

An interview with Jeff Jagiela

**Director of Customer Service, Aventis Pharmaceutical
(formed by the merger of Rhône-Poulenc and Hoechst in 1999)
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Interviewer's note: Jeff Jagiela heads a 70-person organization that has won numerous awards from its customers, including National Wholesale Druggists' Association Technology Awards for its business-to-business internet site, American Productivity and Quality Center award for Innovative Performance in the area of Order Management, and Trading Partner of the Year from Amerisource and F. Dohmen.

A: How would you characterize your style?

J: The people I work with -- that's key. I know it sounds like jargon, but I truly believe we work together. They don't work for me; we work for the customer.

I surround myself with talent: people who have the right attitude, maybe not the skills, but I believe if you have the right attitude the skills can develop. With that attitude comes the hunger, need, desire to be a learner, to be passionate, and to pick up the things you need to pick up.

I let people do what I hired them to do and give them the leeway to do it. I'm there to remove barriers that they may come across when trying to achieve what they need to achieve. I also am willing to let the organization succeed or fail -- to step back when the organization succeeds but step up when it fails.

I try to make sure that people have the same passion that I have. However, I don't want to hire cookie cutters of Jeff Jagiela, or one of us isn't needed. I'd rather hire people that have different approaches or different thoughts and we can give and take and push back and forth and learn from each other.

A: You've mentioned vision. Can you clarify what your team's vision is?

J: We want to be the easiest pharmaceutical company for our customers to do business with. We embrace technology to enable this.

A: How do you communicate the vision? Does everyone on your team know this is the vision?

J: They know we're technologically oriented, but it's not like a "Quality is Job One" at Ford. We don't have a catch phrase.

A: Then how do you get everyone on board?

J: You've got to get everyone to believe in you. We support the vision with projects, capital, and dollars. That's what gets people believing in it. Your actions and your words are the same and they're consistent.

A: What types of persuasion tactics do you use, particularly if someone on your team isn't motivated or has this attitude you look for?

J: You've got to be relatively savvy on what makes people tick. I'm a firm believer that no one comes to work trying to screw up. I try to let people solve issues how they best see fit and let them learn from that. People get motivated from different things. Some get motivated by money. Some people get motivated by a challenge. Some people get motivated by being left alone. Others get motivated by being told what to do. We're truly only as strong as our weakest link. So if we've got one person on the team that doesn't have the motivation or attitude that's going to allow us to succeed, we either have to find out what's going to give them the motivation or attitude, or give that person the chance to succeed somewhere else - not with us. You can't put a square peg in a round hole. It's difficult to answer the question of how to motivate people if you don't know who your people are.

A: So you gain your power by sharing it?

J: Yes. But also knowing when to step in and being given that role by your company.

A: Is communication important?

J: Absolutely -- formally and informally. Every Wednesday morning at 8:30 am, the whole team huddles in the center aisle and talks about stuff. It's a pulse check. The meetings can be 5 minutes or 55 minutes depending on what's going on. Smaller teams get together more often of course.

A: How would you describe your approach to communication?

J: Brutally honest. I'm an outloud thinker. That becomes a challenge in my leadership style. I tell people what I'm thinking and some people react negatively to that. So I need to be careful and know when to adapt my style to the person I'm trying to lead. You really have to be on your toes almost all the time. And that's why being good at being a leader is exhausting, for the most part. I don't think it's something that comes naturally to a lot of people. It's something I have to work hard at every day.

A: What are the areas that you feel you have to work the hardest at?

J: Conflict. Conflict is difficult. I generally do my best to avoid conflict, and the way I do that is to develop relatively good consensus. Everyone is not going to be happy all the time. But having people believe that they've had input into a decision, and that the input has been heard is important. People generally respect that.

Passion is one of the most misinterpreted emotions that I have as a leader. My passion can get misinterpreted as stubbornness and control. But that's who I am. If it's being misinterpreted, then maybe I need to go somewhere where that passion is valued. Stick with what you know. Be who you are and be that very well.

A: You are generally well liked. You talk about conflict - what do you think are the balances between being a leader and being liked? How does that fit into your leadership abilities?

J: I don't care what people do after work. But I want to make sure that during the day we're all rowing at the same speed. I don't think you have to be liked, but I think you have to be likable. You have to be genuine, someone people can look to and respect. You have to have some solid ethics and try and maintain some sort of integrity. If you're not believable, people aren't going to migrate to you or get on board. I look to the merger, and people say, "I don't know if I believe that." You can't discount those human emotions. They're pretty powerful. You have to at least have people believe that the thoughts you have are genuine and there isn't a hidden agenda. There's nothing magical about being a good person.

A: You mention ethics. Have you ever been in a position where there's been a question of compromising your ethics?

J: You have to be as candid as you can with who you report to. There certainly was an instance where I thought the values of the company were being compromised, so I told my boss, "I don't agree with this, and I won't do it unless you tell me I must." And I was told that I must. I could either not do it and be fired for insubordination, or I can just lump it and do it. I'm not talking about anything illegal or life threatening here. That would be different.

A: Would there ever be a case where you'd have to put your ethics or your values before what your boss said?

