

# San Francisco Chronicle

November 6, 2017

Opinion

## Biotech faces up to its own leadership diversity problem

*By Helen Torley*

The public firestorm set off by revelations of sex discrimination and unequal opportunity in Silicon Valley goes well beyond a Google engineer's controversial writings about gender. In fact, it goes beyond the high-technology sector altogether.

In recent months, the U.S. biotechnology community — companies creating everything from stem-cell cures to cleaner biofuels — has undertaken its own bit of soul-searching about how to build a more inclusive workplace culture and a talent pipeline that better reflects the diverse patients we serve.

A sobering report out of Massachusetts in September underscores the challenges our sector faces. While women are entering the state's biotech workforce in equal proportion to men, opportunities for promotion and advancement are skewed overwhelmingly to men; just 24 percent of C-suite positions and 14 percent of board seats are filled by women. Women leaders had to be far more proactive to move up the ladder: 63 percent of women in biotech change jobs frequently to scale the ranks compared with 21 percent of men.

These challenges are not unique to the biotech industry in Massachusetts. Nationally, only 10 percent of board of director slots and 7 to 9 percent of CEO positions at biotech companies are filled by women, according to national surveys by Liftstream. Out of 44 publicly traded biotechs in San Diego, my company, Halozyme, is the only firm led by a female CEO. When I go to networking events with my fellow CEOs, I'm often the only woman in the room.

In one sense, biotech's yawning gender gap seems out of character. After all, our industry is uniquely science-based and data-driven. We spend hundreds of millions of dollars on empirical studies and clinical trials before bringing a single new product to market. There are reams of data that show companies perform better when led by diverse boards. Viewed in this context, the lack of inclusion in biotechnology is something of a business blind spot.

Equal opportunity is an American value, and it should be present in every workplace because it's fair and morally right. But biotechs working on life-or-death medicines have a special responsibility to cultivate diverse leaders. The diseases we're researching often disproportionately impact a particular gender or race. Indeed, it is not unusual for disease progress, symptoms or side effects to be different in men than women.

Moreover, how a particular community perceives — or even stigmatizes — different behaviors or illnesses can impact both adherence to treatment regimens and long-term survivability. These are no small matters for biotech companies devising marketing and education strategies to get treatments to patients in need. Biopharmaceutical leadership teams should have firsthand expertise in the biological realities and cultural considerations of the different populations they serve.

Fortunately, biotech isn't waiting for a public outcry before we ask ourselves how we can change to nurture our talent pool. The Biotechnology Innovation Organization — the industry's largest trade association — has assembled a committee composed of biotech CEOs committed to building a more inclusive future. BIO has also commissioned a workplace survey and ratified the first set of biotech industry diversity principles to attract and groom the best and brightest to steer the life sciences into the 21st century.

By year's end, BIO will finalize an action plan to help build a pipeline of diverse candidates for C-suite and board positions in our industry. It will include unconscious-bias training for biotech employees, increased access to sponsorship opportunities, and other assistance so a more diverse pool of executives can learn about board vacancies and obtain the requisite qualifications to fill them.

This effort needs to start by confronting outdated gender notions. I've been in rooms where women who show sensitivity or emotion are labeled "weak," while men who raise their voice and behave aggressively are seen as "strong leaders." We can simultaneously promote diversity and meritocracy by pushing back against these anachronistic notions of effective leadership and judge our peers based on talent and performance.

Hiring managers need to be introspective about those instances in which a woman or minority candidate is rejected because team members fear they aren't the "right fit." Often, such nebulous determinations reflect unconscious bias and an innate preference to associate with those who come from similar backgrounds. Training our colleagues to recognize such bias and appreciate differences helps combat so-called "group think" and increases the odds of innovating a truly novel product.

There's no magic wand that's going to solve the biotech industry's diversity challenge overnight. But we're uniquely capable of studying the problem, following the research and making incremental progress to solve an intractable challenge. After all, that's the essence of innovation. And we're already taking a step forward by recognizing the link between saving lives and promoting diverse leaders who truly understand them.

*Dr. Helen Torley is CEO of Halozyme Therapeutics in San Diego and chairs BIO's Committee on Workforce Development, Diversity and Inclusion.*

Copyright ©2017 Hearst Corporation, All Rights Reserved.

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/Biotech-faces-up-to-its-own-leadership-diversity-12336263.php>