Roundtable Session – Table 10 – Who Gets Heard in Technical Discussions? Building Inclusive Scientific Decision-Making

Facilitator: Anny Ali, *Sanofi*

Scribe: Seth Madren, *Biogen*

Abstract:

We like to believe that in science, the best data wins. But in practice, who presents the data, how confidently they speak, and where they sit in the organization chart often shapes outcomes of technical discussions as much as the evidence itself. Hierarchy, functional expertise, communication style, native language, organizational culture, meeting format, and implicit bias all influence whose ideas get heard, challenged, and ultimately incorporated into decisions.

This session is an invitation to be honest about that gap — and to think practically about how we close it. This roundtable will examine common failure modes and explore how scientific teams can design decision-making processes that surface technical expertise effectively, welcome critical thinking, and broaden participation without sacrificing rigor or slowing down critical decisions.

Discussion Questions:

1. What factors most influence who gets heard in technical discussions?

2. How can teams distinguish between influence based on expertise and influence based on hierarchy – especially when the two don't align?

3. What specific practices have you seen successfully increase participation and surface diverse technical perspectives? Did these shift outcomes of technical decisions?

4. What signals indicate that inclusive and diverse technical input genuinely shaped the final scientific decision?

Notes:

Experience shared where upper management ignored scientific input on a topic that analyst had significant experience with. New hire with higher title and PhD made the same suggestion and received immediate acceptance.

Discussion: Be aware management may or may not have expertise to scientifically evaluate feedback. However, management should be providing feedback on the steps required to earn acceptance of new ideas. Aware that at small companies there may be limited options for mentorship and also a lack of deep technical understanding to provide path forward.

Experience shared where two conflicting scientific paths forward presented by analyst and peer. The other path forward was selected for business reasons, but has since failed. Unsure how to proceed without stepping on toes

Discussion: Should decide path forward following the science, but it can be difficult to separate personal feelings from science. Should focus on collaborative path forward and not pointing fingers on the failure for competing idea. Also, it is considered appropriate to share thoughts at skip-level meetings with upper management if being asked about it. Although it is still critical to keep manager in the loop to some extent so they are not blind sided when they meet with upper management. Also, it can be tricky since comments from skip level meetings are welcome from some, but others can/would be offended hearing about complaints indirectly due to personal perception (ie approachable and open minded) even if not reflected in reality. Presenting or re-presenting ideas and/or summary of current status at large forums attended by a wide variety of members also an option to indirectly challenge status quo. Large cross-functional meetings can also be critical in showcasing expertise and increase visibility/impact in general.

Experience of a common issue where feedback is often to address personal issues (i.e. be less conflict avoidant, come with more data) without a clear path forward

Question posed: What is most important when being heard:

-Loudest

-Hierarchy

-Reputation

-Confidence

-Respect for personal knowledge

-Tenure

-Being a man

-Race

-Language/English proficiency

Feeback from a current manager: The above list is concerning, but in current organization tries to support those who have thought deeply about work instead of just presenting surface ideas.

It was also acknowledged that those with the highest authority currently and/or the loudest can often take up all of the space in the discussion making it hard for all voices to be heard.

Acknowledgement that credit is critical for junior members to show expertise. It is important for management to provide opportunities for junior members to show case/share their expertise while still providing support.

Discussion around risk-based approaches to achieve impact. Performing work prior to approval is often required since solutions are often expected by management, not just problems and ideas. Similarly, when bringing an idea to management it is critical to have an action plan in place and make importance/impact of issue clear.

There is also often a disconnect between SMEs and filing/end product which is the most visible part of the work. It is important for management to include SMEs in meetings and not just managers/technical leads present ideas.

Discussion around how to improve ability to present work/ideas with high confidence when always ~20% unsure of ideas.

Comments that leadership should share and highlight internal opportunities and resources. Often valuable resources are available but missed or only a select few are made aware of them. Perhaps addressed with changes to onboarding process. Transparency is critical, but companies can generally be opaque with resources and guidance.

Comments that it can often be valuable to identify people who are able to muddy hierarchy based on their widely accepted knowledge and expertise. These can be valuable resources and reaching out to these people for feedback on ideas, how to establish a position of power, and general understanding on how to be heard can be valuable.

“Your lab notebook is where your data goes to die. “ It is critical to not only have good data/ideas but it is also critical to learn how to present them.