



Life sciences leadership in flux

How CEOs are adapting to a changing environment

Leadership and talent agendas in the life sciences are adapting to major external influences on the life sciences sector – economic, political, technological and social. In this current climate, a leader has to ensure that every part of an organisation is well led. A modern and holistic CEO needs to be more of a programme and project person, than a subject matter expert. As such, she or he has to possess an array of core behavioural traits to be an effective leader.

Below, we take a broader look at talent as it applies to organisational leadership, and to examine key skills identified by a number of life sciences organisations as being mission critical.

Entrepreneurialism and execution

When searching for the right person to fill a life sciences leadership role, there are certain qualities to look for. “Talent needs to be adaptable. Talented individuals need to be able to respond to changing needs, to understand and navigate their landscape”, said the CEO of a multinational medical devices company. “I look for entrepreneurialism, structure to their thinking and execution, as well as their responsiveness to external change.” The CEO of a biotech company agrees, adding “I look for drive, hunger, the preparedness to take ownership and to be accountable. Doers get stuff done. They recognise the importance of relationships – getting things done with and through others.” He goes on, “Talent will be increasingly defined by the ability to persuade and influence, being able to sell and to identify who the customer is.”

Knowing the customer is paramount. “The market is changing away from the individual purchaser towards multiple stakeholders and that raises communications challenges. It means changing how the value proposition of a product is articulated and ensuring that it’s understood all the way upstream to Research & Development,” says the Regional GM of a medical products supplier. “Innovation is about creating value through change and continuous improvement, a combination of process and outcomes. Innovation also needs to be ethical, affordable and have the right patient benefits,” he says.

The customer is changing

Increasingly, professional procurement specialists are more prominently involved in buying decisions, and the customer is becoming arguably more interested in the value proposition than the scientific proposition. Correspondingly, communication skills and social style are becoming key considerations when assessing the profiles of executives dealing directly with the customer. Their communications skills must include the ability to combine science with commerciality but also to make the proposition as simple as possible. As the VP Global Marketing of a medical products company puts it, “Sales is becoming much more an extension of marketing, given the need for tailored messaging to prospective customers. Sales excellence is now defined by the quality of external relationship management as well as between sales and marketing inside the organisation. More emphasis is being put on sales targeting and customer knowledge.”

“There’s a growing need for more consultative selling,” says the CEO of another medical supplies company, “and for more expertise around health economics.” The HR Director of an international pharma company agrees,

adding, “Health economic experts sometimes lack an understanding of the market place. They can’t always answer the “so what?” questions posed of the value propositions presented to potential buyers. The people who are articulating value must therefore understand the proposition - and be able to demonstrate it.”

Commercial talent, scientific expertise

Drawing on insight and comments from senior leaders regarding skills essential for success within their organisation, it is possible to compose a preliminary list of desirable talents to look for. These include innovation, internal collaboration, knowing the customer, EQ, IQ, self awareness, communications - internally as well as with the customer - and accountability, while pure technical skills take a back seat. Significantly, increasing numbers of companies are looking for ‘hybrids’ instead of the specialists of the past. These may be people with MDs as well as MBAs or those with medical affairs expertise who have also worked in clinical development. There are many permutations, but the driver is frequently the combination of internal expert knowledge with commercial talent as people work at the intersection of science and technology.

We need skills for the whole value chain

It’s clear these skills need to be present at all stages of the value chain, from R&D through to the sales person. Also, we can see that the value proposition is much more important than the functional organisation or job structure of the company selling its products or services into the healthcare system.

The need for extensive psychometric tools, when evaluating a CEO candidate, and when the CEO is shaping the executive team, is becoming increasingly important. It is not just about functional capabilities – it is now about asking, probing, listening, sensing and being truly committed.

CONCLUSION

We’ve identified many of the skills and behaviours that organisations need in an unpredictable and fast-changing environment. It must be considered what organisations are doing to acquire and develop these skills, and create the environments in which they can flourish.

When it comes to the search for new executive talent, it is imperative that our due diligence and sophisticated approach to the assessment of both the hard and soft skills aligns with that of our clients ambitions across the Life Sciences sector. At the RSA Group, we ensure that our proprietary Proof of Candidate® service reflects these changing dynamics and continues to evolve to meet the needs of the market.

[Read more about Proof of Candidate®](#). The RSA Group’s evidence-based approach, involving thorough due diligence and comparative profiling of executive candidates.



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