

Reflecting on Leadership, Equity in the Biotechnology Industry With Daré Bioscience CEO Sabrina Johnson

|
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After graduating from Tulane University in 1988, Sabrina Martucci Johnson (E '88) climbed the ranks in biomedical engineering organizations. Today, she is the founder and CEO of Daré Bioscience, one of the few publicly traded biotechnology companies working solely in women's health.

A pioneer in the biotechnology industry, Johnson founded Daré Bioscience in 2015 and has served as President, CEO, and a member of the Board of Directors since its inception.

“I started Daré Bioscience because I felt a lack of commitment to bringing new pharmaceutical products forward for women,” Johnson said. “Women represent more than 50% of the population and of the people needing pharmaceutical products.”

Part of Johnson’s inspiration for founding Daré Bioscience stemmed from her desire to see more female representation in STEM, a passion that began during her time at Tulane.

“Not seeing that leadership was a reminder that we create the change we want to see. If you want it to be different then you’ve got to step up into those roles, or it’s just going to be the same,” Johnson said.

When stepping into her first major leadership position as chief financial officer at Cypress Bioscience, Johnson grappled with her concept of leadership.

“It’s easy to emulate other leaders that you’ve seen, or the picture in your head of what a leader is. But in the end, people tend to respond more to authenticity and vulnerability,” Johnson said. “It’s okay to not know everything, it’s okay to be upset about stuff, and it’s okay to need help. Whatever you’re experiencing, just be authentic about it.”

From acting as a chief financial officer at three acclaimed biomedical organizations to founding Daré Bioscience, Johnson has held a variety of leadership roles for over 25 years.

“I’m definitely a different leader today than I was 20 years ago,” Johnson said. “In early leadership roles, sometimes our definition of leadership is power and control. As I’ve matured in my career, I started to realize that a leader is a person who involves people in decision-making and creates an environment where there’s diversity of thought and expression.”

In 2022, three biotechnology trailblazers, Angie You, Julia Owens and Sheila Gujrathi, formed the Biotech Sisterhood, a community-focused networking group for women in the pharma industry, which Johnson is active in.

“We need a place where we can get together, support each other, and help ensure that we’re helping to bring up the next generation of female CEOs and STEM leaders,” Johnson said.

The Biotech Sisterhood has held three retreats along with smaller, local activities, and now hosts a Slack channel of over 200 women CEOs, serving as a platform for strengthening the network of women leaders in biotechnology.

“We have to continue to blaze the path and make it easier for the next group of diverse leaders so that every subsequent group has it easier than the one before,” Johnson said.

Johnson, who has served on Tulane’s School of Science and Engineering Board of Advisors since 2008 and joined the Newcomb Institute Director’s Advisory Board this year, encourages recent graduates to reach out for guidance in navigating the challenges of the biomedical engineering industry.

“Your connections are so important, and when you graduate from Tulane, that’s one of the most valuable gifts that you have,” Johnson said. “Those of us that are hearing from alums love it because it allows us to stay connected and feel like we can give back in a way that can be impactful.”

Johnson’s daughter, Isabella Johnson, graduated from Tulane in 2020 with a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in biomedical engineering. In addition to her roles as a research and teaching assistant, Isabella Johnson earned a spot in the Newcomb Scholars program, a rigorous feminist research program.

“Engineers don’t often have a lot of opportunities to utilize their communication skills. The thing that I saw for Isabella, being a Newcomb Scholar, [was that she was] in a safe community where she was in those communication roles,” Johnson said. “That’s an incredible gift to give young women, and it is difficult to come by.”

Looking forward, Johnson hopes to use Daré Bioscience as a model for other biotechnology companies, expanding gender equity and woman-occupied leadership roles within the industry.

“I would love to see us being a premier women's health company, not just because I want us to continue in a leadership role, but also as the example of what others can and should be,” Johnson said.