

# Mobilizing Talent

Makes the

## Biggest Impact in the Workplace

By Joan Wood

At Genzyme, everyone believes that patients come first.

Henri Termeer, the chairman and chief executive officer of the Cambridge-based biotechnology company, has fostered an entrepreneurial environment in which employees are encouraged and expected to take initiative. At Genzyme, the primary focus is on putting ideas and energy to work on behalf of patients afflicted with unmet medical needs, rather than on employee career development. Yet the company affords its more than 8,000 employees one of the richest environments for career development in the industry.

So how does a company that does not offer a traditional career development program foster a highly successful work force? According to Termeer, the answer is simple. Keep the focus on the patients, and career development will follow.

### MOBILIZING TALENT

In 1999, Christopher Bartlett of Harvard Business School and Sumantra Ghoshal of the London Business School introduced the "Individualized Corporation," a new business approach designed to give organizations a competitive advantage by exploiting the knowledge and talents of each individual employee. This model, which focuses on developing individual expertise and encouraging employees "to become the best they can be in what they choose to do," redefines the role of corporate management. Instead of focusing on strategy, structure, and systems, the individualized corporation is built on the three Ps: purpose, process and people. Bartlett and Ghoshal believe these traits are

what give a particular corporation its competitive advantage in today's business world.

Intrigued by this concept, Genzyme hosted Bartlett for a day in December 2001 to take a closer look at its management fundamentals and its approach to the three Ps. Genzyme had been successfully developing leaders in the biotechnology arena throughout its 20-plus-year history and had plenty of examples to prove it. But following the workshop, senior managers had a clear sense that there was an opportunity to enhance their focus on people. Specifically, they needed to ensure that they were challenging their employees and broadening their experiences over time to leverage their full potential.

In a business initiative coined *Mobilizing Talent*, Genzyme decided to strengthen its focus on the development of employees at all levels, with the goal of increasing capability and productivity as well as maximizing the retention of employees to meet the company's current and future business challenges. Ultimately, they wanted to continue to strengthen and sustain the momentum of the company in pursuit of its mission: helping patients.

### PEOPLE FOCUS

Employees like to make an impact in their work environment. However, in a traditional corporate model, only a small percentage of people are targeted and groomed to become the future leaders.

At Genzyme, the development focus is on the individual, each and every employee, with the goal of fully leveraging their unique talents and evolving capabilities and interests. This level of focus serves as a great motivator, with

many benefits. It keeps employees interested and committed to their work. Retaining employees is good for both the individual and the company. In the end, a multitude of strengths are mobilized to have a maximum impact on the business.

Senior managers at Genzyme want employees to create a record of contribution in their current positions. By encouraging people to take initiative, they are building a high-performing team of people with a broad perspective on the business and the ability to think creatively and solve problems in an inter-disciplinary fashion.

### IMPLEMENTING THIS MODEL

A few years ago, at the inception of the *Mobilizing Talent* initiative at Genzyme, senior managers worked together, at the request of the CEO, to conduct a pilot study with a small group of employees. One of the first steps was to engage employees in personal development planning. Managers met with their direct reports and discussed their career aspirations, career history, proven strengths, developmental priorities and potential next steps from a development perspective and reviewed their goals.

As these discussions took place, managers acknowledged that in general, people are seeking to have a significant impact in whatever role they play. Additionally, some who had been able to have an impact in a current role expressed a desire to keep learning and growing and wanted opportunities to take on new responsibilities, outside of their current roles. For some, this meant moving to different areas within the company and learning a whole new business. For example, one manager learned that a successful and long-term director of marketing in the rare genetic disease area was interested in trying her hand in the orthopedics arena.

### DEVELOPMENT ROUNDTABLES

Once the personal development planning sessions took place, the select group of managers met in a group to discuss what they had learned and what they had committed to in their personal develop-

ment planning sessions with employees. Such a meeting, which brought together a team of managers specifically to exchange information about the perceived strengths and development needs of their employees, was given a special name: a Development Roundtable.

