

# *Case Study 4.02*



*ARE YOU LISTENING? CAN YOU HEAR?*

*by Andrew Graham*



## IPAC Case Study 4.02

### **Are You Listening? Can You Hear?**

Andrew Graham

#### **Abstract**

The Director General of a scientific research centre located quite far from Ottawa has found himself having to become bilingual: speaking NHQ talk and speaking the language of his work location. He sees issues emerging on the so-called 'big picture' policy and strategic front that he feels will have a real impact on his local and so-called narrowly focused scientific research facility. He wants to find a way to bridge this gap and make his research centre more effective. This case explores a specific situation in which he feels personally challenged to take on this daunting task.

**Keywords:** Field/headquarter relations; Strategic outlook; Aligning objectives; Staff leadership; Change and alignment; Outreach

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## **A Performing Organization**

As the Director General of one of Canada's leading food Research Centres, you are pretty proud of what you have accomplished and where you have taken the organization. You have made it one of the government's leading research centres in producing new crop varieties that have extended the growing season and territory of many of the leading export crops such as wheat, corn, canola and flax.

Your focus has been on new product development that can be spun quickly into the private sector for commercialization. You have extensive partnerships with private industry, including a resource sharing arrangement that permits the country's leading producer of grain seeds to use your facilities, on an exclusive basis, for product testing before release to the market. This has proven to be a lucrative, off-budget source of funds for the research centre and the department.

Your research centre is part of the government's chain of research facilities, a total of 6 across the country. You report to an Assistant Deputy Minister in Ottawa, but are pretty free to manage you facility as you please. Your ADM likes your aggressive style and has recognized your work with the private sector when bonus time came around. Like you, your ADM is focused on scientific innovation.

Like you, your ADM believes that the future of crop research is in genetic modification – GM, in short. Your

centre has produced a long series of new crop varieties using established GM techniques.

You encourage innovation and a strong market orientation in your research teams. Your teams, each under the supervision of a senior research manager, are under constant pressure to produce novel and marketable ideas. This pressure, while real and reinforced by the close presence of private sector partners, is generally seen as positive and reinforcing for most of your scientific researchers. In addition, the rich flow of resources both from government and through public-private partnerships has ensured that research equipment is the most up-to-date, that the research scientists travel around the world to deliver papers and attend conferences and those products are prominently celebrated as they flow out to the market.

This is a culture with a strong commitment to innovation, its own sense of worth and little regard for what others think.

## **A Rude Awakening**

As DG, you often get to replace your ADM at meetings. Increasingly as you put up with more boring hours in some conference room in Ottawa, you sense that your enthusiasm for GM and belief that this is the way of the future is less than shared by even those in your own department. As a scientist, you know that the risks of GM products are pretty low. However, also as a scientist you know that a lot of the work of your

centre is becoming more and more esoteric, moving into new fields where the outcomes are less certain. Though, even in this regard, your safety protocols and testing stand among the best.

However, in Ottawa, your department is getting bombarded by a variety of interest groups about these very safety issues. Similarly, the Minister, while strongly supportive, is having trouble with Cabinet and Caucus colleagues who want him to put the brakes on research in this area. The corporate side of the department is trying to balance these pressures. The Deputy Minister, not a research scientist, wants the research side to be more sensitive to these issues. She doesn't want the work to stop, however.

You have become aware of the increasing need to bring both your own colleagues and probably public interest groups to your point of view if you are to continue with successful research. In other words, you see the need to change your way of doing business at the centre just to carry out your primary mission.

Stuck in the Ottawa airport waiting for your plane home, you consider what you should be doing. You are just not sure. But you do know that you have to find ways to convince your teams that they have to be more open to the concerns of outside groups. If not, they will end up being branded with phrases like 'Frankenfood scientists' and the government would be scared off from doing more research in this area.

## **The Challenge You Face**

On your return to the research centre, you start talking with colleagues. You talk about the scientific concerns, the government's situation and the growing public pressure from interest groups. Your colleagues dismiss most of the concerns as alarmist or 'overactive fanatic nonsense'.

Their first solution is that you should stay away from Ottawa! While you may well agree with that, you know that this is a curve that you have to get ahead of. But how do you bring your organization with you?

Their second solution is to ignore the issue. It is based on irrational fears, not good science. These people – be they the bureaucrats in Ottawa or the tree hugging advocates of the precautionary principles – just do not get it. Farmers, seed manufacturers and food processors are better off because of the Centre's work.

Since this issue is far from routine, you have decided to give it your personal attention. Because your research teams have been intimately involved in all aspects of the development of GM products and been celebrated for it, you suspect that their response is probably just as extreme as some of the outside interest groups. Further, you know that they are being just as emotional – in a defensive way – as others in this debate. You also know that, being publicly funded, you will have to face the reality that politics – big P in terms of the Minister or small p in

terms of a whole range of policy, advocacy and consultation requirements – will enter the picture. You would like to be in control when that happens.

You are not convinced that the consumer groups are totally irresponsible, just misinformed. As far as the department goes, you respect the trade people who are saying that selling GM material in Europe is getting harder – a warning sign.

You have decided that you need to begin to start to play a role in presenting a positive understanding of the Centre's continuing use of GM procedures. You need to develop dialogues with the outside and broaden your list of allies in the department.

To succeed at developing such dialogue you will need your teams to work with you. You will have to depend heavily on the background and experience of your research teams to help you in showing the scientific realities in the use of GM techniques. Further, you want your teams to start to listen to and take into account the concerns of interests that they had hitherto successfully ignored.

In the end, you want to open your staff to external realities and influences in a way that they remain successful in their overall mission.

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