

Dow's Kurt Swogger:
"Job assignment is everything."

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Are You a Polyolefin Optimizer? Take This Quiz!

By Alison Overholt

WHEN KURT SWOGGER arrived at Dow Chemical's plastics business in 1991, launching a new product could take anywhere from 6 to 15 years. In fact, in the previous three years, the Polyolefins & Elastomers unit had introduced no new products whatsoever. So how is it that today, a new product launch takes just two to four years? Or that Swogger's research-and-development group has helped deliver 13 successful launches in the past decade?

This is, after all, a plastics business—a \$7.5 billion division that moves 20 billion pounds of product a year in a low-margin, slow-changing industry. It took Swogger, a 54-year-old company veteran, to see that Dow could break out of the commodity trap by rapidly creating new, high-value products delivering more profits.

The turnaround is in part a function of sheer scientific discovery. In 1989, Dow discovered a new catalyst that allowed it to create entirely

new types of polyethylene, expanding the range of possible products. Dow also became more customer focused, sending researchers and marketers to meet with customers before products were created to learn what they really wanted.

But Swogger says the biggest change involved rethinking the R&D team itself. "Consultants all talk about business processes, but the simple fact is that some guys do development better than others," he says. The biggest obstacle to launching great new products was not having the right people in the right jobs. "Job assignment is everything—and that was my biggest job, to shift people around to the right place."

Early on, Swogger reassigned his employees, distinguishing pure inventors from those who added value later in the game—and others yet who were best at marketing the new products.

He did this by asking simple questions. Did an employee have the right attitude? Did she have the right skills? If not, did she have the aptitude to learn?

"I'd put them on a job for six months, see how it worked. If it didn't, I moved them around to a different assignment. But I was right on the first go about 60% of the time." By 1994, he had replaced more than 50% of the division's staff. "We had a bloody battle the whole time," he says (referring to some employees' reactions as well as resistance by management to tinker this much with staffing assignments), "until it was clear that it worked."

The question was, why did it work? For Swogger, it was important that his division not depend forever on his "gut check" approach to hiring and job assignments. He needed a formal explanation of his results in order to replicate his system over the longer term. So as new products rolled off the line for the first time in years, he hooked up with Greg Stevens, a former Dow employee and now president of a consulting firm called WinOvations Inc., to help codify the changes.

Stevens went back to that old Psychology 101 standby: the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality test. He predicted which of its personality types would be best suited to working on various stages of the product-development and launch cycles. He then administered the test to current and past Dow plastics employees, noting which jobs they had held.

His finding: In 1991, when Swogger came on board, the match between the right personality type and the right role was only 29%. By 1998, there was about a 75% match. And by 2001, the rate had jumped to 93%. Swogger had also begun to load up the division on "starters," perhaps explaining the increase in the sheer number of new products Dow created.

In other words, Swogger had got it mostly right on instinct. Next, he hopes to administer Myers-Briggs to new hires, aiming to get job assignments right on the first try. The lesson: Skills can be learned, but personality can't. And it's personality that drives creativity.

What's Your Creativity Type?

Dow's Speed-Based Development is rooted in a classic problem: figuring out which people are right for which jobs. Check your type, as described by consultant Greg Stevens based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and ask whether you and your colleagues match your job descriptions.



STARTERS

Ranking high on the Intuitive and Thinking scales of the Myers-Briggs test, these folks are terrific inventors. Though often difficult to work with, they can make miracles.



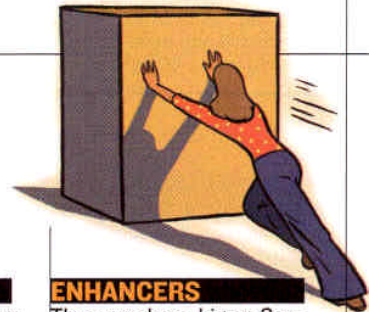
DEVELOPERS

These people are Intuitive and Feeling types. More creative than most but not as purely innovative as starters, developers turn early inventions into real products.



GROWERS

Top scorers on the Sensory and Judging scales, they figure out ways to add value to products, pushing them beyond commodity status toward higher margins.



ENHANCERS

These workers, big on Sensory and Perceiving, are terrific marketers. Enhancers play to what people want and need to hear before they're willing to buy.