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Women In Science: Shifting Role Models And Sponsoring Young Talent



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The science community needs to create new ways of showcasing the opportunities to women WALTER OTTO ON UNSPLASH

Perhaps more so than at any other time in recent history, we have been made acutely aware of the abilities and innovation of science and medicine in the past 12 months. To mark the United Nations International Day of Women and Girls in Science, we interviewed two inspirational leaders at AstraZeneca.

Can Change Attract Female Talent?

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, AstraZeneca was changing the way it researched and developed new medicines.

Cristina Durán, AstraZeneca's Chief Digital Health Officer, R&D, comments: "It has been an extremely exciting time bringing together different expertise from different backgrounds to be able to make a real difference in healthcare. We are leading a transformation in how clinical trials take place, listening to patients and finding out what they need. We have been able to accelerate solutions during the pandemic because of the work and the rethinking that was already underway."

Ann E. Taylor, Chief Medical Officer, AstraZeneca, adds: "Covid-19 has made the world recognize the power of science and medicine. We hope that this could be a draw to women who may not have thought of a career previously with us—and to bring our arms around them."



Ann E. Taylor, Chief Medical Officer, AstraZeneca
ASTRAZENECA

Despite the wider communities of education, industry and government investing resources to inspire and engage women and girls in science, [less than 30% of researchers worldwide are women](#). Also, only around [30% of all female students](#) select STEM-related fields in higher education.

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Female enrolment is particularly low (5%) in natural science, mathematics and statistics. However, it isn't that girls are not performing as well as boys when they choose science. In fact, [research](#) shows that, on average, in STEM subjects, girls' grades are slightly better than boys' and

are more consistent but there are fewer top-scoring girls. The fact is that they are simply not choosing the profession as a career.

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Reimagine the Role Models

Durán's backstory flies in the face of the long-held perception that a scientist is an older, wise-looking man.



Cristina Durán, AstraZeneca's Chief Digital Health Officer, R&D ASTRAZENECA

Durán came to the UK as a 19 year old au pair from Spain. She came from what she calls a “dysfunctional family” with no guidance on what could be possible. Early on in her career, she had to contend with the limiting beliefs of those one would

expect to support and encourage her. These included a manager who told her she would never be a manager and an executive who told her she would never be a leader. When challenged, the male comment maker revealed the engrained bias: in a room of other scientists, no one would assume the woman was the leader. Durán disagreed—and was determined to become both manager and leader, and embrace the skills and qualities she had.

Taylor came from a family that encouraged her to “do everything and explore anything” and allowed—and enabled—her to make the choices she wanted to make. She did go on to explore and, as a physician, became

deeply knowledgeable in specific areas. However, she also recognizes the power of not being the expert; leading teams of individuals each bringing their own expertise to the fore.

Both Durán and Taylor agree the science community needs to create new ways of showcasing the opportunities to women. Taylor adds: “We need to draw them in and show them what they could do, what the roles look like, what the jobs are, but, more than anything, help them to see that they can do it.”

Provide The Encouragement Needed And Sponsor Young Female Talent

Taylor recognizes the power of having her father and grandfather encouraging her to “just go do”. However, “if you don’t get that at home, you need to get it from somewhere”. That ‘somewhere’ can be in the form of a sponsor at work. Today, Taylor finds such conversations with up-and-coming talent “inspirational” and encourages women to seek out more senior people to help them think through the opportunities, experiences and networks available. She acknowledges that such sponsorship “helped to move me along the path and to take on roles not previously thought of. It helped me take a risk.”

With such successful careers across diverse roles in a traditionally male-dominated sector, what advice would Durán and Taylor offer their younger selves?

Advice To A Younger Self

1. Gain sponsorship and seize the opportunities

Seek out other women who can help navigate the opportunities available and introduce you to new networks. For Taylor, she was asked to lead a team away from her specialist area—and that opportunity “led to further opportunities.”

2. Believe in yourself and be clear and open about what you want

When line managers dismissed Durán's desire to lead, she remained steadfast. Without sharing what you want to move towards, no one around you can support you. Durán says: "Don't wait for others to guess what you want—tell them!"

3. Be the expert—in something

Taylor was given this advice by a mentor when she first started out on her career, and it is as relevant today. "Demonstrate you have deep expertise in something." Search and find the thing that "drives your passion and holds you up in the hard times."

4. Put your hand up and start doing the job

Don't wait to be asked, volunteer and embrace new opportunities. Offer to lead and be part of the solution. This can result in new exciting roles and even if "you don't get the final job, you'll have learned along the way," says Durán.

5. Get help—and acknowledge you can't have it all

When Taylor first started at med school, she was told to look for help where she could and focus on where she wanted to spend her energy. "Delegate where you can and set clear boundaries for yourself, like being home for dinner." suggests Taylor.

What can organizations do to encourage more women to take roles in science?

1. Set goals to build and maintain the female talent pipeline

Goals give you a benchmark, a line in the sand, an overt commitment and something to measure.

2. Lead from the top

Recruit the CEO to chair and lead diversity initiatives to demonstrate commitment and investment. For example, Pascal Soriot, AstraZeneca's CEO, established and chairs the Global Inclusion and Diversity Council.

3. Showcase opportunities and career development

Develop programs—for all talent—and signpost and support career planning. At AstraZeneca, for example, the company has dedicated training programs to support and accelerate the careers and personal goals for women in the company.

4. Recognize the value of sponsorship—and rethink mentoring to increase diversity of thought and approach

Old fashioned mentoring to teach people to be like you can hinder diversity. We end up simply helping people to follow the same path as has been taken before. This can create too strong a mold that can remove individuality and diversity.

5. Make the environment welcoming and safe for women

Bias must be eliminated. A safe, welcoming and accepting place for women must be created.

How are these leaders viewing the future of female talent in science? Durán concludes: “We need a diverse workforce to make the changes needed in healthcare—and women can make the difference.”

And the final word comes from Taylor: “I want girls to get excited about science and for them to open their minds that women can be successful in science. This is a great career for women.”

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