

Decoding the Talent Matrix with Dr. Antoine Yver

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Introduction

Included in the incalculable ways that COVID-19 changed the world is its transformational impact on the life sciences industry. Global organizations that were traditionally competitors collaborated to research, develop, manufacture, and distribute COVID-19 vaccines in unprecedented rapid timeframes. As with other industries, Life Sciences companies (well...the successful ones) needed to be quick to adapt and quick to adopt new ways of thinking and working—such as shifting to digitalized business models with an increasing dependency on flexible/remote work arrangements. While Biopharma companies, government and academic research institutions were tasked to save the world with vaccines, they also needed to keep their employees safe and productive and positive from a morale standpoint. Healthcare systems, retail pharmacies, federal/state/local governments, and nonprofits further upped their game in collaborating as never before to ensure the timely and organized distribution of the vaccine as it became available.

The confluence of all these challenges and the new processes required to best address them from an organizational and people leadership standpoint, pushed global Biopharma companies to another pivotal junction in the evolution of their organizational structure. From their foundation, and in the decades that followed, large pharmaceutical companies were generally structured and operated in the standardized manner of traditional corporate design. Per other industries, as these companies grew, so did the levels of hierarchies, the slow pace of decision-making, and the lack of communication caused by cultural/organizational silos.

In retrospect, it can be difficult to fix a date when an evolution starts. Approximately 10-15 years ago (concurrent with the exponential growth of the JPM conference and all the related piggyback conferences taking over Union Square for a week), more and more early-stage biotech's were being funded and making rapid progress in their development programs. There was also an increase in deal making, with co-development and co-marketing deals between biotech and global pharma, as well as biotech acquisitions by global pharma companies. Senior leadership at global pharma began to have a more direct line of sight to how

smaller-medium size companies were structured and how they established their cultures of smart, collaborative, yet swift and decisive decision-making.

Beyond just culture changes, smaller biotech's were getting things done—like progressing in the clinic and getting new drugs approved. Big pharma had to increase efficiencies in both R&D as well as commercial functions. They began steering toward biotechnology-inspired organizational structures. Forward-thinking leaders broke the traditional corporate structure with significant organizational and cultural transformations that aspired to replicate the structure and the successes of the biotech model.

