



Women share secrets of career success in water

The fact that legislation and policies promoting gender equality have paved the

way for women to take up positions in the top echelons of management in the water sector does not mean that women do not have to work hard to earn the positions they occupy. A soon to be published Water Research Commission (WRC) study reveals some of the opportunities and challenges faced by women in water.

To understand how women in the water sector have achieved positions of seniority and leadership, the WRC commissioned a study on the criteria necessary for the career success of women in the sector. The study found that women who participated did not feel that the positions they occupy were 'given' to them. While legislation enabled their rise to influential positions, they still had to get the necessary qualifications and leadership qualities required for the positions.

The study was conducted to gain an understanding of how these women progressed to where they have, and to explore the lessons that could be drawn from their experiences to inspire other women aspiring for leadership in the sector. This was a qualitative study that focused on the experiences of 27 women in senior positions in the water sector.

This sample of women included the former chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Water Services; senior managers in the Department

of Water Affairs; Chairperson of a Water Board; and senior managers in water research institutions.

WHAT DO WOMEN NEED?

The women interviewed came from varied racial and cultural backgrounds and they all had to overcome barriers to their success in the water sector. These were in varied degrees and included challenges of patriarchy and apartheid. The women agreed on several issues, among others that it was their qualifications which assisted them to rise in the sector. While the progressive legislation on gender equity and various gender policies in the water sector have assisted to remove barriers, these women would not have been able to take up their respective positions without the requisite qualifications.

It emerged from the study that all the women had someone who supported them in their childhood and encouraged them to overcome societal barriers. Some of these enablers were teachers or family members who supported them to enhance their personal lives and to make use of whatever support they could garner at their workplaces to advance their cause in the water sector.

Important also was the role of a mentor to teach these women the ropes when they entered the sector. In some instances, these mentors or enablers were men in the water sector organisations in which these women began their careers.

SHOULD WOMEN SUPPORT OTHER WOMEN IN THE SECTOR?

It is interesting that the impact of women's leadership in sector

transformation and in furthering a transformative agenda that creates space for other aspiring women was not unanimously supported by the responses. Coming out strongly from the women who did not support this was that the terms of women's employment does not specify that they should be agents of transformation and support other women. It should be noted that when women get into senior positions, they are assessed in terms of their performance and not on the support role they can play in advancing the careers of younger women who are new entrants into the water sector.

The novelty of having women in senior positions can also sidetrack them from the core responsibilities of their job. One woman recalled having to represent the department on other forums simply because she was one of the few women in the senior management of the department. The emphasis on supporting other women and taking up causes that have a gender label attached to them can be burdensome and actually contribute to women failing in their jobs. The extent to which this role is carried out is considered personal as each woman supports other women based on individual inclinations.

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR SUCCESS

It is clear that the policies have assisted in women gaining access to the positions they hold, which they would not have necessarily occupied prior to 1994 when political and patriarchal systems were less enabling. What then determines the rise of women into senior positions where they can begin to influence policy? The study points to the following:

Functional capability

At the most basic level women need access to functional capabilities. This includes the ability for women to participate by having practical choices; real opportunities; and substantial freedoms and resources such as well-being, health, control over one's environment; support in terms of welfare and social services; and time and space. These are the core essentials or the fundamentals that form the base from which people, and women in particular, can develop and flourish.

Education

Education is essential and a necessity for career advancement and success. The women and men interviewed emphasised the importance of education as a means of achieving success in the water sector. The women profiled have high levels of education, some having one or more tertiary qualifications. The importance of education lies in the independence it allows, the confidence it instils, and it is a resource that one owns and cannot be taken away. The women spoke strongly against tokenistic appointments, and asserted that they had been appointed based on merit. They also felt that the only way to improve themselves and their opportunities were through education.

Hard work and dedication

Coupled with education is hard work and dedication. Both of these are essential to career success in the sector, and it is only with hard work and dedicated effort that growth, improvement and success are attained. The women acknowledged that the legal and policy environments promote women and make provision for the preferential treatment of women; however, it is hard work that enables women to rise to higher levels in the sector.

Support

Personal and professional support, such as education, was cited as being critical to career success. Personal

support at home, from family, spouses and/or partners provides women with the space and possibility to advance themselves towards realising their goals and ambitions.

Professionally, mentors and/or coaches as well as institutional support have been shown to assist women to progress. It is important to identify and access support and the availability and accessibility of formal and/or informal support in the professional and personal sphere. This has been crucial in that it assists women in dealing with personal and work-related challenges and helps to find and maintain a balance between work and personal life.

Further, an institutional environment that is supportive and innovative in responding to the needs of women and the multiple roles that women have is required. This include, for example, mentorship, training, the availability of daycare facilities, and flexible working hours.

Passion and ambition

The women related their passion for the work that they do, and their involvement in contributing to the lives of South Africans through the provision of basic services, such as water and sanitation. This has sustained their interest and engagement in the sector.

The sector provides a challenging work environment that is diverse and constantly changing. There is need for innovation, creativity, problem solving, and many other skills that keep people engaged. In other words, the sector provides an environment that is stimulating. Drive, passion and ambition are required to achieve and to succeed. Some women described how the challenges they face within the sector feed their ambition and how they continuously strive to improve the sector as well as themselves.

Social capital

Social capital in the form of interpersonal networks, contacts, knowledge and other related human resources are assets that can be used to address

needs and interests. These collective assets provide women who are either entering the sector or who are already in the sector with a means to receive and give support; to gain access to knowledge and information; and to establish and be part of a community where ideas, challenges and other facets of work can be shared and discussed. The networks that are formed can be among women only or they can include both women and men.

Either way, it is important that these networks are diverse, representative and inclusive, taking into consideration the reason or objective for forming the network. In some instances, the network can be very informal wherein it is people coming together as friends or colleagues to meet and touch base on matters. However formed, networks and social capital, more broadly, allow and facilitate horizontal collaboration that has fewer barriers or obstacles. These collective networks have great potential to generate individual rewards, such as career opportunities and support networks by encouraging and increasing the capacity of people to work together.

Characteristics for leadership

The final criterion lies in the qualities that characterise a good leader. While these are qualities that were identified in the women holding leadership positions, they are relevant given that the qualities of leadership in the women interviewed were groomed and inculcated over time in their careers.

These include a good work and moral ethic; interacting with people in a respectful manner; supporting and providing opportunities to people; working well with people since collaboration and cooperation are essential in the sector; learning from people and sharing information and knowledge with others; fairness and equality; and managing people in a horizontal way that is collegiate and transformative rather than power-oriented and hierarchical. □