

Evolution is a Discipline

An interview with Steve Sun

In 1999, armed with a PhD and post-doc training in life sciences, an idea, and no previous work experience outside of academia, Dr. Steve Sun partnered with his fellow biochemist, Dr. Amy Liao, to form GENEWIZ in a 300 square foot lab. Now GENEWIZ is the leading player in the global DNA sequencing industry. Currently with several hundred employees, the company is rapidly expanding globally, keeping pace with the rise of biotech and pharma research, particularly in Asia.

Dr. Sun (CEO) and Dr. Liao (COO) have been so effective in their leadership that both were recently awarded the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year® 2010 Award in the Service category for New Jersey.

We spoke with Dr. Sun and explored his perspective on business growth and evolution, coaching, and leadership development. His warmth was as evident as was his clear desire to always develop. Near the end of our conversation, he asked for feedback on how he could improve, underscoring his conviction that “leaders have to want to evolve.”

GENEWIZ has been a Growth River client since 2003.

Tracking Enterprise Evolution

GR: Can you first provide us with a description of the journey? How has GENEWIZ developed as an enterprise?

STEVE: By way of introduction, GENEWIZ is a high-tech service business. We offer DNA sequencing, genomics, gene synthesis, molecular biology and regulatory services. We support researchers in life sciences, from scientists in universities, to private laboratories in biotech and pharma, to the Federal Government. The need for our service is really coming from evolution in the field of molecular biology.

In 1953, Watson and Crick discovered the DNA structure. That was the beginning of modern molecular biology. Fast forward to 1999 when GENEWIZ was founded, and we have the human genome project nearing completion.

At that time, I had received my PhD from Columbia University, and had just finished my post-doc at Rockefeller University. I had the right knowledge, knew the risk, and knew it was not easy. I knew what I wanted to do, which was to create a DNA sequencing service. People would ask me why— what possible use could there be for it? But the completion of the human genome project was not the end of the DNA sequencing; it was the beginning.

When we look at GENEWIZ growth, there are three phases. One is the start-up phase, which was from 1999 to 2003. From 2003 until 2007 was a growth phase. And from 2007 to now can be characterized as a rapid expansion or accelerated growth phase.

When we started in 1999, we actually offered more services than we do today. Think about it: two people, Amy and I, had more services than we have today with a whole team of employees and a global organization. In 2003, we realized that DNA sequencing was our core strength, our winning strategy and winning process, so that's where we focused. That was an evolutionary process!

That year Growth River came on board to help us, providing a structured and disciplined approach to management. This involved defining our lines of business and focusing on strategy, and also high level development, namely my development as a leader, which contributed directly to GENEWIZ growth. For a young organization, and for me as an inexperienced entrepreneur, to understand the business cycle, identify constraints, create clarity on goals and strategies, and create the leadership team as well as a process for developing that team...Growth River helped us with all of this.

In 2009 we underwent a crucial change. We had proven that we could open up labs in different cities. We also had proven it was practically impossible to manage this from a centralized position. So we re-segmented the enterprise, moving from a command and control style business with myself and Amy in charge, to a connect and collaborate enterprise. Amy and I went from the CEO and COO being the business leadership team to having nine business leaders and seven functional leaders.

With that new foundation, GENEWIZ became scalable. Amy and I can focus on the company's growth. That has been tremendous for GENEWIZ. We have established labs in China and anticipate growing our staff by 50% in 2011.

The One-Day Complete Enterprise Evaluation

GR: I'd like to ask about your quarterly review process. Every 90 days you examine the organization, identifying risks, constraints and investments, while also conducting individual leader and management reviews. That sounds extraordinarily efficient. What did it take to get there?

STEVE: When we were a command and control organization, it was just two people, and the quarterly review process was more like a coaching session. A connect and collaborate quarterly review involves a lot more people.

So it's a very structured process. This is how the day unfolds. We—the board and senior leadership team—meet first with each of the business leaders, followed by each of the function leaders. Then we conduct an enterprise review, and finish with a board meeting to allocate resources. Each team member comes prepared, reporting directly to the board about what they see as their primary constraints, what they think should be the solution, and to get advice and support on the process. In this way the board has direct information from the leaders about what is going on. At the same time the leaders have the ability to talk directly with the board and influence investment priorities and risk management.

GR: How has this process influenced your development as a leader?

STEVE: The answer is that it has made my job much easier. Evolving from command and control to a connect and collaborate organization means I don't carry all the weight. I have a shorter to-do list.

We have a team and each member has a clear focus and accountability. If anything is really enhanced, it is the fact that the organization is more scalable.

GR: So you have greater freedom to think about the future?

STEVE: Yes, growth strategy, game changers, strategic motivations...and I also have confidence that my team knows what needs to be done.

GR: Does this process instruct you as to how you need to evolve as CEO?

STEVE: I wouldn't say that. It more provides clarity and focus to the whole team. We can for example identify primary growth constraints or identify new opportunities. We can see our weak points that we need to be aware of and where we can improve.

Wanting to Learn

GR: What makes a business leader coachable?

STEVE: The willingness to learn and to improve. If you have a fixed mindset, you think your way is the best way. And it may be the best way, but it may not be scalable. That is the most important quality—leaders have to want to evolve.

GR: Would you reflect upon how the relationship between coaching and your role as CEO is responsible for the development of your senior team?

STEVE: When I think about the early coaching days from Growth River, it was a lot of focus on my own growth. This was my first job. I was a naïve entrepreneur with zero experience in management. That coaching period was a foundation. Later on, coaching evolved to focus on execution, meaning identifying constraints and working on them. This execution coaching is not a process for me per se; it's more like a holistic process, a coaching of the entire organization. It's not like I'm getting coached and evolving ahead of the organization, and then pulling everyone along. I'm moving with the organization.

GR: How has your experience of being coached influenced your ability to respond to the people in the organization?

STEVE: Having the right tools and knowledge—and also the structured process—allows me to have a more coherent interaction with my team.

GR: So coaching strengthens your ability to lead and to execute strategy?

STEVE: Right, but there's no aha moment where I change overnight, and then the organization follows suit. It is not that dramatic. Evolution is a discipline, a process. Organizations go through different phases, and much of that can happen naturally, but being coached helps one stay on track. ♦