

Use Your Platform to Be a Changemaker

By Quita Highsmith, Chief Diversity Officer at Genentech
AWIS Institutional Partner Since 2011

Quita Highsmith is chief diversity officer at Genentech, a leading biotechnology company that discovers, develops, manufactures, and commercializes medicines to treat patients with serious and life-threatening medical conditions. A ten-year veteran of the company, Quita assumed her current role at the beginning of 2020. AWIS spoke with Quita about the reasons why she chose a career in pharma and biotech, the impact diverse and inclusive teams have on results, and her advice for women pursuing careers in science.

You've spent the majority of your career working at pharma and biotech companies. What attracted you to this industry originally? Why have you stayed in it?

One of my first jobs out of college was as a sales representative for a pharmaceutical company, calling on hospitals. I liked the interactions with the physicians, surgeons, and nurses. The other draw was the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in a patient's life. When I was growing up, my mother used to tell me, "Of those to whom much is given, much is expected." Working for pharma and

biotech companies gives you the chance to make a positive impact on someone's life every single day.

Being a part of this industry has also given me a front-row seat to innovation in action. At Genentech, for example, we've developed a variety of innovative therapies—from the world's first personalized medicine to the first approved treatment for primary progressive multiple sclerosis. It's been a privilege to be a part of the community responsible for groundbreaking advancements in science and medicine.

Before assuming your current role as chief diversity officer (CDO) at Genentech, you held a number of sales and marketing positions. What inspired you to move into this new position?

Before I accepted the CDO position, I led Genentech's Alliance and Advocacy Relations team, which engaged with patient advocacy organizations. A few years ago we were planning a patient summit for the organization and wanted to include a diverse set of patients who had participated in our clinical research. But we couldn't identify anyone—not one single patient of color—who had actually participated in a study. So I began asking why.

I learned that approximately half of the U.S. population is projected to be non-Caucasian by 2045,¹ but that today, fewer than 10 percent of U.S. patients participate in clinical trials, and of those, only 5 to 15 percent are non-Caucasian.² This gap extends into every aspect of the clinical journey—inclusion and exclusion criteria, the diseases we choose to study, who the investigators are, and where the research sites are located. As a result, the genetic data available to scientists doesn't reflect the majority of our diverse global population.

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Advancing Inclusive Research,[™] Genentech's initiative to address barriers to clinical research participation for racial and ethnic minority groups. Helping Genentech embrace the increasingly diverse world around us has been extremely gratifying, and I knew that taking on the role of chief diversity officer would allow me to expand on that work.”



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Not every organization has a chief diversity officer. Why is this role important to Genentech?

When an organization encourages diversity of background, thought, and experience, it's far more likely to uncover new insights and unique approaches to addressing a challenge. For Genentech to succeed in discovering and developing medicines to treat some of the world's most serious diseases, every aspect of our business must be diverse and inclusive. My job is to help make that happen. Also, reporting to the CEO is important because it gives you a voice at the highest levels.

What excites you the most about your work on D&I at Genentech?

Over the last decade, Genentech has made great progress in helping more women rise to senior leadership positions. In 2007 49 percent of our workforce was made up of women, but women made up only 16 percent of our officers. That year we began making a concerted effort to change those numbers—by broadening our candidate pool, expanding career-development programs, and creating opportunities for women to connect and support one another, among other initiatives. The hard work paid off: by the end of 2019, 54 percent of our workforce and 43 percent of our officers were women.

Today our focus is on improving both gender and racial diversity—an undertaking that's equal parts challenge and opportunity. It involves everything from examining our idea of what a scientist looks like to ensuring participants in our

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clinical trials are representative of all patients who use our medicines.

Why would you encourage young women, especially women of color, to pursue careers in science?

I'd encourage women to pursue careers in science for three reasons. And they all have to do with opportunity.

First, science careers offer professional stability. Between 2018 and 2028, STEM occupations are expected to grow by approximately 9 percent, while non-STEM occupations are expected to grow by just 5 percent.³ Think about that: there will be almost double the number of job opportunities in STEM roles as in non-STEM roles.

Second, being part of racially and gender-diverse research teams offers all members the opportunity to make significant contributions to society. Diverse teams drive innovation, improve scientific and clinical outcomes, and help contribute to equitable health-care access.

Third, working in STEM fields gives women, especially women of color, the opportunity to serve as role models for

the next generation. The more that girls and young women see us working as epidemiologists, molecular biologists, and geneticists, for example, the easier it will be for them to picture themselves in these roles too.

What is needed to help women of color succeed in science fields?

A critical factor to my success was having a sponsor, which is different from having a mentor. Sponsors are C-suite executives who connect you to opportunities, provide air cover when you encounter trouble, give you constructive feedback, and ensure you get full consideration for available roles. A sponsor helps open doors that may otherwise have been closed. It's vital for women of color to have a champion in their organization with the power to push them forward.

Who's your favorite scientist?

My favorite scientist is my daughter Quinlyn. She's a senior at Howard University, majoring in sports medicine with a minor in biology. My second-favorite scientist is Dr. Mae Jemison, the first Black woman to travel to space. Her motto has become mine, too: "The future never just happened—it was created." So let's go create it! 🚀

Learn more about Diversity & Inclusion at Genentech - <https://www.gene.com/diversity-inclusion>

Connect with Quita Highsmith on LinkedIn.

1 Source: William H. Frey analysis of U.S. Census population projections, released on March 13, 2018, and revised on September 6, 2018.

2 Source: "Dialogues on Diversifying Clinical Trials: Successful Strategies for Engaging Women and Minorities in Clinical Trials," Society for Women's Health Research, United States Food and Drug Administration Office of Women's Health, September 2011.

3 Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 15, 2020.