R&D SCIENTISTS+ MANAGING OTHERS = OIL & WATER? UNDERSTANDING HOW SCIENTISTS THINK MAY HOLD CLUES

"R&D scientists are technically brilliant but many are not at the same level of excellence when managing and leading others." Susan Morris, President, Morris Consulting Group, LLC.

In looking at a US organization's workforce, there are certain employees who are appropriate if not perfect for the role of manager, department head, even a C-suite position. Resources are allocated to move these high performing "stars" into a manager role through skills training, mentoring, reach assignments and assorted formal and informal development opportunities. Given time, support, visibility and luck, a pool of well-trained new managers are ready to become an organization's future leaders.

This is not the pathway to move from the individual contributor status to manager for R&D scientists. Professional development strategies that produce a steady stream of competent managers *outside* of R&D will not work for R&D scientists and technical experts. What follows is an explanation of how and why preparing scientists to assume roles of managing and leading must accommodate to their way of viewing the world.

As part of their academic training, scientists conduct experiments with an intense focus on procedure and results. Scientists are individually and internally motivated, rewarded for their individual efforts while striving toward perfectionism. Academia prepares scientists to be task-oriented and very little attention is placed on being people-oriented.

Transitioning from academia to government or private sector employment, scientists may find it difficult to be part of a group. Some scientists new to a collaborative work environment may be hesitant to share data or resources, find it difficult to work on a team and may perceive management as organizational interference. When asked to attend training on non-technical content, scientists may query: "why can't they let me do my job?" Scientists see these professional development opportunities as business related and therefore, unimportant.

When confronted by unpredictable, nuanced human behavior, scientists respond with curiosity, frustration and then dismiss the inefficiencies of working with "people". R&D scientists much prefer the exactitude and precision found in their laboratories. Lacking an understanding of how to work with people becomes evident when conflict arises. Intellectual debate is one thing, but when two or more people are blaming and angry, scientists have the fewest management tools to resolve these common workplace challenges.

Scientists may not be aware of the big picture, having a tactical versus a strategic focus. For some, asking scientists to relate what they do to expanding market share or other business goals will be a challenge.

Scientists use a communication style focusing on data, usually in great detail. When asked to talk about their experimental findings, scientists are likely to prepare 60 power point slides for a 15 minute presentation. When speaking to non-scientific audiences, scientists may not take time to simplify their information, talking above the knowledge level of the audience or not being able to get their ideas across quickly and effectively.

Finally, scientists are unaware of how their communication style impacts on others. Being direct, candid and analytical are qualities for communicating scientific thought. These are not communication qualities that inspire others to do a better job.

- We have the recipe to shift R&D scientists from the bench to the manager's office.
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