Managing a winning team of Medical Science Liaisons (MSLs) from afar demands proper selection of highly driven, self-motivated and scientifically-fluent professionals. It also requires a manager’s recognition and vision of “top-down-bottom-up” leadership style, which includes consistency, rapid long distance communication, a team-shared vision of goals and responsibilities, and a working foundation of trust for overall success and MSL job satisfaction.

Effective MSL managers, according to Mario Sylvestri, Pharm.D, PhD, Senior Director Medical Informatics and Communications, Amylin Pharmaceuticals, create team “character.” They do this, according to Sylvestri, by developing team decision making-processes and operational procedures that are clearly understood, are mutually agreed upon, and also foster proactive professional development.

Just as critical to a MSL manager’s success is selecting MSL candidates that have an aptitude for and an ability to mentor new MSL hires.

The majority of MSLs function as regionally based medical scientists and Key Opinion Leader (KOL) clinical information specialists. Managers must constantly monitor and respond to field-prompted subtleties, daily KOL nuances and clinical updates from their team, and act upon requests and suggestions promptly.

Rapid Communication
“MSLs need to know that their thoughts are valued, their needs are immediately addressed and views are communicated up the corporate ladder,” states Sylvestri. Furthermore, feedback and communication must occur rapidly “at a staccato level.”

Effective field communication fosters an ability to ensure that MSLs working in remote locations relay attitudes and field conditions as “in-house extensions” of their colleagues for consideration, and that their opinions and attitudes become an integral part of the “whole” corporate structure of daily operations. This type of interaction will make the field-based team feel part of the whole corporate organization they represent and the corporate organization will feel a part of the field as well.

Personal, One-to-One Interaction
Even though rapid field communication these days is accomplished without hitch through state-of-the-art technology, i.e. cell phones, email, pagers, the technology should never replace direct one-on-one manager-MSL interaction. Manager-MSL field time together and informal communication, Dr. Sylvestri emphasizes, is critical for overall MSL job satisfaction and productivity.

By spending one-on-one field time with regional MSLs, managers are able to take into account the personalities and culture of their team members and enforce or amend “best practice” daily operational procedures and requirements. Daily encounters with KOLs and clinical peers may require different regional, geographic, and at times, cultural approaches by MSLs. One-on-one interaction allows MSL managers the ability to compare and contrast regional approaches and “best practices” among their team members.

Direct one-on-one interaction is also essential when MSL performance development plans need to be established. Managers should request the MSL to develop an action plan during a one-on-one meeting and, through subsequent encounters, stimulate a sense of ownership and responsibility within the MSL to perform job improvements and increase productivity.

Mutual Trust
Because MSLs require an ability to work in an autonomous field environment, mutual-trust
between MSLs and a manager is the hallmark of MSL management success. Managers must not only trust team members to perform their jobs well, but also live up to the team’s expectations and deliver on promises. Sensitivity to trust within all areas and in all encounters, particularly when communicating rapidly and responsively (via voice-mail, telephone, email, etc.) remains critical for MSLs to thrive and succeed.

By blending the tenets of consistent and rapid communication, direct and ongoing MSL field contact, and earned manager/MSL trust, managers and MSLs can thrive in an environment where geographical distance will not impede overall productivity, MSL job satisfaction and success.