

March 11, 2020

Welcome to WoW – the Woman of the Week podcast series by PharmaVOICE. This episode was made possible by a generous sponsorship from Diaceutics. For more information visit diaceutics.com.

In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor in Chief of PharmaVOICE Magazine meets with Susan Kalk, Senior Vice President, Chief Quality and Technical Operations Officer at Sunovion.

Taren: Susan, welcome to the PharmaVOICE WoW podcast program.

Susan: Thank you, Taren. I'm really honored to be a part of this program, and I commend you for the work that you are doing to showcase the women in our industry.

Taren: Well, thank you for that and it's our honor and we're honored to have you with us today. You have 25 years of experience in the global pharma industry. I'd love to get a sense of what drew you to the industry to start with.

Susan: A great question. I think I was probably born a chemist I would say. I had a fascination with science from even early on. In my childhood, I would run my own experiments at home, which surprised my parents because nobody had any science background or knowledge in my family up until that point. And I took this passion for science into high school where I took a number of science classes and then through college where I focused on biochemistry.

I think my fascination was that there's this whole world at the molecule and atom level that exists that is invisible to everybody, but that explains everything that we see in the world, and it's really that fascination that drove me to science.

Taren: I'm fascinated by your fascination. I think that's amazing. There are so few kids that even think about that. So for you to take that world view literally of the small world and bring it to fruition is fantastic. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that your charming accent is South African and you started your career in a small lab in South Africa. What was this experience like for you?

Susan: So it was a great natural progression from a lot of the lab work that I had done in college. I used to spend almost every afternoon in labs and I started to think about a career in the life sciences. So it really was a natural progression for me. I was a quality control analyst in a pharmaceutical manufacturing environment. So I really started to understand how quality and quality control plays a vital role in pharmaceutical manufacturing and I got exposure to a number of analytical instruments and how to use them, which really haven't changed a whole lot in the industry. Obviously, technology has and they've become smarter and more efficient

and more automated, but the science behind those instruments really hasn't changed and they're still used in QC labs today. So it was a very valuable experience for me understanding more about the industry.

Taren: And you've had a really impressive career as one of the few women to lead a quality function in a couple of pharmaceutical companies. Why did you choose to focus on quality rather than another area or specialty?

Susan: So I think because my first role was quality control, my first job in pharma that is a part of the quality organization. So it was almost by default that I ended up in quality, but I found it's a natural step for me. I was always a rule follower, so working in a regulated environment was very natural and easy for me to adjust to.

In fact, you'll laugh at this story – I had a career skills aptitude test early on in my career and it came out that I should be a quality assurance manager, which I was. I'm one of those very few individuals that are in the perfect career for me, which is great. And from quality control, I've transitioned into quality assurance and into other areas in pharmaceutical, such as regulatory affairs, pharmacovigilance and now in my new role with technical operations as well, I'm focused on drug development, manufacturing drug supply. So I've had a really rounded experience in the industry.

Taren: That's fascinating, and it's one of those roles that isn't as high profile as other roles within an organization. Is that a safe statement to say?

Susan: It is a safe statement. Those of us that do it have a real passion for the patient and we have a sense of responsibility I would say above and beyond others to protect the patient and a pride in the quality of the products that we produce. So I think we're kind of a unique group of individuals that thinks that way that finds a very rewarding career in the quality space.

Taren: I love that. Let's talk about the patient because that's been one of your guiding principles throughout your career is to always put the patient and the company first over your own individual needs and sometimes in your own career success. Where did this come from, this passion for patients?

Susan: I have always been patient-focused and I'm lucky to be in an organization now that puts the patient first as well. I have found throughout my career that if you put the patient first in your decision making, 9 times out of 10 you'll make the right decision. But there are other things that contribute as well, such as continuing to deliver results, high quality performance and also as I said, putting the company first is what distinguishes and separates lower level managers from executives. And those managers in my organization that are able to understand that and put the company first and focus on a company which is a broader perspective of the ones that really have the opportunities to progress their careers.

Taren: Fantastic. And as we are now in this era of patient-focus, patient engagement, patient-centricity to use a very overused term, it must feel very gratifying to you that this is a part of your DNA all along and now the industry is catching up to you in a way.

Susan: That's very true and it has been gratifying. We've seen in so many areas, such as devices and combination products that even the regulators are insisting that the patient voice is included in the design of products, that they are having a much bigger input into what they want and what the medical needs are. So it is gratifying to see the patient voice being included, where in some cases we were one of the few groups that have really been focused on that, as you said, from the beginning.

Taren: Yes, and through those interactions with patients you must have some amazing stories to tell from the families that you worked with. What does it mean to you and your Sunovion teammates to be able to interact with patients on such an intimate level really getting into understanding their lives and understanding what matters to them?

Susan: It's so important for us to interact directly with the patients. I know a number of companies that they choose to outsource certain parts of quality operations to other third parties, but for Sunovion and for me, I've always insisted that the patient deserves to speak to a company representative who's an expert on the product to get that intimate knowledge about how to use the product, to get help and it's really helped patient's perspectives on our product – even patient perspectives on the industry as a whole through those conversations. There have been some very heartwarming conversations we've had with the patients and caregivers over the time.

Taren: That's wonderful. You touched on earlier about your broader remit now in terms of your role at Sunovion. How are you bringing that patient voice to the table to help direct strategy that relates to drug development, R&D, etc.?

Susan: We have a number of patient advocacy programs that we use across multiple therapeutic areas, but in the R&D space we are certainly incorporating the voice of the patient. We are getting feedback on a number of product designs and we're asking patients what is more meaningful to you.

