

Business Acumen Is Not Strategic Judgment

Why Senior Medical Support Requires More Than Understanding the Business

Dr Leon Rozen

In recent years, “business acumen” has become a commonly cited expectation of Medical Affairs leaders. The term is often used to describe an understanding of commercial drivers, organisational structure, and how pharmaceutical companies operate. While this understanding is important, it is frequently mistaken for something more substantive.

Business acumen, on its own, does not equate to strategic judgment. For organisations relying on senior medical support—particularly across geographies—the distinction matters.

Understanding the Business Is Table Stakes

Most experienced Medical Affairs professionals understand how pharmaceutical organisations are structured, the relationship between global, regional, and local teams, and the commercial pressures that shape decision-making. This knowledge is necessary, but it is no longer differentiating.

At senior levels, the expectation is not that Medical Affairs understands the business, but that it can operate within it while maintaining independent judgment.

Judgment Emerges Where Trade-Offs Exist

Strategic judgment becomes relevant where genuine trade-offs are present—when scientific caution conflicts with timelines, when global strategy meets local feasibility, or when safety, access, and organisational risk pull in different directions. In these situations, understanding context is not enough. What is required is the ability to weigh priorities and anticipate consequences.

The Risk of Over-Alignment

In an effort to demonstrate commercial understanding, Medical Affairs leaders may over-align with business priorities, defer judgment upward, or avoid clear recommendations. While well intentioned, this behaviour can erode credibility. Executives do not expect Medical Affairs to be commercial; they expect it to be independent, grounded, and reliable.

What Organisations Actually Value

When organisations engage senior medical support—particularly in markets such as Australia—they are rarely looking for someone who simply understands the business. They are looking for someone who can interpret intent, exercise judgment when guidance is incomplete, and represent the organisation responsibly at a local level.

Conclusion

Business acumen is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Strategic judgment enables Medical Affairs to operate effectively at senior levels, particularly in complex, distributed organisations. Experienced medical leadership integrates scientific integrity, organisational reality, and long-term consequence into decisions that others can rely upon.