

# Developing and Broadening Specialists

“When specialists become leaders, they often find themselves thrust into a new role that requires leading in a totally different manner. They must lead without being expert in everything or being able to stay on top of all the details. To thrive in the new role requires giving up much of what made them successful to that point and learning to rely on a whole new set of skills.”

Wanda T Wallace, report co-author.

# Executive Summary

- 1 In an increasingly competitive, knowledge-intensive and connected business world, the demands of leadership are changing. The need now is for leaders to combine business and leadership skills with deep technical knowledge – requiring specialists at senior levels to balance leading with continuing to deliver technical expertise, client support or project work. We sought to understand the challenges this raises for specialists aspiring to leadership and identify how their development is best provided.
- 2 This report covers a broad range of specialists, from engineers and scientists to consultants and lawyers. What they all have in common is intensive technical training, a strong professional identity and deep technical knowledge.
- 3 We examined the differences between what makes a technical specialist successful and what is required of leaders, finding that many valued skills in specialists can be a barrier to leader success.
- 4 Many paradoxes have to be negotiated by specialists, including
  - moving from operating with certainty, detail and logic to being able to deal with ambiguity, and making decisions based on limited information and intuition
  - learning how to influence through relationships rather than by knowledge, data and facts
  - becoming skilled in inspiring and motivating people with different styles, not just dealing with the same type of people
  - learning to relinquish control of all the details
  - focusing on the strategic and commercial, as well as technical issues.
- Specialists becoming leaders also face changes in attitude from being motivated by facilitating and developing others rather than doing work themselves, and regarding themselves as business leaders.
- 5 Though organisations value leadership capability, some reluctance among specialists to move into leadership is evident, along with concern about losing their identity, expertise and perceived value to the organisation. Few good role models of leadership practice appear to exist from whom specialists may learn.
- 6 The transitions that typically have to be navigated when moving from an individual contributor to enterprise leadership are described. This model of career passages – or similar – is used by many participating organisations in our research to underpin their approach to leadership development and leader curricula. However, this model does not adequately address the needs of specialists who have to be both producer and leader.
- 7 Most organisations run generic leadership and commercial skills development programmes for specialists and other function staff. Given the challenges raised in this report, we question whether such programmes actually deliver what specialists need – few organisations we spoke to have translated these challenges into targeted development activities. Updating curricula to reflect the unique issues facing specialists is of critical importance.

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8 Commercial skills are a key need for specialists – developing a better understanding of business generally, strategy, and how it delivers business objectives are examples. Leader-specialists also require negotiation, customer relationship and selling skills.

9 Development budgets are clearly under pressure which means achieving more with less. Many opportunities outside traditional programmes exist to develop specialists – stretch assignments, rotations, project work, leading cross-functional teams and support through mentoring and role modelling, are useful practices.

10 We have identified key actions, including

- rethinking the selection of specialists as leaders by focusing more on leadership potential and motivation to lead rather than technical skills alone
- giving specialists opportunities to develop commercial and leadership skills as early in their careers as possible
- helping leaders to accomplish a balance between leading and producing by clearly defining roles, objectives and performance standards – and explaining the nature of any transition required
- tailoring leadership development towards the specific challenges that specialists face as leaders.

11 Overall, we argue, development must take into account individuals’ learning needs, the principles of adult learning and different learning styles. Its effectiveness should be evaluated against pre-determined objectives.

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