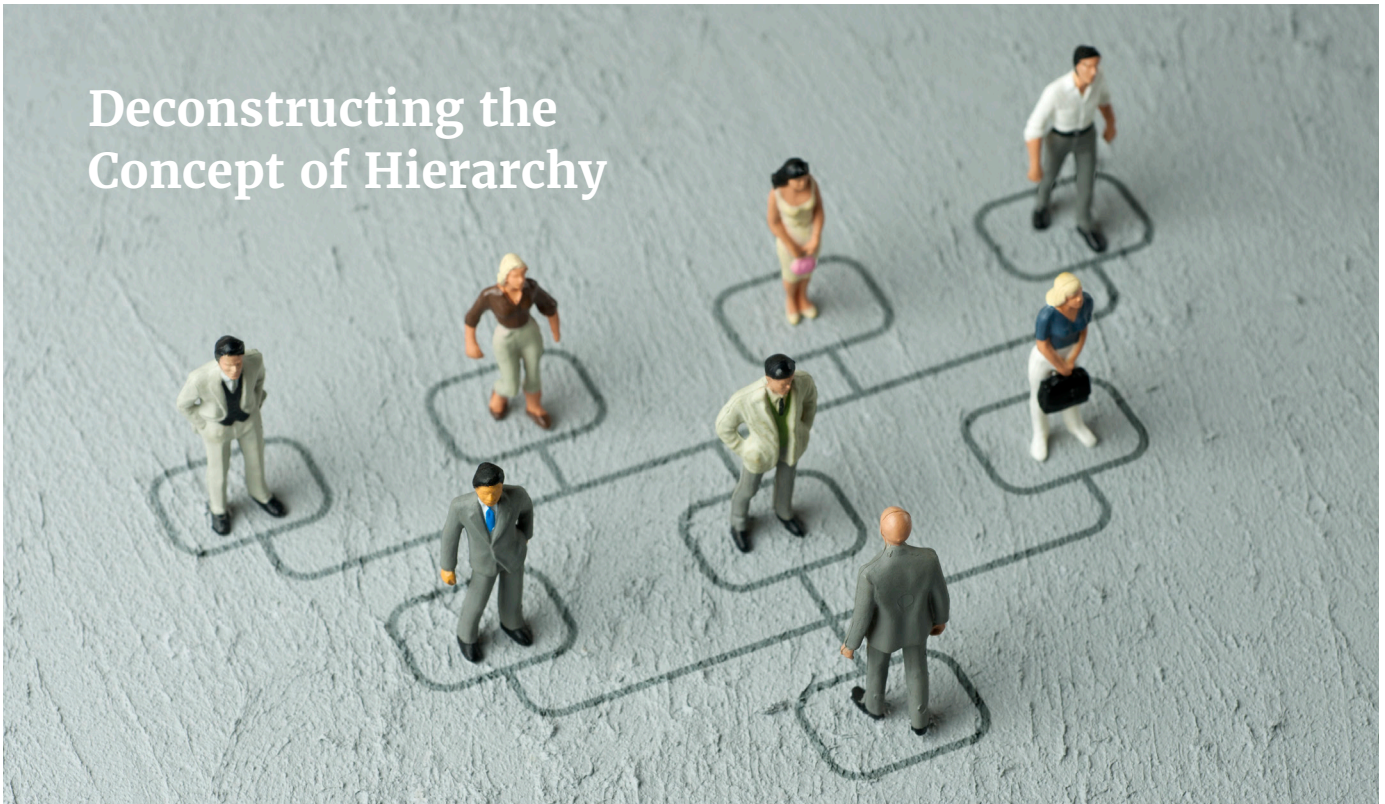
Fast forward to today, and global biopharma is looking at further leveraging lean and agile cross-functional leaders who empower employees to be accountable—with the support of smart and savvy governance. They are also looking at institutionalizing a remote work environment powered by a hybrid business model. But.....how do you do it right?

There is, of course, no single answer. But what are the common principles of leadership in successful organizations that are flourishing with a flat matrix organization and a culture of collaboration and accountability?

I caught up with a highly accomplished and respected industry veteran and the new Chief Medical Officer of Centessa Pharmaceuticals Ltd., Dr. Antoine Yver, to discuss his approaches to building and sustaining highly successful and productive organizations. Dr. Yver has over 30 years of global pharma experience. His direct leadership has led to the approvals of 11 different Oncology drugs, including TAGRISSO, LYNPARZA, and ENHERTU. Those approvals reflected his leadership in the turn-around of global oncology development with AstraZeneca and subsequently his repeat of that success leading for global Oncology R&D at Daiichi Sankyo.

As the industry struggles to fill the skill talent gap today, Dr. Yver takes us through his detailed approach to building and recruiting a talent pool that is agile, interpersonal, savvy, decisive, and accountable.

Deconstructing the Concept of Hierarchy



Dr. Yver has strived to be the catalyst that ensured the institutionalization of what he calls “a deconstructed hierarchy.” Our conversation highlighted the three main criteria that he has kept in mind while developing the unique organizations and people he has led.

Understanding Governance

Governance is not a one-size-fits-all decision. It comprises three main aspects: one is defining the risk. Understanding the risk at the portfolio and company level allows the governance to correctly define the final business model. The second is knowing the time that is ‘real.’ Discussing the timelines at length with your team and prioritizing tasks collaboratively allows you to be accountable and ensure the best possible performance delivery. Finally, the third aspect includes the value you have to offer—the most important driving factor. You need to have good value—it could be commercial, reputational, and even human value. It is what drives you to achieve your goals.

The role of governance is to understand all these elements and create a framework that empowers the team to work collaboratively toward one common objective.

The second is defining a structured advisory process – internally and externally

Everyone has an opinion—like everyone should. As

leaders, it is critical we emerge as sources of experience and viewpoints and not one of telling people what to do. Not realizing that every function has an opinion is a common mistake in the pharma industry, and it results in the project team struggling to find the best possible solution.

