More than anything, promoting commerce is about leveraging our most valuable assets: people. So, I was concerned when our recent Business and Tax Climate Dashboard revealed that, at 44.6 percent, women make up less of San Diego County’s workforce than any of our competitor metropolitan areas across the nation. Women in San Diego County do not benefit from the same professional opportunities.

As a husband, a father of two daughters, a grandfather to a young girl and a San Diegan who has hired many people for jobs with great impact, this fact is troubling.

It may be our connection with the military driving this disparity. We have the highest percentage of veterans in the region, according to the same measure, and women account for only 15 percent of active-duty personnel in the U.S. military, according to Time Labs. But there is little value in trying to explain away the statistic.

Making Economy Stronger

As the president and CEO of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, whose job is to increase commerce in the San Diego region, I see this as a great opportunity to make our economy stronger.

An underrepresentation of women in our workforce means that we are essentially turning away talent. By allowing historical barriers to persist, we are missing a competitive advantage to other metros. We should be very deliberate in identifying an increase in the numbers of women in the workforce as a goal of the business community.

The economic success of our region is the same as the economic success of our workforce. For San Diego to succeed, San Diego needs women to succeed.

Difficult Path

Of course, the definition of success is always evolving. Today, that definition is becoming one with more emphasis on choice. Regardless of your definition, it is undeniable that women face a more difficult path to success in business.

Women are even more underrepresented in leadership roles. Last year, the chamber surveyed businesses in San Diego County and found an estimated 37 percent of executives are women. The conversations happening in boardrooms across America show that we are informed with the diversity of perspective available in our population.

On the national scale, the extent of this is unmistakable. According to the Pew Research Center, women make up only 17 percent of the corporate board members and 5 percent of CEOs at the nation’s Fortune 500 companies. A study by the Women’s College at the University of Denver in conjunction with the White House Project forecasted that, at today’s pace, it will take seven decades for there to be equal representation of women in leadership roles.

Getting Their Perspective

Again, we can explain away the issue by arguing that women are more likely to take time off to care for a child. Or, we can cite an increased likelihood of women to choose positions that offer less advancement opportunity, but greater flexibility in their schedule. The explanations however, only underscore the very reason we need more women in our workforce — their perspective is the product of a different experience. The most important thing we can do is make a deliberate effort to design HR systems to create the strongest teams. That means identifying potential women leaders and making sure that there are equal opportunities for success. Any given team may benefit substantially more from bringing in a different perspective. I don’t need a lawyer to tell me it is OK to consider the perspective of an applicant before hiring or promoting the best person for the job.

You should feel confident that this approach is in the best interest of your business and our entire economy.

Young Leaders Program

The chamber is approaching the second year of our San Diego Young Leaders program. Women are well represented in this group of professionals that are 40 years old and younger, making up 50 percent of the 50-member board.

Each year, it is important to the success of this program that we keep that way. We hope that this approach creates further opportunity for the young female participants — all of whom have already demonstrated the capacity for leadership.

Next year, the chamber will offer a leadership program exclusively for emerging women leaders. I am proud to look for and cultivate those rising leaders, and encourage you to apply to a chamber leadership program.

Jerry Sanders is president/CEO of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce.

DeSouza joined Illumina in 2013 as president. He has been instrumental in Illumina’s evolution into the clinical markets and executed multiple major initiatives, including launching the HiSeq 4000 and the recent introduction of MiSeq.

Forsing Partnerships

Illumina has been forging important partnerships.

Earlier this month, Illumina announced a partnership with Oregon-based firm Thermo Fisher Scientific to develop and co-market software for analyzing single-cell, single-nucleotide generation sequencing data.

Illumina was named one of the “smartest” companies out there, according to the MIT Technology Review, which in June released its annual list of the 50 companies that have created new markets or taken risks to disrupt an existing marketplace.