

Alessandro Riccombeni Case A: Lessons in leadership

Introduction

For Alessandro Riccombeni, it seemed a career-defining moment. It was Christmas 2018 and he had just been headhunted by BigTech plc to be the company's industry lead for genomics in EMEA.

The appointment was the culmination of five years' dedicated experience in the field, working in the UK and the USA for several leading-edge bioinformatics and genomics firms, and now Alessandro was charged with driving the overall market and technical strategy for genomics, focusing on the public healthcare sector, for a huge multinational corporation.

He had a very clear vision of what he wanted to achieve, and was particularly excited to be working for a company that had a reputation for empowering employees and giving them license to generate ideas. Or so he thought...

It soon became clear, however, that establishing the new initiative was not going to be easy. He knew that separate teams in a big-tech organisation can have very different sub-cultures and that some big techs have teams that are extremely competitive.

For all that BigTech plc espoused values such as diversity and employee freedom to innovate, he found the organisational culture frequently challenging and, at times, positively obstructive; not least because the account execs competed for the relationship with the customer. He said:

"You've been hired as an expert to support the account execs, and they can't close the deal without you, but this creates resentment. So, they try to bring you in when they need you and kick you out when they don't, because they know the customer wants to discuss their business with the person who understands it."

The siloed nature of the organisation, where "you only do technology or you only do sales", inevitably created trouble for Alessandro. As he freely admitted, he was not cut out to play the silent backroom guy:

"That was a problem for me because I understand the business, I understand the market, I understand the technology, I understand the customers' challenges. I get into trouble in situations where somebody expects me to be the quiet technology expert."

Instead of obediently fading into the background when he was not actively required to interact with customers, he began asking pertinent questions about the business fundamentals of the new division; "sometimes embarrassing managers who were banking on the fact that nobody could validate their claims."