

**LEADERSHIP:**  
THE HIDDEN JOB REQUIREMENT  
FOR DISTRICT SALES MANAGERS

*by Lynda McDermott and Bill Waite*

Photograph by GettyImages

In today's fast-paced business world, training heads are consumed with a wide range of duties. One of their most important responsibilities is to stay informed of what other companies are doing and what the current best practices are. Yet many training heads admit that day-to-day demands make this extremely difficult, and keeping an eye on what's going on outside the company is the one duty they are most likely to neglect. For a training organization, that can be dangerous.

The organizational chart for any given pharmaceutical or biotech company isn't likely to include a position called District Sales Leader... though maybe it should. Those who take on this important position are expected to act as more than just managers. In fact, effective leadership is essential to their success (even if no one bothers to tell them that in advance). As such, the best training and coaching efforts aimed at developing new district sales managers into their role focus not only on building strong management skills, but also on developing solid leadership competencies.

Management Role	Leadership Role
Plan and budget	Create a vision
Organize and staff	Align people
Control and problem solve	Motivate and inspire
Evaluate	Share power and coach
Supervise and persuade	Use influence and build commitment
Manage behavior	Focuses on results
Be reactive	Be proactive

Figure 1

While the differences between management and leadership are sometimes hard to pinpoint, there are certain distinguishing elements (see Figure 1). In general, managers are concerned with getting things done—planning, organizing, and controlling to ensure that work is accomplished on time and in line with certain specifications or desired outcomes. Leaders, however, center more on motivating, empowering, and getting results through others. They demonstrate the ability to think strategically and influence the attitudes and behaviors of a group toward achieving mutual goals. They hold a broad organizational perspective, generate innovative and creative solutions, and accept accountability for business results.

Of course, the ideal is to combine, balance, and move seamlessly between the two realms, as each is required for overall effectiveness. For example, a leader with a tremendous vision won't get far without the ability, a la Star Trek's highly effective Captain Jean Luc Picard, to "make it so."

For most people new to the district sales manager position, this is their first managerial job. As former sales reps, they were individual contributors, concerned primarily with their own territories and sales targets. This new role may well be their first encounter with others looking to them for leadership. While myth would have it that leaders are born, not made, our experience has shown repeatedly that once you identify critical leadership competencies and make people aware of how closely their behaviors match those competencies, you are then in a position to coach and train them toward more effective leadership practices.

In our work with new managers, including district sales managers, to help them grow into their role as leaders, we use a competency-based experiential learning model known as the Strategic Leadership Development Process™ (see Figure 2).

This process provides a framework and tools to define

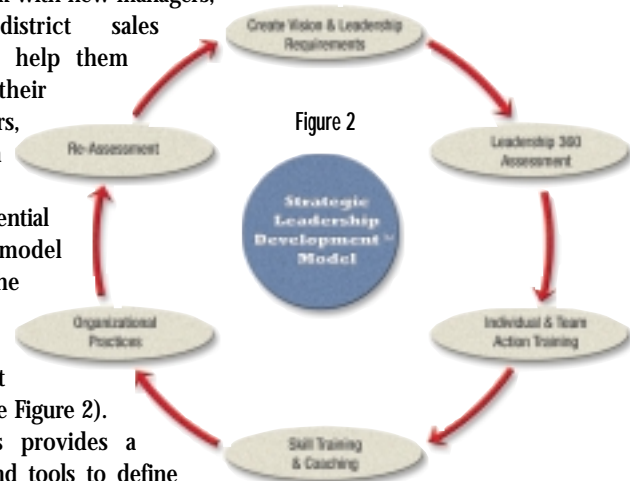


Figure 2

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the leadership practices necessary to meet an organization's competitive business goals; and to devise and implement practical, targeted strategies designed to develop and strengthen the use of those practices. It can be the basis for formal leadership development programs as well as to facilitate leadership coaching.

## DEFINING LEADERSHIP REQUIREMENTS

Leaders don't lead in a vacuum. Nor is there a single leadership style or fixed set of behaviors suitable to every district sales manager in any pharmaceutical or biotech company. Instead, the demand for leadership must be defined for that specific position within a specific organization. Accordingly, the first stage in the Strategic Leadership Development Process involves defining the results the particular company or sales force organization is trying to achieve and the leader's organizational context. Only when the big-picture goals and operating context are clear can you determine the leadership practices required to move the organization forward.

As an example, at EquiPro International, we worked with Pfizer Pharmaceuticals to establish a leadership development program for its worldwide organization, consisting of subsidiaries in more than 40 countries. The process began with each country manager (the executive heading operations in each country) gathering his or her direct reports together to discuss this question: "Given the company's mission and our specific vision and goals over the next two to three years, what type of leadership will we need?" The question was then cascaded down by the vice president of sales into each business unit/territory. The result was a discrete set of leader behaviors considered critical for success in each country's

pharmaceutical sales organization, which in turn informed the kind of leadership developmental initiatives necessary to foster those behaviors right down to the district sales manager level.

Along with the overarching organizational vision, various aspects of a district sales manager's operating context should be considered. For example, evaluate what the district sales manager role has entailed in the past, what the organization now requires from that role, and how the role must change based on the results required and any projected industry changes. Also, determine any unique challenges that individual managers may face, such as having an inexperienced staff or a highly competitive geographic area. The key is to take into account any forces, internal and external, that could affect and shape the appropriate leadership criteria.

