

Thriving in the Midst of Corporate Change

Mergers, acquisitions, and management shifts bring constant change to corporate cultures in chemical and biopharmaceutical industry workplaces. What's a chemist to do in the midst of these upheavals? Don't just try to survive. Instead, strive to thrive in the new culture.

If you're an industrial chemist, you've probably found your work world turned upside down at least once or twice in the past five years. You've seen corporate mergers (e.g., Dow–Carbide and Pfizer–Pharmacia), foreign ownership (e.g., BP acquiring Amoco and ARCO, Bayer acquiring Aventis and Roche), restructuring and layoffs (e.g., Dupont and Solutia), spin-offs (e.g., NatureWorks and Monsanto), and top management changes (e.g., 3M and HP). The only constant in the world of industrial chemistry seems to be change.

Each upheaval brings a new corporate culture. You're supposed to carry on with your job, while everything around you seems in flux. What's an industrial chemist to do when the corporate culture changes?

No wonder you're occasionally dazed and bewildered. To help you survive—and thrive—in the midst of a changing corporate culture, we asked the following three leaders for their advice:

- Magid Abou-Gharbia (ACS '74), senior vice president and head of chemical and screening sciences, Wyeth. In his 23 years with Wyeth, he's seen many corporate changes in his company and the pharmaceutical industry.

- William F. Carroll, Jr. (ACS '73), 2005 ACS president, is vice president for Chlorovinyl Issues, Occidental Chemical Corporation. Carroll's presidential initiative ("Chemistry Enterprise 2015") is sparking an ACS-wide discussion of the scientific, economic, demographic, and regulatory trends that will continue to drive corporate change in the decade ahead.
- Barbara Peterson (ACS '85), a chemical information manager, is currently manager, Global Knowledge Management, Ecolab. She recently retired from 3M, and her career has included industrial employment at several Fortune 500 companies.

Adopt a Realistic and Forward-Looking Attitude

Carroll recommends that chemists adopt the approach outlined in Jim Collins' best-seller, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*.

According to Carroll, the attitude that helps great companies thrive in times of challenge and change can also be applied to chemists in their individual careers.

This approach, based on the "Stockdale Paradox," is not one of blind optimism. As first observed by Admiral James Stockdale while he was a prisoner of War in Vietnam, prisoners who were overly optimistic that they'd be released soon, only to have their hearts broken again and again, often died. "The survivors," said Carroll, "were those who confronted the brutal facts of their reality but never lost faith that they could and would prevail."

Abou-Gharbia emphasized a forward-looking attitude. "It's important to avoid looking back and referring to the old way of doing things." He advised his colleagues, "Let's try to be open-minded. Let's look for ways we can contribute to the change. Let's not resist it; let's try to be a part of it."

He cited the example of combinatorial chemistry when it was introduced throughout the pharmaceutical industry. Said Abou-Gharbia, "You found resistance from medicinal chemists in each company. They said, 'We are doing good medicinal chemistry. Why do we need that?' But after internal training, they started to realize that there was a good place for it—so we can do our work faster, add quality, and cut the cycle time."

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Peterson said it all: “Communication is the problem—and the solution. As a professor of communications once told me, ‘Remember that all efforts to communicate result in partial misunderstanding.’ So, you need to communicate in as many ways, and in as many settings, as possible. People take in information in a whole variety of ways, so try to meet people where they are now. When you think you’re done communicating, keep going.”

Even in a corporate hierarchy, communication is a two-way process. “Each person has 51% of the responsibility for effective communications,” says Peterson. “In an organization undergoing change, it’s not just the responsibility of the leaders to communicate. It’s also the responsibility of those who are part of an organization to be active listeners—ask questions, get clarifications, and be explicit about expecting communication from your leaders and managers.”

Abou-Gharbia points out that, during times of change, it’s all too easy for groups of individuals to “form silos”—aligning within “us” versus “them” factions and focusing on the faults of the new culture. His advice: “Avoid destructive discussions.”

Actively Manage Your Own Career

In his role as ACS president, Carroll meets with many chemists at all stages of their careers, from students to retirees. He offers similar advice to all of them. “You have two choices: You can keep putting one foot in front of the other and not being attuned to what’s going on around you. Or you can actively manage your career.”

For Carroll, “actively managing your career” means a whole set of behaviors that include:

- picking a career that you feel passionate about;
- being attuned to the environment in which you live, including your corporate culture;

- viewing every job you have as something that contributes to your overall tool kit;
- keeping up your skills with continuing education; and
- becoming the employee who’s too valuable to let go.

One of the best ways to manage your own career is to build and use a network. Said Carroll, “With the dynamic nature of industry today, and particularly as industries and companies in which chemists work get smaller, your network becomes more and more critical. A significant percentage of jobs get filled by word of mouth and never are posted. The way you know about those jobs is your network.” Carroll believes that the ACS is an excellent resource for networking. In fact, he said, “I think this is a fundamental change in the way people utilize their membership in the ACS.”

Calm Seas Ahead?

Is the pace of corporate change going to be slowing down in the decade ahead? Definitely not. Expect to see more mergers, spin-offs, start-ups, restructuring, and new technologies. Expect to get plenty of chances to adapt to corporate change. Expect to make changes in the way you do your job. And, emphasized Carroll, “Never lose faith that you can and will prevail.”

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