



10 Questions for Pure Bioscience CFO Craig Johnson

- Name: Craig Johnson
- Age: 50
- Time with company: 5 months
- Education: Bachelor's in Business Administration, University of Michigan; CPA
- Company headquarters: El Cajon, California
- Number of countries: U.S, with sales in other countries
- Number of employees total: 25
- Number of employees the CFO oversees: 3
- About the company: [Pure Bioscience](#) develops and markets nontoxic, technology-based bioscience products, including antimicrobials, aimed at various global health challenges.

1. Where did you start in finance and what experiences led you to the job you have today?

I'm a CPA by training and I worked with Pricewaterhouse right out of college. I always liked smaller startup companies, so my entire career since leaving Pricewaterhouse has been with smaller startup technology companies. I've worked as a CFO in the tech industry here in San Diego since '94.

I'm sure bioscience is a little different than your standard run-of-the-mill biotech company that is going to produce a drug that's not going to see revenue for a decade or more, if ever. Pure has developed products that are on the market and they're not drugs, they're antimicrobials, sanitizers, antibacterials. It was interesting to come from biotech to this company that has strong sales and that is in a number of different areas since the products we develop are used in a lot of different industries.

2. Who was an influential boss for you and what lessons did they teach you about management and leadership?

He's passed away -- his name is Tom Tranchina. I worked for him at two different times at two different companies. It was early in my career, right out of Pricewaterhouse. He taught me to always do the right thing. ... It's a character issue. I was always practical and pragmatic but he was more practical and pragmatic than I was. That's a great skill to have, the ability to cut through the nonsense and just understand point A to point B, this is where we're going, so let's just ignore all of the ancillary stuff and home in on where we're going. The other thing that he taught me was to keep things simple, which kind of goes along with being practical. A lot of finance guys want to tell you the horror story about how they got from point A to point B -- just tell us the bottom line. Nobody wants to hear the horror story. Just break it down and keep it simple so that everyone understands it.

3. What are the biggest challenges facing CFOs today?

I've been CFO in the biotech industry in smaller companies, so I'll speak specifically to that industry. The biggest thing we face as CFOs in biotech is financing. We don't have product revenue, so it's explaining what we'll do with money, what we'll develop, and taking it to the next step. It's creating value with that money and maybe going out and getting more money. The last few years, trying to extract money from people is not the easiest thing in the world.

Another one is not specific to biotech, but just the ability to focus and allocate resources [is a challenge]. You can't be involved in a million projects. There's a finite amount of time, there's a finite amount of money. You need to be able to move products along. That's always a struggle, that's always a challenge.

4. What is a good day at work like for you?

I'm a big list person, so it's getting everything done on my list and then just having the ability to work on the things that are important but aren't necessarily urgent. Getting back to the whole Stephen Covey "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" ... getting to the things that are really important rather than the daily fires.

5. How would you characterize your management style?

I played sports all my life and still do, so I'm a big team guy. There's a lot that goes with being a team guy. One is that everybody is going to make mistakes, everybody is going to fumble the ball every once in a while, everybody is going to make a touchdown every once in a while. But the key is that you're still a team even when there's a fumble. I'm not worried about making mistakes unless it's the same one over and over again.

I'm also big on people asking for forgiveness rather than permission. I'd rather people be the CEO of their own area, or like Seinfeld, the master of their domain. I want people to be smart enough when they know they might be over their head to come and ask a question, but I never want anyone to worry about making a mistake. I want them to hire smart people and go ahead and do their job. You're the expert in your area, not me.

And I like to have fun. I spend eight to 10 hours a day at work. It would be nice if it was fun.

6. What strengths and qualities do you look for in job candidates?

That's a good one. That's a good one. It's funny, over the years, I just kind of boiled it down to three things -- I just came here [recently], so I was on the other side, I was the job candidate. Early on in your career, I think you think about a whole bunch of stuff, but to me it boils down to these three things: know your craft -- if you're a CFO, you've got to be a good CFO, so know your craft -- work hard and get along. Those are the three things I try to ferret out in the reference-check process and the interview process. Do you know what you're doing? Do you work hard? Do you get along with people, which goes back to the whole management style of working with a team.

7. What are some of your favorite interview questions or techniques to elicit information to determine whether a candidate will be successful at your company? What sort of answers send up red flags for you and make you think a job candidate wouldn't be a good fit?

I try to find the answers to my three things that I think are important -- do you know what you're doing, are you a hard worker and do you get along? Any reference you're going to give is going to say you're good, so one of the things I say is, "I know everybody loves you, but there's that one person who doesn't. If I found that guy and asked what's your story, what's he going to tell me and why?" I'm not trying to surprise them, but life is that way. You don't get along with everybody. I've been fired. I've had guys who didn't like me. I've had guys who've loved me. The way they answer the question, if they're comfortable in answering the question, that really goes a long way.

The other thing I like to find out is why they've moved from job to job, what was the transition between those jobs and were they running from a situation that they didn't like or were they running to a great opportunity. I often ask, "if I talk to your boss or the people who sit next to you what would they say that's good about you and what would they say you need to work on?" When they refuse to answer the question and just stick with, I'm really great, that one sends up a red flag.

If they ever disparage their prior employer or prior supervisor or boss [that's a red flag]. They could have had people they didn't get along with and it's fine to say that, his personality and mine just wasn't a great fit, and I can ask, "what about it wasn't a great fit?" It's just a comfortableness in talking about that -- nobody has arrived yet, what are the areas of need, what are the areas that need improvement?

8. What is it about your current job, at this particular company, that sets it apart from other chief finance positions?

Again, mainly because I've been in the biotech industry, it's specialized. The thing that sets it apart from other biotech companies is that it actually has products for sale and that was an experience I wanted to have. And it still has the homerun potential of a technology platform that can spin out multiple products in multiple industries.

9. What do you do to unwind from a hectic day?

I play a lot of basketball. I played in high school, I played all the way through, and I still play with other old guys my age. I have scheduled games each week and I try to make at least two of them a week. They'd rather go to play basketball than go to a gym or get on a treadmill, and it's just us guys trash-talking each other: "I can slip a credit card under how high you can jump, Johnson."

I also coach a travel team, a club team of kids. They were in the 4th grade [when they started] and now they're in the 8th grade, so this is their last year of what's called club basketball before they go to high school. I'm looking forward in a year from now going to their high school or JV [junior varsity] basketball games and seeing how they do.

10. If you weren't doing this job, what would you be doing?

I would coach basketball. If we hit it big here and I could retire, I would be one of those guys who started a second career of trying to work my way through to be a basketball coach.