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Leadership in Pharmaceutical Industry: Embracing Diversity and Inclusion

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Suneela Thatte, VP and Head - Healthcare R&D India, Merck Group pens down her thoughts on International Women's Day



The pharmaceutical industry has been at the forefront of driving positive patient outcomes and the last decade has been a significant one in terms of scientific advancements and innovation. Along with leveraging the new age technology, the industry is witnessing a paradigm shift when it comes to the employee and business strategies, and it is great to see that women leaders are driving this change. Breaking gender stereotypes, they are spearheading the industry with their vision, expertise, and leadership skills.

However, just like any other industry, there's still a significant gap with respect to diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the leadership positions that needs to be addressed. Despite significant progress, gender disparities still exist, and more needs to be done to level the playing field.

Women in Leadership

The pharmaceutical industry has traditionally been male dominated. However, the industry has undergone a significant shift in recent decades, not just in science but also in the leadership and workplace landscape. Healthcare companies are embracing cutting-edge innovation and tapping the enormous potential of delivering healthcare solutions to all sections of the population. The industry is looking at diversity and inclusion, welcoming more women into the workforce. While traditionally, pharma companies have skewed gender ratios; this trend is slowly but steadily changing.

For instance, Belén Garijo, the CEO of Merck Group, is one of the most prominent women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry. Under her leadership we are steadily making progress to achieve a more balanced gender structure at various hierarchical levels across all areas. We currently have 38% women in leadership and 43% women in our global workforce. We aim for gender parity in leadership positions by 2030. Women at all levels – not just those in leadership roles – need more role models like Garijo that they can look up to follow and learnt from their career insights.

Encouraging Women in Science and Technology

To encourage more women to pursue careers in science and technology, starting right at the grassroots level is essential. There is a need for an environment that strengthens the STEM curriculum and links it to real-world situations. Fostering a wider ecosystem of learning through private sector backing, including scholarships, networks, grants, and other initiatives, can make a big difference.

Businesses are taking active steps to address obstacles that prevent women from applying for leadership positions in the pharma industry. The Department of Biotechnology (DBT) is also making a concerted effort to promote young women's involvement in science and technology, supporting women entrepreneurs through the Public Sector Enterprise Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC).

Women Need More than Family-Friendly Policies

While family-friendly policies are a step towards creating a more inclusive workplace, they alone are not enough to achieve true gender parity in leadership positions. Women deserve equal opportunities for leadership training and development, and companies must also address biases in their hiring and promotion processes. Moreover, creating a culture of inclusivity and belonging is crucial for ensuring that all employees feel valued and respected, regardless of their gender or any other characteristic. It's not just about the bottom line; it's about recognizing the immense potential of every individual in the workforce.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, as we look to the future, we must create a world where everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. We must acknowledge women's incredible potential in leadership roles and take action to empower and inspire them. By doing so, we can build a more just and equitable world where everyone has a chance to thrive. While celebrating the progress made in the pharma industry and other sectors is crucial, let's also recommit ourselves to the work that still needs to be done. As leaders, we must continue to promote diversity and inclusion and inspire the next generation of women leaders in science and technology. Together, we can create a world where every woman has the opportunity to lead and make a difference.

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