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The New Breed of Leadership

Meet Pharm Exec's 2010 Emerging Leaders—25 proven talents
whose great promise will be tested by an industry in turmoil





» RYO KUBOTA

President and CEO, Acucela

Ryo Kubota has kept his eye on the prize—curing blindness—ever since he was a kid whose injuries to his retina caused floaters and required laser surgery.

The path to this goal started when Kubota, a native of Japan and eye-surgeon-cum-researcher, discovered the gene that causes glaucoma, the second leading cause of blindness worldwide. But after the devastating realization that a cure would take many, many years, Kubota left Japan for the University of Washington Institute for Stem Cell and Regenerative Medicine. There, he discovered a way to test small molecules for possible activity against the wayward gene. Running with that technology, he started up Acucela in 2002.

Governing Acucela presented a learning curve for Kubota, between having to attract funds and micromanage in the lab. But he soon found his footing, employing what he calls a collaborative approach to management. Most major decisions are now delegated to his team of department heads, who must come to a consensus. “I will come in only when they cannot come to an agreement—I’m pretty hands-off at this point,” he says.

Kubota believes that trust is essential to leadership, and that the burden is on the leader to discover “a tailored way of communicating with each person to create a strong bond so that they will embrace your vision and follow your lead.” And it

should come as no surprise that this successful scientist-entrepreneur encourages his staff to experiment, take risks, even make mistakes. “My message is, If you’re not making some mistakes, then you’re not stretching yourself enough,” he says.

And after only eight years, the biotech has solved its money worries. Otsuka Pharma has inked a deal with Acucela to bankroll development costs. “We don’t have to raise any more money till commercialization,” he says. “The only reason we are interested in going public is to expand our pipeline.” It currently has five compounds for various serious retinal pathologies.

Kubota’s ten-year plan isn’t limited to treating blindness. A true believer in the concept that strength lies in diversity, he wants to apply his faith in collaboration to global problems. “Throughout my career, I have seen that there is a way for everyone to live in prosperity by means of collaboration, despite very different backgrounds. I would like to expand that beyond the pharmaceutical business so that the world can live together in a more cohesive way,” he says.

