

Women still lag in filling top positions

Their qualities bring an extra dimension to business world, writes Erica Webster

DESPITE employment equity legislation, female representation at senior level remains too low, says Landelahni CE Sandra Burmeister.

"A 2005 survey showed that 11%, or about 300 directorships out of almost 3 000 total directorships in SA, are held by women."

The figures are even lower for traditionally male-dominated industries. Landelahni recently conducted a survey on the construction industry in SA, which indicated female representation of 5% at board level and 5% at senior-management level.

"We did a mining survey in 2006 and the statistics were very similar. The nature of industries like these could be the reason, but I question the validity of this argument at board level."

"There are a host of positions — from human resources to corporate services, finance and investor relations — that do not require special expertise and there is no reason why these shouldn't be held by women."

But progress is being made, Burmeister says.

"We're doing better than most countries, a product of legislation and businesses following government's lead. While the appointment of women to management positions may be politically correct, it's not legislated elsewhere in the world."

She says a possible contributor to the low figures is that many women in senior positions are leaving the corporate environment for opportunities such as empowerment deals and women's consortiums.

"These are pull rather than push factors. There are signs of women shifting the power balance as a growing number demonstrate the capacity to buy into businesses at shareholder level."

Robyn Imray, principal at Heidrick & Struggles, says an enormous amount of research has been done over the past few decades to establish whether women have different leadership styles from men.

"There are several schools of thought— those that argue that women and men do have different leadership styles and those that see gender as a red herring and that feeling, attitude, context and experience determine leadership style."

"Others acknowledge there are differences between women and men but believe these differences are so minute as to be irrelevant."

"Research shows that many women managers are inclined to a leadership style in which managers serve as role models and coaches."

"This style is more inclusive, more individually orientated and revolves around communication and positive working relationships. It encourages creative solutions, sensitivity and values-based decision-making. Recent research has shown that this approach may be best suited to the complex, borderless, innovative, shifting and dynamic global economies in which business operates today."

She cautions against the belief that women and men have an innate, predetermined management style.



Bongi Mthembu ... women are often asked to handle functions like corporate social investment and human resources.

"Both men and women would benefit from examining their current leadership styles to determine their dominant approach. It would then be valuable to consider objectively the advantages and disadvantages of this style in their current environment and how to incorporate elements of other styles to make them more effective leaders."

Bongi Mthembu, managing member of beyondyourvision, says that women should embrace the qualities that make them different from men.

"Africa is still stuck in the mindset that women are submissive when, in fact, we're nurturing and vulnerable. That vulnerability enables us to be more sensitive."

She says women's high levels of emotional intelligence enable them to connect at a different level.

"This is why women are often asked to handle functions like corporate social investment and human resources."

Dawn Jones, MD of Imperial Car Rental says, regardless of one's gender, occupying a leadership position in any business is not easy and women should use their strengths to their best advantage.

"Women have wonderful qualities and must use them, not lose them, to be effective in business. Don't lose your femininity; feel comfortable in your own skin. It is possible to be assertive without being aggressive, but unfortunately some people confuse the two."

Mthembu says everyone, regardless of their gender, has a responsibility and a role to play, whether in business, leadership or a member of a community.

