Stanford eCorner

Moving From Academia to Industry

Richard Scheller, *Genentech*

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Genentech Executive Vice President Richard Scheller articulates his thought process in deciding to leave a tenured faculty position to join a commercial enterprise. While leaving Stanford was hard to do, says Scheller, joining Genentech provided new intellectual challenges and opportunities to apply his biological insights to tackling diseases.

Transcript

I was a professor here for 19 years. I was a successful, member of the National Academy. I was a Hughes investigator so I had plenty of money. Things were going well. But the research that I was doing had gone through a phase where the knowledge had just exploded over the last decade and the rate of learning started to sort of plateau a little bit. So I just took stock in where I was headed with the rest of my career and thought that I had to do one of a couple of things. Find some new technology that increase that rate of learning again or switch my field to a little bit something different where I felt was sort of prime for that tremendous gain of knowledge again or maybe just do something different. So my wife, who's on faculty here, and I thought, "Should we move to Boston?" I get to go to Boston and have a bunch of nice colleagues there and then have labs there. But it really wouldn't be very different than here, given that we didn't have any problems here. We loved it here.

So I thought if I was going to do something different and move somewhere, since being a professor here is terrific, that I should really move somewhere where it would be quite different. So I thought then what would that be? It seemed to me then that we have done and when I say "we" in this case, I mean, the life science endeavor, not my lab. So everything funded by NIH for years and years. That sort of done what we've promised the society that we would do, which is learn enough about the way cells work and the way tissues work and enough about molecular biology. So that we can actually think about disease in very, very mechanistic terms which is the way I like to think. And wouldn't it be interesting to try and apply my biological insights to disease? So I was fortunate enough then to have somebody. David Botstein was in the Genetics Department at the time, had work with Genentech. He kind of heard I was looking around at different things. He introduced me to the CEO of Genentech at the time, Art Levinson. Art was a scientist, started off in a lab at Genentech, became the CEO.

And I thought, "Wow, you know, if I'm going to actually have a boss," which was kind of a noble concept to a faculty member, "if I'm going to have a boss, it should be someone who's a scientist who can actually understand logic and things like that." Someone that I could talk to. So it seemed like a terrific challenge, a terrific opportunity and that it would be really, really different from what I was doing day to day at Stanford. So, I remember over the Christmas holiday ten years ago thinking, "Should I do this? Should I do this?" Walking into the lab and thinking, "So nice here. My God, I have ten years. Should I do this? What if they fire me?" I could get fired if I go. These are all kind of noble notions to think about but it just seem like a terrific opportunity and I took the plunge and I have to say for me, personally, it was the right thing to do. My learning curve picked up again immediately learning all about kinds of new science, about cancer biology. I didn't really know that. I knew about cell biology but I didn't know specifically about cancer or immunology. I knew absolutely nothing about business.

I was on the executive committee of the company. I had to find out what EPS stood for. Really, the executive committee meetings were just learning all about business, all about drug development. How do you develop a drug? I never thought of that before. So it was just absolutely fascinating. I have to say I give the company a lot of credit because, basically, I think it

has paid off for them. But it took me two years before I had any idea what I was even doing in business. I mean, I knew about science but it really was a steep learning curve but not something that happens overnight. So for me, personally, I would say I took the leap because I wanted to do something different and I felt it was the right time to become basically a human experimental biologist, which is what we do all in the context of disease, of course.