Ashraf Abu Arrah – CEO, DEEF Pharmaceuticals



Transformation is never about commanding change—it's about enabling it.

14.04.2025

Tags: Saudi Arabia, MENA, CEO, Strategy, CMO, Licensing,

What does it take to turn a low-key regional manufacturer into one of Saudi Arabia's most ambitious pharmaceutical platforms? For Ashraf Abu Arrah, CEO of DEEF Pharmaceuticals, the answer lies not in grand declarations, but in disciplined execution, strategic clarity, and deep engagement with people. As the company undergoes a sweeping transformation—emerging as the only fully specialized B2B partner for contract manufacturing and licensing in the Kingdom—Abu Arrah shares the vision, the strategy, and the mindset behind the turnaround.

How did your professional background prepare you to lead the transformation of DEEF Pharmaceuticals?

It has been a privilege to lead DEEF Pharmaceuticals. I assumed this position approximately 14 months ago to spearhead the company's transformation and turnaround. As a pharmacist graduated from the Jordan University of Science and Technology, my career has been defined by a purposeful accumulation of diverse experience across various functions and geographies.

I started my career in Jordan as a medical representative, quickly progressing to team leader and then Sales Manager for Jordan at Julphar (Gulf Pharmaceutical Industries). From the beginning, my goal was to build a well-rounded profile, which led me to transition into marketing role. Subsequently, I moved into learning and development, where I led soft skills training and oversaw functional training—across sales, marketing, manufacturing, quality, and process—for teams in

over 45 countries. This exposure to diverse professional backgrounds and cultures has significantly shaped my leadership perspective.

Recognizing the importance of aligning people and processes, I led a transformation of Julphar's HR function, repositioning it from a personnel-focused department to a strategic partner. I firmly believe that people are at the core of success in the pharmaceutical industry—more so than in many other sectors—because they are involved in every part of the value chain. My leadership style reflects this belief: at 31, I was promoted to Director, and by 37, I had become a General Manager, milestones I attribute to being surrounded by strong teams and the ability to clearly articulate a shared vision.

As Corporate Development Director, I oversaw regional expansion and subsidiary operations. I was then appointed General Manager of Gulf Inject, a company acquired by UAE-based YAS Holding that was facing liquidation at the time. I led its restructuring, oversaw its merger with WellPharma Medical Solutions, and successfully navigated both acquisition and integration—restoring profitability and enabling shareholder exit at enhanced value. This led me to specialize in corporate turnarounds, particularly for companies with structural, portfolio, or financial challenges.

To complement my operational experience, I earned certifications from the KPI Institute, including in Balanced Scorecard methodology, and completed leadership training through the Institute of Leadership & Management. I also hold an international business diploma from Cambridge. This combination of hands-on experience and structured knowledge enabled me to build a reputation for leading transformation programs—making my current role at DEEF Pharmaceuticals a natural continuation of that path.

What is the strategic positioning of DEEF Pharmaceuticals within Saudi Arabia's healthcare ecosystem, and what role does the company play today?

Founded in 2007 in Al-Badayea, within the Al-Qassim region of Saudi Arabia, DEEF Pharmaceuticals was established with the ambition to contribute meaningfully to the national healthcare landscape. However, inconsistent leadership in its early years limited its long-term impact. Despite this, the company's technical infrastructure remained remarkably robust, offering a strong foundation for renewal.

DEEF's manufacturing operations are fully integrated within its Saudi-based facility and span four primary production lines: oral solids, oral liquids, semi-solids, and antiseptics. The plant is equipped

to produce up to one billion units annually, including 800 million units of oral liquids, 25 million sachets, and 20 million units of both antiseptics and semi-solids. Its portfolio extends across nine distinct dosage forms—ranging from creams and gels to nasal sprays and mouthwash—underscoring the company's broad technical capability.

Crucially, DEEF's location in Saudi Arabia—home to 38 percent of the total pharmaceutical market in the MENA region—places it at the center of regional healthcare growth. The company also benefits from a well-regulated operating environment, strong shareholder backing, and a workforce that combines internal talent with the capacity to attract external expertise. Against the backdrop of Saudi Arabia's localization agenda, these assets form a compelling platform for transformation. What was required was a clear strategy to unlock their value and reposition DEEF as a competitive, innovation-driven pharmaceutical manufacturer.

How is DEEF leveraging contract manufacturing and licensing to offer international partners a scalable entry point into Saudi Arabia?

Recognizing a significant market gap—where many regional and international pharmaceutical companies seek to enter Saudi Arabia but remain hesitant to invest directly in infrastructure—we set out to position DEEF as a uniquely specialized platform for contract manufacturing and licensing. Unlike local manufacturers that often engage in these partnerships on an ad hoc basis, our model is deliberately structured, focused, and built to scale.

