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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."

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Not surprisingly, the approach did not make him any friends. In effect, he was an independent contributor in a senior role with a very high level of expertise and ability to contribute, but was not connected to the agendas and politics of the key areas of the business.

On the one hand, he was joining a company because of his deep expertise in a primary domain, for which his value was recognised, but on the other he was one of many who could be replaced immediately by colleagues, regardless how senior or experienced he was. The company “does a large number of things – you are very important for one thing, but for everything else you are not.”

This scenario is a common one for anyone endeavouring to move from academic research or industry to big tech. Alessandro soon discovered that such a transition is not straightforward for anybody. As he put it, it’s not trivial to find the right position in the spectrum, “where you are invaluable but not indispensable.”

His refusal to stay out of key business areas soon led to conflict. When one account exec wanted to move a customer account from a European territory to a different part of the business, Alessandro refused to comply, saying, “We’re building a new country team – we cannot abandon the very first account in the territory.”

His response conflicted with a colleague’s agenda and escalated the tension, making him realise how vulnerable his position in the company was:

“People with power in an organisation are often part of a group, and with me being stuck in the middle, they were not going to do me any favours, so there was strong tension between me and a clique of people.”

Alessandro’s domain, genomics, had generated great excitement in the industry, with multiple teams competing to set up their own expertise. A colleague told him, “Alessandro, genomics is the next big thing in healthcare – everybody wants to be you!”

Knowing that to be the case, he had repeatedly tried to ignore internal politics and push ahead with his project, but the tension was growing and making life very difficult.

He knew that, at BigTech, dozens of innovative projects were underway at any given time but few, if any, seemed to come to fruition. The situation was even beginning to make him think he should accept what he was being told and relinquish his grand ambitions.

But could he abandon a project that was so close to his heart and which represented the culmination of his career? If not, how should he deal with a challenge that seemed to be completely beyond his control?

Alessandro Riccombeni: The back story

Alessandro Riccombeni was an unlikely academic high achiever. Born in Milan to working-class immigrant parents from southern Italy who had little formal education, he was raised with the ethos that work, not education, is everything. Achieving outstanding grades at school did nothing to change their view that continuing in education was a waste of time at best, or even potentially bad for their son. All of Alessandro’s closest relatives were of the firm opinion that he should abandon any thought of completing high school and instead dedicate himself to saving the family business – despite the fact that the “business” was constantly failing.

Such was the lack of support from his family that Alessandro’s situation attracted the attention of social services – but even they offered little help; advising him, aged just 13, to look for a full-time job.

A meeting with an Italian charity was to change the course of his life. An anonymous family from Milan agreed to sponsor Alessandro's studies, allowing him to complete high school against the wishes of his family – and causing a lasting rift with them.

Alessandro then pursued his ambition to further his education, attaining a bachelor's degree in industrial biotechnology and a master's degree in bioinformatics from the University of Milan – where he did graduate, but with great difficulty due to the lack of finance that obliged him to prioritise paid work to pay his living expenses over his studies.

Intent on a career in science, possibly in research or at a university, he then found a lifeline in the form of social-impact investing: Banca Intesa Sanpaolo had just introduced student loans in Italy, allowing Alessandro to prioritise his studies above having to earn an income for the first time in his life. For his thesis, instead of a three-month assignment, Alessandro undertook an 18-months unpaid internship at the European Oncology Institute, a prestigious research organisation.

The fellowship allowed him to join a competitive PhD programme in Bioinformatics and Infection Biology at University College Dublin. He completed the PhD in 2013 but, again, not without experiencing significant financial hardship. A recession was underway and his partner was unemployed, so the couple had less than the minimum wage to support them. They lived in a one-bedroom flat with mice and no heating, on a food budget of €30 a week. Alessandro recalled:

“We lived off rice, eggs and tinned food. The conditions were terrible. It was very distracting – you want to focus on your PhD, but research is the last of your priorities because you need to get money to live.”

As his fellow PhD students were mainly in their early twenties and from local families, they had immediate support and did not have to use their student grant to pay the rent. The experience once again made him feel something of an outsider:

“I felt money and subsistence were not really understood in academia. The researchers and professors I interacted with did not have the same challenges.”

Halfway through his PhD he did a bioinformatics internship at Illumina in Cambridge. He loved the city and, after completing his doctorate, applied for a job as a research fellow in Cambridge, because he greatly enjoyed doing research and teaching. Unfortunately, however, he did not get the job he wanted. Determined to move to Cambridge eventually, he started a post-doctoral degree at University College London, but felt obliged to abandon a possible research career after eight months.

Once again, it was a decision that was driven at least in part by financial hardship. It was not that he wasn't interested in the work at UCL, but London was expensive, his partner was again unemployed and he didn't want to repeat his Dublin experience.

When a friend from Illumina put him in touch with a job at a startup in Cambridge, Atlas Bioinformatics, he discovered that, for his experience, even a startup paid 50% more than he was earning as a researcher. That was how, at the age of 32, he had disposable income for the first time in his life.

Learning from experience

Alessandro joined the startup as Bioinformatics Team Leader, but was clearly not ready to be a leader of people. His poverty, lack of parental support and lack of industry role models meant

that his only reference for how people work together in a professional setting was his professors at university. He admitted:

“All things considered, I know now that I was not a good boss. I think I was aligned to the culture of a startup, but I wasn’t a good leader. A manager, yes, but not a leader.”