## ASSESSING LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE

A selected set of strategic leadership requirements provides a benchmark for assessing—and reassessing, over time—the leadership practices of individual district sales managers. The assessment tool we typically use for this purpose is Leadership 360®, developed and licensed by the Management Research Group (MRG).

Leadership 360® encompasses 22 specific dimensions of leadership behavior, measured against six essential functions of the leadership role (see Figure 3). By conducting evaluations on a 360-degree basis (self, boss, peer, and direct report ratings), organizations can gain a broad perspective on a leader/manager's effectiveness relative to the established leadership requirements.

In addition to highlighting individual competencies, Leadership 360® also reveals performance gaps, such as areas of disparity between demonstrated behaviors and required leadership practices. Critical in this regard are the perception of others. For example, individuals may have clear notions about their strengths and weaknesses, yet feedback from bosses or peers might emphasize entirely different aspects of their performance.

With district sales managers new to the position, we recommend they spend at least six months on the job before a formal assessment is done. At the onset, however, they need to be informed of the leadership behaviors expected of them. They should then receive regular coaching and timely feedback relative to those expectations in their first several months on the job. Managers also could take part in formal training programs if they clearly need certain skills training in order to meet those initial expectations.

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS ANALYSIS™	
Creating a Vision	Following Through
Conservative	Control
Innovative	Feedback
Technical	
Self	
Strategic	
Developing Fellowship	Achieving Results
Persuasive	Management Focus
Outgoing	Dominant
Excitement	Production
Restraint	
Implementing the Vision	Team Playing
Structuring	Cooperation
Tactical	Consensual
Communication	Authority
Delegation	Empathy

Figure 3

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## BEST LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Pharmaceutical/Medical Products Industries  
Sales and Marketing Managers/Executives\*

### Overall Effectiveness Ratings

Leadership 360® assessments ratings from all three observer groups (bosses, peers, and direct reports) agreed that highly effective Sales and Leaders had:

Higher Scores On:	Lower Scores On:
Strategic	Authority
Technical	Outgoing
Communication	
Innovative	
Persuasive	
Production	
Excitement	
Management Focus	
Control	
Feedback	
Tactical	

\* From a Leadership Effectiveness Analysis™ study conducted by the Management Research Group (MRG) on 816 managers and executives in the Sales and Management area within the Pharmaceutical and Medical Products Industries.

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To illustrate how Leadership 360® works, let's take a look at a leadership profile for district sales manager Jane Ryan. For benchmark criteria, we'll use a set of "overall effectiveness" ratings presented by MRG in its report on "Best Leadership Practices for Sales and Marketing Managers and Executives within the Pharmaceutical/Medical Products Industry" (see Figure 4).

From those ratings, senior management at Jane's company chose six practices as being the most critical for her position. She needed to be strong in communication, innovative, persuasive, production, management focus, and feedback. When Jane began her job, her boss discussed with her these expected leadership behaviors. After six months on the job, a Leadership 360® assessment was conducted with Jane and her boss, peers, and direct reports. Her resulting profile showed her to be within the "high" range (60 to 80 on a scale of 100 percentile points) on innovative, persuasive, and production. However, she was out of range (less than 60%) on communication, management focus, and feedback. In combination, those three sets relate to communicating, delegating, and giving feedback to direct reports. Thus, these became areas of focus for coaching and development efforts (for example, exposing her to situational leadership, performance management, etc.).

### DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

Leadership development is a change process. It requires a commitment to examine crucial leadership competencies and expand those competencies through various learning and

Figure 4

personal-growth strategies. Assessment tools such as Leadership 360® offer valuable insight into individual and team leadership development needs and, in effect, provide a blueprint for devising developmental initiatives around those needs.

Ideally, the leadership track would include a combination of formal training programs, on-the-job developmental assignments and individualized coaching. With district sales managers new to the manager/leader role, it is especially important to help them create action plans outlining specific ways they can contribute to the company's leadership culture, then monitor their progress and provide regular performance feedback. Likewise, a group of district sales managers can formulate action plans toward collectively enhancing their leadership team effectiveness. At Sanofi-Synthelabo Pharmaceuticals, for example, a group of district sales managers saw the need to improve their cooperation scores and committed to spending more time sharing "best practices" on a regular basis.

Unfortunately, even the finest action plans and training efforts can fall far short without the consistent involvement and support of upper management. Part of a leader's job is to develop other leaders. That means the district sales manager's boss must take on the role of coach. More often than not, it also means the company's training and development professionals must step in to provide any assistance the boss may need to be a good coach.

Preparing new district sales managers to become efficient managers and effective leaders is an investment toward both individual and organizational success. But to draw them out of the mindset of an individual contributor and into that of a strategic business partner, they must have an understanding of leadership in practical, non-esoteric terms—what we often refer to as "bringing leadership out of the clouds and down to earth". The Strategic Leadership Development Process serves as a systematic means to help bridge the gulf between learning about what leaders do and putting those concepts into practice. So what are the potential payoffs? Greater motivation, loyalty, commitment, accountability, competency... and results!

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