Allowing all stakeholders involved to have an equal say in the process might take time, but it also determines the most efficient and feasible path to take as a team. Having a structured governance allows for a stimulating environment for the team to brainstorm with flexibility and enhances the value you have to offer.

That leads us to our third point: Empowering the team to be accountable

The industry has one main driving force – to deliver the best science humanly possible for the benefit of the patients. Having a governance that deconstructs the traditional hierarchy, allows open communication between experts, and ensures a time and risk assessment before embarking on a project makes the team accountable for their results.

A structured advisory process and governance provides you with a high-performing team that delivers—and you rely on them to be as upfront as possible without feeling cornered.

Understanding Cross-Functional Phenotypes



Pushing authority and accountability on teams is very different from affording them the opportunity to feel accountable and make decisions—with the support of governance. Such interactions allow for a cross-functional type of leadership (and influencing) that supports an ongoing exchange of ideas, offering them the wisdom and benefit of senior-level governance. It unravels the concept of hierarchy and generates an autonomous agility among the teams to keep moving forward and redefine who they are as leaders.

Such attributes may have been a bit of an oxymoron a few years ago in the world of big pharma, but with greater frequency, cross-functional leaders/influencers are having a greater impact in environments that were recently “old school” hierarchies.

What defines cross-functional leadership?

Simply put, the truly effective cross-functional leaders are visionaries who work with team members hailing from different departments and disciplines within an organization. This leadership talent is agile and nimble. It also contributes to the core value proposition the firm has to offer, i.e., to pursue science for the benefit of the patients.

As a firm, it is important to have a structured recruitment process that ensures you keep your standards high as you look for new talent but also makes you receptive to the rising stars and rewarding them with important roles.

Dr. Yver has a unique approach to conducting these interviews. “I run atypical performance development interviews to deeply understand what drives the person to be successful. I want to understand what the deeper motive is—not necessarily from a career path perspective—but what would define absolute success for them.”

Such ‘atypical’ interviews allow you to pick the best fitting talent, faster.

The other way is to look for people who have the attributes you need and who can potentially transform into the leader you envision with the right mentoring and guidance. These could be internal or external hires, coming from a different function or role. The key is to engage with the people and connect with them to understand if they share the deep obligation to pursue perfection.

You can also approach the recruitment process by creating the role around the person you meet. Start from a blank sheet of paper. The newness of the role you end up with is, and should be, critical to the firm.

Following such philosophies helps the firm get laser-focused on what is right and de-prioritizes the criteria that does not matter. The balance is critical to ensure a commitment—not only as a business decision—but also as a win-win ownership that leads to the success of the individual and the organization.



The Future of the Industry

Centessa Pharmaceuticals is well known for its deconstructed approach to defining organizational structure. Simply put, they are “leaders, innovators and entrepreneurs working together to redefine the way they make medicines.” Even prior to Dr. Yver’s arrival, the company’s mission statement spoke of “...a deconstructed R&D environment that prioritizes data-driven decision-making led by subject matter experts.... This operating model has minimal centralized infrastructure, reduced hierarchy, and exclusive focus on data-driven capital allocation.”

For decades, Dr. Yver has been a firm believer in establishing organizations with decentralized decision-making and awarding his reports with autonomy, agility, and accountability. His informal intensity, along with these foundational principles, appears to be an ideal fit for his new role at Centessa—a true biotech environment that is agile, decisive, and fast moving.

The fast and smart talent desired by all companies need not always come from the top down. For someone like Dr. Yver, who spent a major part of his career creating a swift decision-making model

throughout his global biopharma experience to ensure drug development success, Centessa’s structure and leadership philosophy is a clear reflection of this.

The successful companies of tomorrow will need to shift focus to adapt and adopt new ways of doing things. It is time to move away from the traditional organization structure and business models and steer courses toward building a non-transactional relationship that is empowered by what truly motivates your workforce.

Ask yourself as current leaders. What drives you today? What should drive you in the future? Those are the real questions—and the answer lies in developing the right science with a rigor and passion for making medicine that serves your patients’ needs. As Dr. Yver has done, and as he advises other Biopharma leaders, be competitive, caring, passionate, and relentless in your pursuit of perfection.



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