Taren: Wonderful. Let's switch tacks just a little bit. I'd like to talk about your leadership style. What are some of the lessons you've learned along the way that might benefit other women who aspire to reach the executive level?

Susan: Well, I've learned a lot of lessons along the way and I can say that there are a couple of areas that I would provide to other women.

First of all, mentorship is very important, both within the industry, but even outside. And I can tell you my husband is one of my biggest mentors. He's my biggest fan but also my biggest

critic. So he gives me very truthful, constructive feedback and you need that. You need somebody that will tell it to you straight and you also need to be open to acting on that feedback, and that's been extremely valuable to me, along with the other mentors in the industry.

But also I would say EQ in an organization is very important, too. I think women have instincts and they need to trust those instincts. I think it's an advantage we have over men, but it helps them to find their place within the organization, understand the dynamics within the culture of the organization, who the key influencers are. The biggest lesson I have learned is to be authentic. Be your true self. Do not try to be somebody that you think the organization wants you to be. That would be the advice that I give a lot of the people that I am mentoring.

Taren: That's sound advice. There's nothing like bringing your authentic self to work because people can read through artifice very quickly. As a really driven and innovative leader, what gets you going everyday and then at the same time what keeps you up at night?

Susan: Right. I would say throughout my career the thing that has motivated me everyday has been the people that work for me. Being able to see them accomplish things that they never thought possible, particularly seeing people perhaps in individual contributor roles move into leadership, and seeing people that I have mentored move into high-level roles, vice president roles in the industry, is very motivating for me.

Of course, I'm in the unique place at Sunovion of being part of some groundbreaking new programs which is very exciting and motivating, and it's just wonderful to be a part of a program that's going to make such a difference to patients. But being at the executive level now, I have a new responsibility and that is to blaze the trail at Sunovion for future leaders, women and girls that will be our next generation of leaders here. I take that responsibility pretty seriously, and I want to make it as easy as possible for them to be successful when they reach this level.

Taren: I love that. Being a trailblazer in an organization is not easy. What are some of the things that you're doing?

Susan: I think we're trying to do a lot of things to encourage women in leadership positions. I am the executive sponsor for a leading essentials program which is encouraging women to strengthen their leadership skills to have the confidence to take their leadership to the next level. We are starting a women's group internally that will allow mentoring and networking amongst some of our senior women leaders to share ideas and to support and encourage them to take their leadership to the next level as well.

So there are a number of areas, but really it's about developing the respect of my male peers and learning to earn that respect so that they expect that of all women within the organization and being aware of our behaviors as women and helping men to understand that we deserve to

sit at the table right next to them. So it's really everyday I'm conscious of that in how I behave and earning the respect of my peers.

Taren: Excellent. Yes. We know that there is quite a gender gap in the C-suite within the life sciences industry, and it's about getting that seat at the table, but also having men understand that this is not – that you deserve to be there as well because we can't get there. We can't bridge that gap without male allies. So it's so important to make it a really comprehensive kind of look at what you all are doing. That's great. You said earlier that one of the things that's really gratifying for you is to see some of those women that you have mentored reach senior level executive positions. How else do you define success for yourself?

Susan: Integrity and respect are key metrics for me, the ability to make a difference in an organization. I also am very proud of my record within quality. I am very conscious that the products that I put out onto the market would be of safety and purity that I would give my own children or take myself. So I am very proud of my record within quality. but I guess things that really resonate for me are when I bump into people that have worked for me years ago and say "You're still the best manager I ever had and we haven't forgotten about you." And that is a great measurement of success for me that I made enough of an impression in people's lives that they are remembering me 20 years later, which is wonderful.

Taren: That is wonderful and that's very amazing, and I hope that happens to you often. You provided us some really great lessons learned along the way a few minutes ago; in that similar vein, is there a piece of advice that you would give to your younger self, something you wish you knew then that you know now?

Susan: Yes, there definitely is. My younger self was rather reserved, and I would encourage myself to step outside of my comfort zone to have the confidence to speak up and have a voice way earlier than I did. It wasn't natural for me early on in a male-dominated environment to speak up.

I also would tell myself that not to judge myself too harshly because men sure don't and it's an area that I think women struggle with. They make a mistake and think 'oh well now everybody's perception of me has changed' rather than just dusting themselves off and moving on the same way men do. So I've noticed that with girls that I mentor; they tend to struggle a little bit with that area. I'm even telling my two girls – my two daughters who are in the life sciences that a mistake is okay. You admit to it, you fix it and you get up and move on, and that doesn't mean that your career is over or your job is over. That's something that we as women need to do a better job of.

Taren: I couldn't agree with you more. That's excellent advice. Finally, you've had a really successful and varied career, is it possible for you to identify one wow moment that either changed the trajectory of your career or has left you with a lasting impression?

Susan: Well, I would say that being appointed to Sunovion's executive leadership team was a key moment and a huge honor for me. It wasn't expected at the time, and the opportunity to interact with my peers across all functions and at that level with the responsibility of making decisions to the company as a whole is really the wow moment for me in my career, to be part of the C-suite. I hope that I can continue in this role to make good decisions and to increase my leadership and inspire girls to aim for this executive level and the C-suite.

Taren: I love it. I thank you so much. I want to wish you continued success in your career and thank you so much for providing such great insight for our WoW program. Thank you so much.

Susan: Thank you, Taren. I really appreciate your insights and I enjoyed talking to you today. Thank you.

Thank you for listening to this episode of WoW, the Woman of the Week podcast series. And thanks again to Diaceutics for sponsoring this episode. For more information, visit diaceutics.com. And don't forget to check out our other episodes at pharmavoice.com/wow.