leadership is the individual's capacity to get things done effectively and with efficacy. Leadership then, is not solely attached to hierarchy. It's about behaviours, and getting business results through those behaviours.

Leadership traits

For the organisation leader, building trust and credibility is dependent on their ability to demonstrate humility. A starting point for this process the leader's willingness to engage in a high level of self-awareness and awareness of others. Why? Because it helps the organisation leader understand the limits of their skills, knowledge and competence, and how other

people's skills, knowledge and competence might complement their own. And this can lead to becoming comfortable in letting go of the need to control. Which in turn helps the leader get more comfortable in dealing with the unknown. The successful organisation leader will encourage openness, freedom of thought and process within self-regulating working

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groups. To make humility and self-awareness work for the leader, they must display the courage to operate in this dynamic state of change. "As a leader, my job is to hire the right people,

challenge them and let them take calculated risks," says the Regional General Manager of a large international medical devices company.

These attributes are not sufficient in themselves to guarantee success, but they are necessary components. The successful organisation leader demonstrates the willingness to fail fast to learn fast. Additionally, aggressiveness and competitiveness in the pursuit of excellence are other important behaviours. They are necessary traits to be able to kill projects early, to ensure that the organisation remains agile and keeps focused on activities that are more likely to produce successful business outcomes. For the people working on those projects, they can move quickly onto another project with the understanding that the failure is not a career ending event but is both a learning and growth opportunity. The CEO of a fast-growing therapeutics business sums up this style of leadership by saying that, "CEOs must be able to prioritise and to over-communicate from the top about the business, its direction, its priorities and its progress. They should know when to start and stop activities."

Determination and entrepreneurialism work best when wrapped within all-pervasive purpose and principles. Leadership behaviour

that's consistent and brings life to this is much more likely to engender trust and followership among others. "Leaders should embody the principles of the organisation and be seen to be principled themselves," says the Regional GM. The CEO of an international devices company adds, "Business is complex. There are many competing agendas. There is a reliance on the division of labour and on core competencies. But what really constitutes an A-player is authenticity; someone who holds true to the company's values as well as their own, and can be depended upon to always act accordingly."

Develop internally vs hire externally

Where are the people with these behavioural traits and where will they come from in the future? Part of the answer seems to depend on whether the organisation is large or small. "A manager's job is to make things simple for their customers and their people. That's what they're paid to do. The lack of investment in growing and developing others may often be a result of managers making life easy and simple for themselves. But, that's selfish, and not always good for the organisation. A leader's job is to grow talent and develop people." says the Regional GM.

But, as the CEO of an international medical devices company argues, "Development is more synonymous with the sophisticated propositions offered by the larger companies. The acquisition of talent recognises that it's difficult to take someone from the inside and grow them." This is echoed by the CEO of the therapeutics company, "Biotech is a risky environment and requires seasoned leaders and managers. Skills can be developed but they need to be based on what's innate or has been developed so far." As the HR Director of another international medical devices company says, "Development requires a lot of good behavioural analysis. It's also heavily dependent on real commitment from the top."

CONCLUSION

In summary, the definition of effective leadership is changing, and this change is widely acknowledged within the life sciences sector. It's changing to the premise that an organisational leader ensures that leadership happens within the business at all levels and in all aspects. To do that successfully depends on self-awareness and awareness of others. What's also clear is that we're still in an era in which acquiring talented leaders from other businesses is seen to be safer and more straightforward than developing people internally.

Whether acquired or developed, rigorous and robust means of assessment of behavioural traits are critical. In reply to the question of whether leadership skills are innate or developed, it's clear that trial and error is a vital process, meaning that there is no substitute for actual experience.



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For over 20 years, **Jim Kennedy** has worked as an HR and executive leader within international companies, participating in change that has helped companies meet their goals sooner and improve the benefits they offer their customers. Between 2009 and 2017, he was VP, HR for CooperVision Inc., a global contact lens manufacturer. During this period, CooperVision grew from 17% share of the world's contact lens market to 23% and its revenues doubled. Now an independent consultant based near Cambridge, UK, Jim can be contacted at jim@metispo.com