

Leaders to Learn From

Corlis Murray

*Senior Vice President, Quality Assurance,
Regulatory and Engineering Services
Abbott*

“I wasn’t going to let who I was, my gender, or my zip code dictate where I ended up in life.” Corlis Murray, now Senior Vice President, Quality Assurance, Regulatory and Engineering Services at Abbott, grew up in inner-city Dallas during a time when women graduating with STEM degrees were rare. Now that she has found her own way in a successful engineering career, changing the narrative for young women has become a top priority. Working with interns as young as 15 years old to demystify the world of STEM, Corlis is determined to make the lack of representation of women and minorities in STEM a thing of the past. “The fix is bigger than my company or me. It’s bigger than a hashtag, a summer camp or a STEM day. We need people in powerful positions — educators, policymakers, scientists — to join together to reach girls and minorities early, painting a picture for them of what the future could look like.”



Untraditional Pathway to STEM

As a teenager, Corlis worked at Jack in the Box making \$1.76 an hour and had a promising career path – she had been told by her boss that she was an ideal candidate for the company’s manager track program. But an opportunity arose when IBM chose her out of her Dallas high school class to complete a summer internship. That internship changed the trajectory of her life. “My internship with IBM when I was 17 years old gave me the confidence I needed to land another internship after my senior year as a civilian with the Norfolk Naval Shipyard – and those two things combined were enough to convince me that I was capable of pursuing a career as an engineer.” Members of her family asked, “What exactly is an engineer?” and she recalls having a conversation with her grandfather about the career. “Why on earth would you want to drive a train for a living?” he asked. Corlis wasn’t talking about driving trains, of course. She was talking about building things, making things. Everything that exists, after all, she’ll tell you, has been engineered.



Paving the Way for the Next Generation

Due to her own experience, she believes that it's important to reach future STEM talent early, and therefore in 2012, Corlis worked with Abbott to develop and start a high school internship program. "A big reason for that is girls don't consider STEM careers viable options – or don't even know what they're all about, because they're seldom exposed to them." Almost 60 percent of girls say they never consider a career in STEM and just 10 percent of girls say their parents would encourage them to think about a career in engineering. The program sources interns from diverse schools near areas where Abbott operates. Since its inception more than 100 students have participated in the program. Though there are no admission guidelines on gender or race, based on the schools the students come from, typically about two-thirds of interns are young women and about 60 percent are minorities. The program allows these students to engage with real-world, high-visibility projects such as Freestyle Libre, a device that eliminates the need for painful, routing fingerprints for people with diabetes. They are able to experience firsthand what exciting STEM careers look like. Of these interns, 97 percent go on to major in a STEM field in college, addressing the very real issue that minorities and women tend not to choose these sorts of degrees.

Closing the Gap

But just having one program at Abbott isn't good enough. As one of very few African-American female engineers, Corlis feels she has an overwhelming obligation to do something to help close a real gap of women and minorities in STEM fields. "It's good for our company and its future, but it's also just the right thing to do for society and the future of innovation." Now along with being a pioneer for Abbott, she travels the country speaking at events and writing letters to Congress; "I say to companies focused on engineering and science that no matter what they are doing now to promote more women and minorities in STEM fields, they could be doing more. For example, unless they already have one, they should consider the benefits of establishing a high school internship program." The task seems daunting and it's for a good reason. The idea of a high school internship program is a long-term risk-taking venture and some companies may not be able to accept the lack of visible ROI. Companies are not just reaching out to students: they are investing in their lives. This doesn't stop Corlis, however. "I've been through it, and if you want to do something similar, I will gladly give you the blueprint, complete with the nitty-gritty logistical details."

I've been through it, and if you want to do something similar, I will gladly give you the blueprint complete with the nitty-gritty logistical details.



Advice for Future Leaders

"I learned along the way that I don't have the ability to change anyone, but I do have the ability to help influence the interaction between us. I can't control you, but I can improve how we are able to communicate so that we can get this project done. Then I just think: 'Okay, how can I modify myself to be able to help with this relationship, be it temporary or long-term, so that we can achieve the things that we want to do?'"