

Novo exec fuels firm's new obesity fight

Over the course of a lengthy conversation with Jesper Høiland, his voice lowers and slows precisely two times. The first is when he talks about his initial round of sales training, which occurred shortly after he started at Nordisk Gentofte A/S as “the assistant to the assistant to the assistant”—the first of his 11 roles with the company. “The training certificate is still on my wall,” he says proudly. The second comes when he discusses the fate of his previous Novo business cards, which went MIA during Høiland’s move to the US. “I just liked having them. I liked flipping through them.”

Those quieter moments notwithstanding, a chat with Høiland is, to descend into the realm of the colloquial, an absolute gas. He laughs loudly and often. He deadpans and self-deprecates. He exclaims “yuck!” with the faux-aggrieved delight of a child, whether discussing the weather—which forced multiple closings of Novo’s New Jersey office last winter—or when assessing the prospect of seeing the photos that accompany this story. He’s such a warm and generous conversationalist, in fact, that it’s easy to forget that you’re talking to an enormously well-regarded executive who plies his trade in an industry not exactly renowned for its charming personalities.

“Jesper is one of the most energetic individuals I have ever met,” says Maziar Mike Doustdar, EVP, Novo Nordisk International Operations. “He has this ability to encourage people to become even better versions of themselves in everything that they do.”

Høiland downplays his effect on his colleagues, but it’s clear that engaging with them drives him. “I love being with people. I love being out on the front lines,” he says. It’s fortunate that he does, given the 90 or so days he spends on the road every year—which, while a far cry from the 15 hours a week he estimates he spent on a plane during his days in Novo’s International Operations unit, remains a punishing schedule.

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Jesper Høiland
EVP, Novo Nordisk USA

2013
SVP, Novo Nordisk North America

2004
SVP, Novo Nordisk International Operations

1998
Managing director, Novo Nordisk



Perhaps it’s that energy that has prompted Novo to task Høiland with an assignment that will demand every bit of brio he can summon. In the wake of the company’s April launch of Saxenda, which combines the same active ingredient as Novo’s diabetes shot Victoza, Novo is hoping to establish a dominant foothold in the underdeveloped—and, to hear some tell it, under-innovated—obesity space. As Novo’s top exec in North America, Høiland may well be judged on the success or failure of this effort.

If he’s the slightest bit intimidated by the enormity of the charge, you’d be hard-pressed to tell. “So many patients have [obesity] and so few are getting treated—that kind of challenge, wow, how great is that?” he asks. “Obesity is so interesting to me because we all know it exists but nobody knows how to tackle it.”

Høiland points to a host of sobering statistics that inform Novo’s decision to focus on the space: Eighty million Americans are currently obese, with an astonishing 44% of the population projected to be obese 15 years from now. “Is this an epidemic? No. An epidemic comes and goes. This is a trend curve,” Høiland says. “We need to bend that curve.”

Høiland, a fitness enthusiast who rides his bike to the office most days, isn’t attempting to spark a self-help revolution or shame patients into submission. Rather, he says Novo’s role should be part counselor, part advocate and part cheerleader. “We’re not talking about being crazy and sitting on a bicycle for six hours a day. We’re just talking about normal healthy behavior,” he stresses. “The reason [treating obesity] has been so hard is that for many people, it’s not a question of appearance. To attempt to treat and improve the quality of life for patients who might not think they’re suffering—that’s hard.”

At the same time, given its success in the diabetes sphere, Novo might be one of the few entities with the tactical and behavioral agility to stall and ultimately reverse the upward trend in obesity rates. As Høiland puts it, “Novo knows a little something about chronic conditions.”

The ultimate goal? “To truly do something for society,” Høiland says. “I hope that Novo Nordisk is the company that reduces obesity, but I’m so excited that there are three or four compounds out in the marketplace. We will not be able to tackle this challenge alone. Let the best person win, I say.” —Larry Dobrow