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To Grow Your Company, Leverage Your Leaders

Dupont's "Leadership for Growth" program leverages talent and ideas by taking the chemical company's top executives out of their element and teaming them up with colleagues from other divisions.

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A plastic beer bottle? Pub purists would choke on their Guinness at the thought. But Craig Binetti, 44, vice president and general manager of polyester resins and intermediates at DuPont, saw the promise of a brave new market. He'd had researchers, packaging experts, and McKinsey consultants dissecting the idea for a year. DuPont chemists had conquered plastic's porousness, which lets air in and makes beer go flat. (The reason that soda is not affected is that it has less carbonation.) And focus groups indicated that ale swillers were willing to give plastic a try.

Binetti was ready to leap. But where -- and how, exactly? Should he approach brewers? Bottlers? Wholesalers? Retailers? And were die-hard beer lovers really ready to raise a plastic bottle to their lips?

Managers in Binetti's position -- he has the resources of a \$26 billion, 94,000-person company behind him -- might be tempted to call in more consultants. Instead, Binetti turned to a new program at DuPont called "Leadership for Growth," which culls the company's top 400 executives to form teams that can swoop into any of DuPont's 202 product groups. For three weeks, each team focuses its collective brainpower on the question at hand -- anything from "What are new uses for Kevlar?" to "How can we sell polyester resins online?" The program is both a training tool -- participants are assigned a coach and get refresher courses on decision making and conflict resolution -- and an intelligence unit, a way of leveraging team members' expertise to flush out products and strategies that might be worth millions of dollars in new revenues.

The program is an answer to something that's often said about operations as big as DuPont: "If only they knew what they knew." The company is divided into 21 business units, some of which would qualify for *Fortune 500* status on their own. Working for one of these units is like living in a college dorm: You know the kids on your floor, but you don't know the ones at the other end of the building. Leadership for Growth is a way of tapping the enormous knowledge base that lurks within DuPont.

"The recommendations that come out of these groups are as good as, if not better than, anything we get from external consultants," says program manager Chor-Huat Lim, 43.

The first rule of the program is this: Throw everybody into the deep end. No team member is assigned to a

project within his or her division, and each person brings different skills and a different background to the effort.

"When I heard that I was going to be working on PET, I thought, 'What's that?' " says Tom Keen, 58, who manages a nylon-yarn plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee. PET, or polyethylene terephthalate, is the material that would be used to make plastic beer bottles. Not that PET's promise mattered much to Keen and his team -- at first. "We were a bunch of people who didn't know a plastic beer bottle from a Frisbee," he says. Still, DuPont gave them all of the tools that they needed: three-inch binders crammed with product data and market research, and funding to jet off to anywhere in the world to dig up additional intelligence.

For Rajeev Vaidya, a business manager in DuPont's fluoropolymers division, Leadership for Growth was a chance to "step out of the swamp" for three weeks last May, he says. His mission: Explore e-business opportunities for a DuPont countertop material called Corian. He and his cohorts fanned out across the United States and talked to fabricators, contractors, and retailers. One person spied on shoppers in a Home Depot.

"We were talking to people who'd worn out the soles of their shoes walking this path," says Vaidya, 42. Among his team's recommendations: Create an Internet system to track orders online, and put kiosks in stores to help consumers design their kitchens.

The beer-bottle team, meanwhile, uncapped its own unorthodox ideas. Could DuPont make its own ale and call it "Du Brew"? (Not likely.) How about a bottle shaped like a sports-team mascot? (Sorry, no.) Discussions with brewers, however, proved enlightening. With beer consumption flat in the United States, brewers want to set their brands apart. A plastic bottle -- maybe one with Austin Powers-esque fluorescent swirls -- would appeal to 21-to-29-year-old males, the demographic that glugs the most beer in the United States, brewers said. And venues such as sports stadiums were a sure market. Team members concluded that the best next step was to partner with a brewer -- they even knew of one that was ready to sign on. "That was incredibly valuable information," says Binetti, who is now doing a test run with the brewer named by the team. With this kind of rapid-response system in place, can Du Brew be far behind?

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Sidebar: Chemical Reaction

How does an industry giant become more nimble? DuPont gets fast answers on new business opportunities by training its executives to think outside their divisions. Here's the program's MO.

Call in the troops for three weeks at most. Leadership for Growth used to be an eight-week assignment, but "it wore people down," says Chor-Huat Lim, program manager of Leadership for Growth.

Ensure that team members can fully commit themselves. "This isn't something that can be done part-time," says Rajeev Vaidya, a business manager in DuPont's fluoropolymers division, who participated in a team last year. "You'd dilute the power of the whole thing." Provide information on what's been done on the issue so far, so that team members don't tread old territory. Market research, competitive information, product literature, and a list of pertinent Web sites are good choices.

Give teams latitude and a travel budget. While exploring e-commerce applications for Corian countertop material, one Delaware-based team sent a member to Dell Computer's Texas headquarters in order to bone up on e-business best practices.

Assign a coach to each team. Coaches don't participate in field work, but they do act as facilitators who

can help members work on their management skills, and who can intervene when meltdown seems imminent.



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