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CS-23-007  
July 2023

## Alessandro Riccombeni Case B: Resolving the impasse

### Going back to school

While still working for DNAnexus, Alessandro had decided to do an executive MBA in London, which he completed in 2020. Although it was a long-held ambition, the immediate trigger for going back to school was the “incident” at DNAnexus when he was excluded from a high-level customer meeting and told very clearly that only two career paths lay ahead for him: become an account executive, which to Alessandro was a step backwards “and not exactly an interesting job”, or become a field application scientist (FAS) – which he saw as “a shallow role with no real career perspectives: “To me, FAS meant career failure”.

Alessandro had always wanted to do an MBA, but could never afford it. Fortunately, he managed to convince his CEO to back him, despite the latter’s misgivings:

*“He was very doubtful about my ability to do it while working full time, but he was also very supportive and excited for me.”*

While still doing the MBA, DNAnexus partnered with BigTech plc, leading to an opportunity for Alessandro to transition. He was charged with spearheading BigTech’s market strategy for genomics. Almost immediately, however, it became clear that he was going to encounter a whole new set of organisational and personal challenges.

The Alessandro Riccombeni of a few years ago would simply have walked away if he had not been able to do what he thought was right from the outset. Now, he approached the situation with a different mindset. A number of learnings from his MBA proved especially invaluable. A key piece of advice arrived almost as an epiphany during an Executive Leadership class when he experienced a moment of clarity about his management style:

*“I realised that, in a leadership role, I needed to stop being yes/no, right/wrong – I had to discipline myself to take a step back and coach others to help them move towards optimal solutions, so that they understood the issues through their own learning path.”*

Another insight concerned the art of turning defence into attack. Some colleagues wanted to make sure Alessandro “knew his place” and acted purely as optional support for their projects. He asked an executive coach how he could flourish at BigTech plc if people were telling him, “You’re not senior – you don’t really matter” and that his job was “to shut up and do what you’re told”. The coach responded with “some of the best advice I ever had”, telling him:

*“You’re already one-foot-out-of-the-door in your head because they want to push you out. At this point, it doesn’t really matter – if you have one foot out of the door, you might as well try to elbow your way in. If it doesn’t work, you’re out anyway.”*

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That is how Alessandro responded – much to the surprise of his immediate management. He said:

*“Corporate bullies do not expect that reaction. They expected to pressure people into walking away and leaving the company. Instead, I responded with my own type of pressure, turning my intimate knowledge of technology, market and customers into data, documentation and roadmaps.”*

His approach also explained why, out of dozens of competing proposals to create a new offering in the industry, Alessandro’s was the only one, worldwide, that was accepted by the top leadership team:

*“Not only that – I was not based in the headquarters and that almost caused a scandal. I was not intimidated by the pressure. I learned to recognise the pressure, interpret it as fear and defensiveness, and push back accordingly.”*

Another significant piece of advice came from a colleague at BigTech who told him that he needed to build relationships “because everybody here has an agenda – you need to find an agenda you like and attach yourself to it, and that’s what I did.”

Doing so gave him leverage and helped him realise that he needed to show how his proposals “created value for others” in a situation where “others” meant the various agendas of the leadership team. With this in mind, he set about joining agendas from executives at multiple levels.

He attributed his ability to put together a successful proposal to two things. One was that he was the only one among his peers who combined deep technological and business insights. The other was that his EMBA training enabled him to structure the proposal in such a way as to communicate his business vision to senior company execs in a clear and persuasive way, turning technical documentation into a compelling argument for a new product.

In a “masterpiece in influencing”, he then put his political skills to good use and, using his expertise in market technology and the customer side, gained the trust of key executives spanning multiple disciplines to win support for his project. He said:

*“I moved from being an academic who says, ‘This result is right and this is wrong’ to a business leader who says, ‘This option is the best way forward and this is how it creates the most value for stakeholders and customers’. I was still pushing for what I believed was right, but explicitly creating value for stakeholders around me as part of the process and making them active participants in the journey I was leading them through.”*

As Alessandro said, it was not so much that his personality had changed profoundly – he still “had very strong opinions about what was right and what was wrong” – but rather that he had assimilated better ways of doing things and acquired key skills. Instead of locking horns with those opposed to his project, he looked to create “a win-win situation”.

He was successful in enlisting help by identifying a product team who had been charged with getting into his sector of the industry, but who had no roadmap or customer pipeline to support the venture. His strategy was to focus on finding the points of similarity between what he thought was the right strategy, what the company wanted to do, and what the team was trying to achieve. He said:

*“The old Alessandro, the pre-business school Alessandro, would not have been able to do that when he started. He would have been very excited about how important this project is for the future of mankind, but would not have connected*

*with executives with the right gravitas, with the right pacing, with the right tone, to help them understand the great business opportunity. I had to learn about the power of relationships across groups.”*

And – in a far cry from his days at Atlas Bioinformatics – he had also learned how to build relationships in the organisation, understand how each person is different, understand how to motivate each individual and commit to spending the time influencing them “to take them with you on the journey”:

*“I learnt that one of the ways to do that is by making everything measurable and trackable, so if there's any doubt about the strategy, people can immediately follow the KPIs.”*

The “new” Alessandro now adroitly put together and managed a cross-functional matrix of more than 50 employees spanning global markets who combined expertise and market insights from the very different disciplines of healthcare, academia and pharma. Relationships accordingly became his top priority:

*“I was spending at least 40 to 50% on on-on-one sessions and coaching. Rather than becoming an expert on technical or business stuff, I was managing relationships with stakeholders.”*

His efforts paid off. By earning the trust of senior executives across the enterprise, he was able to verify customer requirements at the highest level and put together a customer-centric strategy roadmap. This was subsequently validated through customer workshops and eventually became the product roadmap for a key new – and very high-profile – managed service that became generally available in 2023.

Through the culmination of over two years of “an obsessive focus on customer-centricity” and his newly acquired political and leadership skills, Alessandro had led BigTech’s first international, cross-division, user-experience initiative in precision and genomic medicine, identifying mission-critical challenges across accounts, countries and markets.

In recognition of his achievements, he was awarded a prestigious engineering award for “demonstrating thoughtful, forward direction which resulted in great results for the business and its customers”.

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## Postscript

Not long after receiving due recognition for his pioneering work, Alessandro quit BigTech when a shift in the political balance of power at the parent firm forced his executive sponsor to relinquish control of the project. For Alessandro, this was a different kinds of politics: the geographic politics where changes in the balance of power in another continent change the ability of the organisation to access budgets and resources, and decide priorities. He said:

*“People were blatantly lying to my face while trying to take over everything I had been working towards, but they were untouchable because they had now moved into the right positions, so I moved out.”*

Fortunately, another lesson helped him overcome any bitterness he might have felt towards his peers as he quickly moved on to an equally high-profile leadership role, heading the UK commercial strategy and value proposition for genomic medicine for another tech giant. The “super-painful” lesson came from Jeffrey Pfeffer’s 2010 book *Power: Why Some People Have It—and Others Don’t*. Alessandro revealed:

*Right at the beginning of the book, Pfeffer says you have to accept that life is not fair, and if you cannot accept that, put this book down now. And I did put it down, for six months. But I realised you have to accept that life simply is not fair. In perspective, there’s plenty of people more deserving than me who did not have my success. To quote a friend of mine, I made the most of the luck I had.”*