J: Absolutely. It hasn't happened with me to that point yet. Maybe I lean too much on my paycheck. But I think it could happen, maybe with the merger. I think there's a point where you say, "I'm either going to continue down this path or I need to do something different," and I don't know why it happens. Maybe because people's values become compromised. There's really only one person who can answer that, and that's yourself.

A: What about your team? Do you feel a sense of obligation to your team in a situation like that?

J: Yeah, that's a difficult one. Your team needs to feel that you've done everything you can for them, for the organization, for your beliefs and your values. And then you've got to say, "there's just nothing else that can be done." And that goes back to the candid and honest part. So you tell them, "Look we've done everything we can do. So you either have to go on with the ship being painted orange or you can look for another white ship because the ship's going to be orange for awhile. You have to be comfortable with that or go do something else."

A: In light of the merger, how do you, as you're dealing with some of these conflicts, still keep the team motivated during this period, especially if honesty is so important?

J: Actually, I've found that honesty in any situation, and trying to have as much integrity, really never disappoints you. People may be taken back by it, but eventually they get over it. You give people the time to grieve and get over it.

During the merger, I kept people focused on more short-term goals, and that's difficult for the strategists in the organization. So, what we've done with the strategists is linked them to projects that are more short-term strategically oriented. It's uncomfortable. You let the group know that

you're uncomfortable. You tell the team that you'll let them know as soon as you find something out. And if you find out that they found something out before you, you tell them that they found it out first.

A: We've talked some about your career. Do you have a personal vision?

J: I'm not that kind of person. If I didn't have to work I wouldn't. If I won the lottery, am I going back to work? Look at me now because you won't recognize me tomorrow. I'm not kidding myself. We have to walk to a certain beat, but how you get there is a different story.

A: Have you had any significant events that shaped your leadership development?

J: From a business perspective, and probably what I'm most proud of is coming up with a business-to-business e-commerce solution for our customers. It was a vision we had a few years ago which is a stark reality today. Cool stuff. Thinking we had to be there, not knowing how, creating a team that got into it, and getting it done.

A: We've talked about a bunch of things: honesty, passion. Why is it people see you as a great leader?

J: I'm not self-centered. I'm in a service organization because I'm not self-centered. I know my limitations. I know that I'm not a salesman; I don't want to close deals. I don't want to put my hands around someone's throat and say, "you've got to do this." I know I want to get people to the same goal by energizing them and giving them the tools to get there. And then I can step back and let them reap the glory. I'm very fortunate. I'm very happy with where I am from a career perspective. I feel honored that people feel this way about me. But I don't need that. It makes me feel good and it humbles me. But I think that's the difference: it doesn't feed me, it humbles me. It's just me. It's just who I am. The merger's changing all that and that's a given. That's why I need to take a step back and see what my next step is.

A: What recommendations do you have for someone relatively early in their career for developing leadership skills?

J: Some of it is baptism by fire. When I came to RPR I had 17 direct reports and I didn't think I could survive. But I learned from it. You need to take some time doing some different things and not be afraid to try. You need to go into things trying to learn. I'm not going to tell you that you have to have a plan and stick to the plan because that's not my style. You need to have beliefs, and you can't back away from it. You have to understand your role. If you're in a service role, you're never going to get the accolades. If you need that spotlight, go to sales. You need to know what motivates you in order to be respected. I think an egomaniac is a terrible leader. Ironically, many leaders are.

A: When you say terrible, what do you mean: effective/not effective or respected/not respected?

J: It depends on how you describe effective. The difference I make in the lives of the people I work with doesn't directly effect the share price of our company. Does that mean that I'm ineffective? I don't think so.

A: So when you define yourself as being a good leader you look at how the team is affected more than how your team is affecting the company?

J: I think it's both. You need to look at how your team's role makes a difference to the company. You gotta get things done. It doesn't get you anywhere as a leader or as a team. You need to look at how the two compliment each other.

A: Do you think as you move further up to an executive level, is that still do-able? 70 people is a big team, but what about an organization of say 20,000 people? Does it still apply?

J: I don't know the answer because I don't know that that's what I aspire to. ...because I couldn't know them. I don't know everything about everyone in my organization, but I generally know who they are. And that means something to me. I'm probably more aligned to a smaller, more entrepreneurial, more give-and-take, more it's-okay-to-think-differently type of organization than a get-in-line-and-talk-when-I-tell-you-to-talk organization. That doesn't get me going.

A: Is there anything you'd like to add in summary?

J: There's a saying by St. Francis of De Sales, "Do not try to be anything but what you are and try to be that perfectly." That's my mantra. I am who I am. I work real hard to be that person all the time. It might not be the greatest person, but it is who I am. And to that end, adapting where you need to adapt in order to move an organization to a shared goal of being excellent at what they do. Be believable. Be yourself. Be honest. And be kind. Unfortunately I'm not that way all the time, and that's what I struggle with. But I try to be consistent. That allows people to align with you -- not get in line behind you, but align with you, knowing that you're going to be right there with them and not abandon them. That's what I do.

You always have to believe that you can make a difference. I don't want to just get in line.