To formalize this direction, we launched DVenture, a wholly owned subsidiary of DEEF, in October 2024 at CPHI Middle East. Dedicated exclusively to B2B collaborations, DVenture enables partners to localize manufacturing without capital expenditure, offering not only production capabilities but also comprehensive regulatory, pricing, and localization support. Our technical infrastructure, combined with deep local expertise, positions us as an integrated and strategic partner rather than a transactional supplier.

Today, DEEF's operations are structured across three channels: B2B through DVenture, B2C via our own branded products, and B2G through government collaborations. Although recently launched, DVenture is already projected to generate around 60 percent of our total revenue—demonstrating both its relevance and long-term potential. What distinctly sets us apart is our neutrality: we do not compete with our partners by marketing the same molecules under our own brand, ensuring full alignment and shared success.

Beyond manufacturing, we are expanding into out-licensing, developing selected molecules in-house and offering them to commercial partners focused on sales and market access. This evolution underscores our broader ambition—to act not merely as a manufacturer, but as a strategic enabler capable of guiding partners through regulatory, legal, and commercial complexities. In many cases, this includes advising on joint ventures and long-term localization strategies.

Through DVenture, DEEF is becoming a key driver of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 goals—offering a rare blend of technical depth, regulatory acumen, and partnership maturity for companies seeking meaningful, scalable entry into one of the region's most dynamic pharmaceutical markets.

How is DEEF Pharmaceuticals contributing to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 goals, and what therapeutic and regional priorities support this alignment?

DEEF Pharmaceuticals is fully aligned with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, actively contributing to the national agenda by strengthening local manufacturing, advancing healthcare access, and fostering innovation through strategic partnerships. At the core of our approach is a commitment to enabling international and regional companies to localize their operations in the Kingdom, thereby accelerating the development of a resilient, self-sustaining pharmaceutical ecosystem.

We have streamlined our operations into three defined verticals: B2B through DVenture, B2C through DEEF's proprietary product portfolio, and B2G through collaborations with government entities. On the B2C front, we chose to focus our resources on three priority therapeutic areas—skin health, women's health, and pediatric health—where we can build depth, address unmet patient needs, and strengthen our market positioning.

In skin health, our offerings are organized under two distinct lines: Dermaline, which covers medicated dermatological solutions, and Cosma, focused on cosmetic dermatology. While our current commercial portfolio includes approximately 30 products, we are actively expanding. Through new R&D partnerships, we have laid the groundwork for a pipeline of 200 products, with launches already underway. At the same time, we are extending our commercial reach beyond Saudi Arabia, with registrations secured and exports initiated in Bahrain, Oman, and Iraq, and further expansion planned across the GCC, Levant, and North Africa.

On the B2B side, our objective is to provide a complete and dependable manufacturing platform. With four production lines, nine dosage forms, a fully integrated Enterprise Resource Planning

(ERP) system, and a skilled team with deep Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) expertise, we offer international partners a seamless entry into the Saudi market. From regulatory guidance and registration strategy to supply chain integration and local distribution, we are able to support every stage of the localization process.

Ultimately, DEEF's role extends far beyond production. We are positioning ourselves as a strategic partner of choice—committed to advancing Saudi Arabia's healthcare goals by combining technical excellence with a collaborative, market-driven mindset.

How are you building the internal capabilities required to sustain DEEF's transformation, and what leadership initiatives have been key?

Driving a transformation of this scale requires more than strategic intent—it demands structure, alignment, and disciplined execution. One of my first priorities was to secure full buy-in from our shareholders by presenting a clear and realistic vision rooted in a detailed assessment of our capabilities and future potential. Their response was both immediate and substantial, resulting in a capital increase that signaled strong commitment and provided the financial backing necessary to begin executing with confidence.

In parallel, we formalized the company's governance structure through the creation of a Board of Directors for the first time in DEEF's history. The board is composed of seven members, including an independent chairman, two additional independent directors, and a representative of the shareholders. This step marked a shift toward institutional discipline, bringing greater oversight, transparency, and strategic alignment to our operations.

Internally, I focused on building a leadership team capable of delivering on our ambitions. We restructured the organization to attract experienced talent across all critical functions—technical operations, quality, finance, digital systems, and ERP—ensuring that each area was led by professionals with both expertise and executional rigor. Our goal has been to create an operating environment where the company's vision is not only articulated, but actively realized through the strength of the people behind it.

