

Some Big Stilettos to Fill

Just two years ago *The Economist* declared that the world should: "Forget China, India and the internet: economic growth is driven by women." Despite these bold words, women are still under-represented in leadership positions in corporate South Africa

WRITTEN BY CARA BOUWER & MASEGO LEHIHI-MAKUVA

According to a recent survey by Landelahni Business Leaders, men still make up 70 per cent of total directorships in SA. But Joan de Beer, Director of Corporate Training at Dale Carnegie Training, believes the tide is slowly turning. "There has been a shift in some organisations, and women are being recognised and respected for their professionalism and expertise. What is alarming, though, is the lack of support that women give to one another. We need to adopt a more collaborative approach," she says.

This kinship starts, believes De Beer, with women encouraging and supporting one another. "In order to make a difference for up-and-coming women professionals, more experienced women must share their knowledge unselfishly. Senior women should be spending at least 25 per cent of their time training and mentoring their more junior female counterparts. As a leader in business, I believe it is my responsibility to nurture and encourage my young colleagues."

In *See Jane Lead*, Dr Lois P Frankel looks at the issues of socialisation, self-doubt, gender stereotyping and the inevitable struggle to be all things to all people.

"There is a perception in the corporate world that 'it's a man's world' and women do not fit the norms," says De Beer. "If a woman demonstrates her feminine traits, she is 'acting like a girl' and is not taken seriously or does not win respect. On the other hand, if she exercises her authority then she earns the label of being dictatorial. This paradox is unique to women."

What we forget in our haste to "fit in" to the male-dominated corporate culture is that women have a great deal to offer in

the workplace. "Women are natural negotiators," says De Beer. "Think how skilfully they negotiate with small children to eat their vegetables! Women are strong communicators and particularly good listeners. They are sensitive and willingly offer support and encouragement. They keep calm and civilised in a challenging environment. It is also true that women are excellent planners and strong team-builders."

The perception, however, is that women were considered to have less leadership ability than men and this is an ongoing issue in certain organisations, especially those locked into a more traditional leadership style. Step one, says De Beer, is altering women's mindsets. Everyone is a leader to a greater or lesser degree, she says, and training, such as that offered by Dale Carnegie Training, helps people to find what they are capable of and then capitalise on that.

But there is no substitute for powerful role models. "I know many strong women," says De Beer. "Many come from humble backgrounds. What makes them outstanding leaders is their mental agility, their emotional intelligence and their ability to motivate and inspire others."

"A woman who is in the public eye and who seems to possess all of the above and who has made significant difference in business is Maria Ramos."

As one of the most recognisable leaders in South Africa today, it is fitting that Transnet boss Ramos features in US business magazine *Fortune's* ranking of the world's most powerful women in business. At 14th on the 2007 list, Ramos continues to show women that world-class leadership is not only the preserve of men. **D**