Learning the hard way
NGM PRESIDENT JEFF JONKER REFLECTS ON CAREER LESSONS IN BIOTECH

Jeff Jonker isn’t a science guy by training—he’s a lawyer who hasn’t taken a science course since high school. But the lack of lab training didn’t stop him from recognizing the opportunity of the biotech industry.

So when the chance came to move from the strategic transactions group at legendary Silicon Valley law firm Wilson, Son-sini, Goodrich & Rosati to legendary Peninsula biotech company Genentech Inc., Jonker jumped.

Jonker went on to a number of executive roles in biotech companies, including senior vice president of corporate and business development at Theravance Inc. and spinout Theravance Bio-pharma, before his hiring as president of 140-employee NGM. The company was founded by Jin-Long Chen, now its chief scientific officer.

NGM is a reunion of sorts. Its chairman, Dave Goeddel, was the first scientist hired at Genentech, and other people from Tularik, another Goeddel startup that was sold to Amgen Inc., are on board with NGM. The company has an important partnership with Merck & Co. and is working on experimental treatments for the fatty liver disease known as NASH, as well as diabetes, obesity and cancer.

How’s business? We are in a rare position of being able to devote almost all of our attention to R&D right now. It’s allowed us as an umbrella to build our business and molecules and move them forward to humans.

What’s going to change in the next year? We are moving into the clinic with our first oncology program.

Are you hiring? We’ll hire another 20-plus people this year.

Going from NGM’s original work of looking at gastric bypass surgery and its impact on diabetes to cancer is a big range. How does that cause the company to think differently? We’re almost too specialized as an industry, but there’s a function of how big organizations are structured. I would argue, when you go back and look at the early days of biotech, people were more expansive. Dave Goeddel’s inventions span four or five areas. We’re not too concerned about somebody’s background, because if you have a good idea, we want to hear it. Some things can be applied across therapeutic areas.

Goal yet to be achieved? Having a new medicine reach patients. We’re part of the way through that journey and we hope to have multiple molecules in our organization’s future.

Guiding principles for good management? You hire absolutely ace players and then build a culture of trust, and you empower people and give them the responsibility to make good decisions to shepherd things forward. It’s like the Warriors.

Best way to keep your competitive edge? To be honest with ourselves. That was one of the things about NGM that drew me here and drew me into biotech. If you look at a lot of industries around here, there are short product-development cycles and intense competition, so they’re in a rush to get things out the door, to market the heck out of products and tell consumers, “This is the solution for everything.” But in biotech, there is a reckoning: the FDA, patients. If this is not a good plan, someone who sees it will speak up. You can’t package stuff in biotech very long. We’re selling the dream, but ultimately the dream reads out.

Best business decision? Joining Genentech. I almost didn’t. I thought they were jerks about how they operated. Older, wiser folks said, “Hey, listen to this.”

Hardest lesson learned and how you learned it? At Satori Pharmaceuticals, we had a clinical trial failure in Alzheimer’s. I had to fire myself and the team. Burying a biotech and shutting the doors is no fun. The hardest lesson I know is, I know far less than I think I do. We are kidding ourselves if we think we have it under control.

Your biggest missed opportunity? At Wilson Somsini, when Google was in beta, I had an opportunity to go in and join Google, in the sub-100 range of employees. That’s a notable one that my wife likes to remind me of. But I knew I wanted to go into biotech. Life works in interesting ways; I don’t have much time for regret.

What does “NGM” stand for? Officially nothing. There are several stories and they’re probably all apocryphal. One, that it stands for “Next Generation Medicines,” is probably what we’d like. Another is that Dave Goeddel wrote on the tab of a manila folder the basic gist of what the company was trying to do: “Next Genentech Metabolic.” But my favorite version is early on things weren’t looking as strong and one of the venture partners suggested that what it stands for is, “Not Going to Make it.” But, really, it just rolled off the tongue.

What do you like least about the job? That you’re pulled in so many directions. I would love to spend more time with scientists. If and when we go public, that would only magnify the challenge.

Your pet peeve? Lack of transparency. There are so many challenges to just communicating that put up barriers to effective communications. We don’t have time.

Your biggest missed opportunity? At Wilson Sonsini, when Google was in beta, I had an opportunity to go in and join Google, in the sub-100 range of employees. That’s a notable one that my wife likes to remind me of. But I knew I wanted to go into biotech. Life works in interesting ways; I don’t have much time for regret.

Most respected competitor? I have intense respect for Genentech and the gRED (Genentech research and development) unit, and people trying to push the envelope — Calico and Denali.

Most influential book? Anything by Hemingway — the power of the perfectly crafted sentence.

Favorite cause? Hunger alleviation, particularly mothers and their children in the developing world.

Favorite movie? The original “Star Wars” — whisked me back to being five years in Grauman’s Chinese Theater.

—Ron Leuty, rleuty@bizjournals.com