Equally important has been the clarity of our strategic direction. In a market full of opportunities, we made a deliberate decision to act with focus and restraint. Over the past year, we conducted a comprehensive evaluation of our technical capabilities and market potential, used that to define a clear roadmap, and committed ourselves to executing it without distraction. That discipline—at the

shareholder level, within the board, and across our leadership team—is what now underpins our ability to scale with purpose and consistency.

How are you building global awareness around DEEF Pharmaceuticals and positioning DVenture as a strategic partner for international companies?

A central part of our strategy has been to ensure that when global pharmaceutical companies consider contract manufacturing or licensing opportunities in Saudi Arabia or the broader GCC, DEEF and DVenture stand out as the clear reference point. While established players like SPIMACO, Tabuk Pharmaceuticals, and Jamjoom Pharma often dominate regional recognition, our goal has been to differentiate ourselves through a focused, purpose-built B2B model.

Because DVenture is exclusively dedicated to contract manufacturing (CMO) and licensing, we have taken a deliberate approach to visibility—one tailored to the nuances of B2B engagement rather than traditional consumer-facing communication. We officially introduced DVenture at CPHI Middle East, a key pharmaceutical industry platform, and continue to build our presence through professional networks such as LinkedIn and highly targeted industry media. Participating in platforms like PharmaBoardroom enables us to present our capabilities in a format that resonates with global executives seeking strategic, high-quality manufacturing partners in the region.

What truly differentiates us is not just our technical infrastructure, but the clarity and consistency of our operating model. In contrast to many companies in the region that include contract manufacturing as a supplementary activity, our organization is designed entirely around B2B partnership—from the mindset of our teams to the structure of our operations and the way we craft value propositions. This approach demands a distinct set of capabilities: understanding how to engage with partners, co-develop solutions, and deliver value in ways that align with international standards and expectations.

To date, we have yet to see another company in the GCC or MENA region that has made this kind of dedicated commitment to the B2B pharmaceutical space. That unique positioning is what we are building on—quietly but strategically—to ensure that DEEF and DVenture are recognized not only as capable manufacturers, but as trusted, forward-thinking partners in regional and global healthcare value chains.

What have been your most important lessons from leading complex corporate turnarounds, and how have they shaped your leadership approach?

Turnaround leadership is not something you master by reading a manual—it is experiential, complex, and deeply human. Every company presents a unique set of circumstances, and the role of a leader in such moments is not to impose a ready-made solution, but to diagnose carefully, engage meaningfully, and guide the organization toward recovery with clarity and patience. I often compare it to treating a patient: first, you must understand the symptoms, then stabilize, and only then can you begin to rebuild and restore long-term health.

One of the most enduring lessons I've learned is that there is no single blueprint. Each turnaround demands a tailored approach rooted in context and shaped by people. In distressed companies, systems and dashboards may offer partial insight, but they rarely reveal the full story. To understand why a business is underperforming, you need to speak directly with the people behind it. You need to listen, involve, and earn trust. This is why I often refer to myself as a chief engagement officer rather than just a chief executive—because transformation, above all, is about aligning and empowering people.

Across the three major turnarounds I've led, success came not from dramatic interventions, but from sustained, thoughtful engagement. In one case, we took a company burdened by accumulated losses, legal entanglements, and low morale, and repositioned it as a profitable, export-oriented business with presence in eight markets, an EBITDA (Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation, and Amortization) margin exceeding 14 percent, and a 2.5x return for shareholders. These outcomes were only possible because we built a culture where innovation could surface from within and teams believed in the mission.

A good example is DVenture, which began as an idea but was shaped collaboratively over time. Rather than dictate it top-down, I opened it up for discussion, refinement, and shared ownership. Over the course of a year, it evolved into a concept the team genuinely embraced—because they saw themselves in it. Ultimately, successful transformation is not about commanding change, but enabling it. It requires discipline, vision, and deep respect for the human side of business. When leaders listen more than they speak, involve rather than instruct, and remain focused on building momentum through people, real and lasting turnaround becomes not only possible—but inevitable.

What are your priorities for the next 12 to 24 months, and what message would you share with potential international partners?

Our strategic focus over the coming two years is shaped by three priorities: expanding our product portfolio, advancing facility upgrades and compliance, and deepening strategic partnerships. On the product side, we are accelerating development and market launches to strengthen our position across targeted therapeutic areas. In parallel, we are investing in the modernization of our manufacturing site to ensure it meets the highest standards of quality and operational efficiency. Most critically, we are continuing to position DEEF—and DVenture—as the leading regional partner for contract manufacturing and licensing, offering global players a reliable, specialized gateway into Saudi Arabia and the broader region.

To prospective partners, my message is simple yet foundational: DEEF exists to bridge gaps—between international innovation and local execution, between ambition and access. We are here to create value through partnership, and we are ready to lead that journey forward.

See more interviews