In addition to development needs, these discussions also focused on specific opportunities available across the company and critical roles or potential vulnerabilities within the group. Ultimately, the goal of the process was

to link individual development with the business needs.

Four years later, the use of Development Roundtables is a common practice within most divisions at Genzyme. During these meetings, the group's comments are constructive and confidential, with one employee discussed at a time. A two-person HR team, which includes an HR business partner and a specialist in leadership development, is responsible for facilitating these meetings, taking the notes

so managers can focus on the issues. Everyone is encouraged to focus on specific behaviors and to avoid labeling employees.

The primary purpose of the roundtable is to make operational Genzyme's strategy of developing individuals primarily through work assignments. When the roundtables are scheduled to take place every few months, they can become very valuable to an organization, strongly linking development discussions to job openings that are on the horizon. Genzyme also utilizes mentoring and structured learning to aid in professional development, but these strategies are found to be most powerful when used in conjunction with the experiential learning that occurs naturally in a challenging work assignment.

Additionally, engaging in the practice of Development Roundtables helps managers to become better managers. The objective for managers participating in a roundtable is for them to walk away with a shared understanding of the strengths and development needs of the people who report to their peers as well as those who report directly to themselves. They also gain experience giving and receiving specific feedback on the talents, performance and potential of individuals, identifying possible development opportunities and identifying potential organizational vulnerabilities. In short, the process improves their ability to think strategically about the organization and leadership development and to help their direct reports grow and become high-impact contributors to the success of the company. This strong focus on individuals benefits everyone in the end, and fosters the development of diverse and capable teams across the organization.

#### **THE BENEFITS**

The pilot activities associated with the *Mobilizing Talent* initiative were a success at Genzyme, and the response from both managers and employees confirmed that this approach was a natural fit for the company and its culture. Genzyme's Leadership and Organization Development team has developed a toolkit for the program and helps facilitate the Development Roundtables, but

the core of the process is driven by the managers. In fact, managers have been encouraged to engage in personal developmental planning discussions with *all* of their direct reports, even though it may not be feasible or beneficial to discuss every employee at a Development Roundtable. The ideal, of course, is to be able to discuss at a roundtable the development of not only high performers but also those employees who are focused on staying in their current positions for the long term or those who may pose other unique challenges in terms of their development.

As a result of the processes associated with *Mobilizing Talent*, annual performance reviews have the potential for an expanded scope of conversation. Instead of solely providing feedback to employees on what they are doing well and what they can do to do their jobs better, reviews have become an opportunity for managers to understand better how to help individuals succeed and grow.

Several years into it, managers and employees are now embracing the *Mobilizing Talent* approach across the company, and there is an overall increased level of focus on employee development and the associated outcomes of broader capability and increased productivity. Employees benefit through broader management awareness of their capabilities and readiness for developmental assignments. In addition, managers now have assistance from others in identifying the developmental opportunities inherent in work assignments, which can be effectively leveraged to expand and develop new skills, knowledge and attitudes.

Many success stories show the benefits of using this business model. The internal movement within the company has resulted in a workforce with a broader understanding of the business and improved management skills across the board. These kinds of success stories are attractive to potential new employees and are being used to help Genzyme in competing for top talent outside of the company.

The Individualized Corporation model works for both employees and managers. The employees find new challenges and opportunities and can feel

like they are doing something significant that will make an impact. Managers, in turn, improve their coaching skills and become advocates. The end results are many, including a larger number of entrepreneurial leaders, higher retention rates within the organization and ultimately an economic advantage for the organization. While the model for this kind of management may not be as structured and controlled as the traditional corporate approach, it does provide the basis for a culture where people

can propose new ideas, gain management support to take intelligent risks and, ultimately, make a high-level impact.

At Genzyme, employees are affecting the lives of patients every day. With a clear focus on this objective, their career development is taking care of itself. ■

---

**Joan Wood is vice president of leadership and organization development at Genzyme Corporation. She can be reached at [joan.wood@genzyme.com](mailto:joan.wood@genzyme.com).**