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R&D

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Lead or get out of the way.

by Scott Gantwerker & Paula Manoski, Contributing Editors

The stated goal of many businesses, and R&D groups as well, is to become a high performing organization. High performance means many things to many people, but all agree that it is essential to drive superior business performance. Over the years, many R&D groups have set a goal of high performance, but few have reached it. Achieving high performance in R&D requires the right blend of several elements, with major emphasis placed on leadership and culture.

Leadership at the top

High performing R&D provides a balance of leadership and support to the business in which it resides. While R&D leadership begins at the top of an organization, it needs to be found at all levels of a high performing R&D organization. The best R&D leaders not only lead and manage their organizations effectively, but set the cultural tone for their organizations, serving as role models for success and mentors for their staffs. They possess a vision of how R&D can best contribute to company success and position their staffs to deliver this vision. Rather than demanding certainty about the work they accept, they are comfortable with ambiguity and are confident they and

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their groups understand the business needs, can influence outcomes and bring clarity to the picture. They recognize and reward behaviors and performance that supports their vision.

The business and its strategic direction drive specific requirements of an R&D leadership position. Often

R&D leaders are selected primarily on the basis of their technical knowledge. While significant technical knowledge and understanding are key to R&D leaders, what sets excellent ones apart from mediocre ones are the complementary skills they possess. Individuals representing a diverse set of personal styles have proven successful in this role. Nonetheless, the highest performing R&D organizations are headed up by leaders that have a balanced skill set, with strengths in each of the following areas:

1) Technical skills

The effective R&D leader need not be the most skilled technologist in the organization. However, he/she must be technically skilled and up to date in order to assure the technical growth of his staff, critically review the work of his/her organization, ensure the quality of technical work and translate technical issues, accomplishments and opportunities accurately and persuasively for non-technical audiences.

2) Strategic & general management skills

Excellent R&D leaders become part of the leadership fabric of the business organization, linking the R&D organization to the entire business. As a result, they are able to assure translation of their team's technical insights into business opportunities, and the company's business needs into strategic R&D programs.

3) Cross-business skills

In order to maximize the business impact of R&D, the leader needs to understand the workings of the entire business and deploy the R&D organization in accordance with its critical needs. This understanding can come from observations and second-hand exposures, but is enhanced greatly by previous cross-functional career assignments.

4) Coaching/mentoring skills

Successful R&D leaders share their knowledge, insights and vision with their staffs. By disseminat-

ing and perpetuating their understanding of successful R&D programs, they help staff members develop their skills and deepen their commitment to organizational goals.

5) **Influence & communication skills**

These skills enable the R&D leader to ensure that R&D develops an equal partnership with marketing, sales, operations, etc. in charting the course for the business. It assures that R&D's unique point of view is heard and understood, and that its contributions to business success are appropriately recognized and supported.

Leadership at all levels of the R&D organization

Equally important to senior level leadership is the leadership provided from all levels within R&D. It is sometimes possible to see R&D groups performing at a high level despite the shortcomings of the person at the top of the organization. More often, however, R&D groups receive guidance and support from their leaders to perform at this high level.

High performing R&D staffs see themselves as leaders, not lemmings. They are not order takers, but rather believe they can and should influence the rest of the organization for the benefit of the business.

Beyond the requisite technical skills they:

1) **Are critical thinkers**

They actively observe the world around them, going deep to develop understanding and insights. They utilize a "think-act-think" paradigm for processing information and, by doing so, work to innovate and maximize the outcomes of their work.

2) **Understand business success criteria**

This includes knowledge and understanding of consumer/customer drivers of preference. They consider practical financial and supply chain factors in conducting their work and making decisions.

3) **Utilize influence skills**

High performing R&D staffs communicate with impact. They give and accept feedback in the context of their work. As part of an effective team, they work to productively resolve conflict.

4) **Work with a sense of purpose and urgency**

Demonstrating commitment to business goals, they act like entrepreneurs, accepting challenges and taking an aggressive path to project execution. They work confidently and are comfortable moving forward despite risk and uncertainty.

5) **Provide R&D leadership to the team**

In behaving as equal partners in business success, they provide leadership in their area of expertise — and beyond — to assure well-informed decisions are made and actions across the team are coordinated and aligned.

