

## **Women vs. Men: The skills development showdown**

*Issued by Trinitas Consulting*

*"The advancement of women in South Africa is no longer an option, it is an urgent requirement." - Konyalala Maphisa, president Businesswomen's Association of South Africa.*

In the past, the business world has often been described as a 'man's world' and many believe that this is still the case. But are women using this as a scapegoat to cover up for their own lack of ambition or fear of success? Are women standing behind this old adage to protect themselves from being hurt should they attempt to advance their careers and fail?

Gizelle McIntyre, director of The Institute of People Development, feels that more often than not women themselves actually put up barriers to their own success (whether as a result of their fear of failure or a lack of self-confidence) rather than their lack of advancement being as a result of male bias. McIntyre suggests that women should take action in their own lives to advance their careers, and offers some advice as to how to do so.

Firstly, if women want to be seen as strong, and want to compete as strong career women, then they need to act strong. One of the biggest drawbacks of employing a woman is that she often uses her children as an excuse. "A woman who is stuck in a meeting that is going nowhere will say that she needs to leave due to having to go and fetch her children. A man stuck in the same meeting will simply say that he does not feel that the meeting is going anywhere and that it is time to call it a day – men have harnessed the ability to say no, women need to learn to do this rather than making excuses," says McIntyre. "Although the perception is that men are not as worried about their children as women are, this is not the case – men just don't use them as an excuse."

Secondly, women should avoid trying to be men in order to get into a higher position at work. "Women's liberty struggles hinged on burning bras and acting less ladylike, but the world does not need more women who act like men, it needs diversity. Through our differences, better solutions can be garnered in the workplace. So rather than 'becoming one of the boys', be a lady; you'll receive a lot more respect from both sexes by doing so," adds McIntyre. "Women need to have the confidence to use their skills and the self-confidence not to have to change who they are to achieve success."

Thirdly, women need to learn to treat each other with respect in the workplace. Unfortunately, the trend leans more towards women making derogatory comments about other women who are in more senior positions, than men making these comments. Although it may take a little longer for a woman to prove her clout to a board of men, once she has, they generally accept her and respect her for it (especially if that board of men is made up of gentlemen under the age of 35). According to McIntyre, "As women we need to learn to stand together and respect each other if that is how we want the opposite sex to treat us too."

The most important piece of advice that McIntyre has to offer is that women need to recognise the power of skills development. Many companies favour men for technical skills

training when sending staff for skills development, while women are more often sent for training in softer skills. Although all forms of training are beneficial, women need to learn to ask for what they want. "Get everything together yourself and do the work for the manager. Show them how the particular training links with the goals of the company." If all else fails, do it yourself; "Don't make subtle remarks about wishing to go for training. Find out what you want to do and do it yourself."

There are certain skills which women are naturally better at than men, although these may still require the honing of skills development in order to be useful in the workplace. "For example, women make better win-win negotiators, because we have an affinity towards the people we are negotiating with, we are better listeners and we don't naturally have the need to win at someone else's expense. We also have the ability to be non-threatening, for example, in a disciplinary process, which can work favourably for the business."

McIntyre's final words of advice for any woman that is trying to advance her career are simple; "Make sure that you have good skills, including technical skills. Do every course or training programme that you can possibly do to improve yourself. Make yourself visible with how much you are willing to learn. Do not assume someone knows you know something, tell them and show them that you can do it. Remember that the only person that is going to be good to your career is you. Find yourself a mentor to bounce things off of, we are talkers, we are good at that, and lastly, be aware of the reality of the opportunities around you; if it's too good to be true it's too good to be true."

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Words: 869