At that time he thought that, if he wanted his team to be successful, he had to follow the examples of the centres of excellence where he had worked in academia:

“I approached the role in the same way that my PhD supervisors treated me: there is only one right way of doing things, so it’s right or wrong. It was sink or swim, and incompetence had to be chastised.”

In charge of a team of five people, two of whom did not have much experience, his approach was to “ignore their individual needs” and push all of them equally hard to succeed, in the same way that he had always driven himself.

That worked well with one of the two junior colleagues, who was bright and very driven and who responded positively to his approach. That individual went on to do a PhD and was “a great success story”. The other junior colleague, being different in terms of aptitude and lacking empathy, did not fare so well under Alessandro’s charge. Looking back, he realised that he was not a team player. He admitted:

“I was not equipped to deal with the situation. I was still in the academic mode of publish or perish; it’s right or wrong. It was my way or the highway – ‘I’m the expert. This is how it’s done. And if you challenge me, we are going to have a problem’.”

He had joined the company “full of expertise and ideas” and was convinced he knew everything necessary to fulfil his role, but his approach clearly irritated the CEO, whom Alessandro found to have the same personality as himself and who reminded him, “This is my company”.

The scenario nonetheless provided Alessandro with an invaluable lesson that originated in the observation that the CEO talked frequently about himself:

“I always felt, ‘We’re building a product – why do you talk about yourself and not the product?’ That’s when I started thinking maybe attention should not go inwards, but outwards. Maybe our customers might have something better to say than the CEO.”

Although he was “distracted” to move on as he cared deeply for the team he had built, the insight into the importance of customer-centricity became his North Star, and a principle that was to greatly help him succeed in his career.

Another key on-the-job learning came in his next job as Head of Bioinformatics at Nextmerge Ltd, where he was indirectly managing other people in what turned out to be “a crash course in politics”.

He had joined a chaotic organisation that had grown organically through multiple acquisitions in a very short period of time, and where there were multiple factions and cliques “constantly warring with each other”.

Unfortunately, he “didn’t know the meaning of company politics” and found himself having to negotiate multiple organisational cultures:

“One division consisted of people who were very collaborative and great to work with, but in another division the culture was cutthroat – very focused on money,

highly competitive and distrustful. It was like working in two different companies at once.”

Alessandro had joined Nextmerge Ltd as the company’s key expert in a highly visible domain, and was repeatedly frustrated at having to “stick to his level” in the organisational hierarchy. It didn’t help that he lacked respect for his line manager, whom he believed couldn’t do much besides use Alessandro to further his own ends. But the situation did at least educate him “in aligning the political conflicts, the different requirements from different parts of the business, trying to bring people together.”

His time with the company also provided him with a profound insight into the value of data, beyond its technical utility:

“There were a lot of managers who went around saying, ‘Forget about your expertise, forget about the data. My gut feeling says this is what needs to be done.’ I could immediately see that that was a useless approach. That experience taught me to be more data-driven in my approach.”

Sensing that “the numbers didn’t stack up” at the company – the share price collapsed and the leadership was removed a few months later – Alessandro eventually decided to look elsewhere, and was subsequently headhunted by Silicon Valley-based DNAnexus for his genomics expertise.

The first international employee to join the company, he began as a scientist and within two years was promoted to Director of Scientific Business Development. There, he worked to combine the customer-centric perspective he had acquired at Atlas Bioinformatics with the political skills he had learnt at Nextmerge Ltd.

Now, a different kind of leadership was required in that it was all about influencing an executive team in the US as the only international employee. He rapidly build the firm’s EMEA business from almost nothing by earning the trust of colleagues in the US in a scenario where physical presence was essential:

“I spent three months a year in California, creating personal connections with the 100 people in the US, really becoming one of them.”

It was a role which required him to work very closely with a key customer, Big Pharma One, where he had to align the requirements of 12 different groups. People skills were now key, because “most of the different group members didn’t speak to each other – even if they were going to lunch together!”

His new perspective helped secure the Big Pharma One account, with DNAnexus becoming Big Pharma’s platform of choice for genomics for all their divisions. It also helped land another milestone deal for the company to support a population-scale clinical dataset. By that time, Alessandro could see that the academic perspective of “right or wrong” did not work in a commercial environment:

“I had to work with the people, for the people, delivering through others, many of whom were in another continent. It was a very different perspective, considering my technical and academic background.”

But then something happened that gave him pause for serious thought. A Scandinavian customer had emailed a support ticket, but the company’s attention lay elsewhere at the time. Alessandro connected with the customer and, earning their trust simply through emails, got his CEO to accompany him on a client visit, where Alessandro led a workshop to onboard the customer’s diagnostics team on the platform. The CEO and the account manager then had a meeting with the client’s executive team without him. Alessandro was not impressed:

“I thought, ‘Hold on – I set this up, I built the relationship, I dragged my CEO here, I made the business case. The account manager and the CEO had no idea who these guys are, so why am I not allowed to meet the executive team?’

Being Alessandro, he wasn't shy of asking for an explanation. The response he got was along the lines of, “It doesn't matter what you think – you're just a scientist.”

The opportunity at DNAnexus was Alessandro's dream job and seemed to represent an appropriate reward for the many struggles he had encountered in education and in his professional career to date. After all, as a colleague had told him, “Everyone wants to be you!”

But now, it seemed he was likely to encounter many of the same problems that had beset him throughout his career – only this time, it seemed they were going to be on a bigger scale and would likely prevent him from being able to do what he wanted to do. How could he circumvent that problem? And how should he deal with a challenge that seemed to be completely beyond his control?