R&D culture

From a cultural perspective, there are two major categories of R&D groups. The first view themselves as the "experts" and believe they already have the solution or answer their business needs. The others are the "learners," who enjoy the challenge of the uncertain or unknown and reap the benefits that continuous learning, growth and development brings to them, the R&D group and its capabilities. The key to results with the experts is in phrasing the question or work request carefully and precisely. With the learners, the key to results is collaboration and joint exploration.

R&D Experts - The typical "expert" has a fairly small and static bag of tricks. Rather than having additive experiences that build their knowledge base, they tend to multiply a small experiential base a number of times. The same approach...the same solution...the same result. Twenty years' experience really translates to one year's experience repeated twenty times. They focus on delivering a product or solution, but tend to be order takers. ("Tell me exactly what you want and I will give it to you.") These R&D groups demand detailed project initiation documents — authorizations that look like legal contracts. The project proceeds with minimal interaction until the result is thrown over the wall. Technical challenges are presented in a manner intended to impress, delay or obfuscate. With this modus operandi, innovation is rare, the success rate is low and the frustration level is high.

R&D Learners - Contrast this group with the "learners" who also draw on their experiences, but see each project as an opportunity to continue to learn. This group also focuses on delivering a product, but rather than being told what to do, they are an integral part of figuring out what needs to be done. They present technical challenges in the language that others in the company will understand and therefore promote sound decision-making. They are continuously learning through collaboration, the kind of learning that is along multiple dimensions — the marketplace, the consumer, and the customer. They learn more about how their company operates — what is important in the supply chain, what is needed to sell the product, what the regulatory risks are.

"Learners" also search for what is new among suppliers and vendors. They seek to know more about their competition and take interest in learning and exploring different product categories and technologies. They also learn how to work more effectively in teams, how to be more influential and how to get things done more efficiently. All these behaviors help "learners" to be the best innovators and problem solvers. The more they learn, the greater their contribution to the business's success.

A Tale of Two Companies – Chapter VI

We continue with “A Tale of Two Companies,” contrasting the leadership and culture at fictional, extreme opposite food and beverage companies, Schiffer-Branes Foods and Nirvana Food Processing with — of course — contrasting outcomes.

Schiffer-Branes Foods

Dr. Ernest Maladroite, VP of R&D for Schiffer-Branes Foods, is having another bad day. Nobody seems to be happy and once again he is in the middle of it. Maladroite has taken calls from S-B’s VP of marketing and VP of operations demanding to know why key projects they are sponsoring have not been initiated. Maladroite explained his concern about requests for R&D project work coming in without detailed information on what needs to get done, but made little headway.

His R&D staff has long complained that without detailed input, direction often shifts over the course of projects, causing them to sit through wasteful meetings and creating significant rework. Dr. Maladroite could not offer any advice. He has shared the same frustration since he was a product developer himself. When he attempted to educate his peers in marketing, operations and sales on the complexities of the science underlying S-B’s products, they turned a deaf ear to him. In response, he had no choice but to initiate a policy requiring highly precise direction before beginning R&D work.

He knows his R&D group has been criticized for poor speed to market, but what can they do? If only project requestors would get their acts together and tell R&D exactly what they wanted, his technical experts could do their jobs. His life would be easier and their jobs would not be so bad.

Nirvana Food Processing

At Nirvana, Maxwell Albright, VP of R&D, is anxiously waiting for several of his staff members to come to his office to seek his input on a new project they are working on. Coaching has always been an important part of his job and he loves to share his war stories and insights with others. As such, he is very approachable. Not every project has worked out, but each project has provided experience to make him better at his job. He works to instill his knowledge and philosophy in his managers and staff,

not only on the technical side of the project, but in work with the team.

He is very proud of developing an R&D team that exudes confidence and professionalism stemming from a track record of success. They accept the fact that many uncertainties exist at the start of any project. They ask critical questions of themselves and others on the team and set out to answer those questions over the course of the project. They explain their technical challenges in a manner that allows everyone on the team to understand and contribute.

They strive to understand the thoughts and positions of others on the team and are quite comfortable in challenging assumptions. They know how to work with the business team to establish project timetables and goals that are achievable. They also are great with surfacing issues and make recommendations on how to approach them. When problems arise they are skilled at galvanizing the team to address the issues. There is no posturing or politics, and team members thoroughly enjoy their work.

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Summary

A high performing R&D group plays a critical role in contributing to the success of a company, driving superior business performance. High performance comes from a blend of skills and capabilities made operational through leadership at all levels of the organization and a culture that promotes collaboration, exploration and continuous learning. **FP**

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