

Facing the challenges of doing business in a predominately male environment

*Attitudes towards women who hold positions of authority in business have significantly improved since the advent of democracy in 1994. And there have been notable increases in the number of women – black and white – appointed to key executive positions, many in newly-established companies. Traders spoke to **SANDRA BURMEISTER**, Chief Executive of the Landelahni Recruitment Group, about these and other trends in the specialised recruitment and executive coaching arenas ...*



Sandra Burmeister

DESPITE BLACK ECONOMIC empowerment gender equity requirements and the visible increase in the number of women executives in a number of sectors, employment equity figures from the Department of Labour (based on annual training reports submitted by organisations) have suggested that the numbers of women in executive positions may actually have been declining.

Burmeister believes that this reduction in the number of women at executive level – as reflected in employment equity statistics – may well be due to the fact that many women previously holding corporate executive positions, have since moved on into their own businesses, or as partners in newly established ventures.

A number of these high-profile women executives, says Burmeister, have moved into the likes of black empowerment investment companies, partnering with multi-national corporations. In some instances, women-only empowerment groups have been involved in some substantial deals in the marketplace – a trend that has been gaining ground over the past 18 months to two years, she adds.

Landelahni is the first black- and women-owned executive search company to be established in South Africa, opening for business in 1997. Today, the group consists of a number of companies offering specialised, but synergistic, recruitment services across all levels of employment in both the public and private sectors.

One of these, Landelahni Business Leaders, is the Africa representative of the Amrop Hever Group, the world's largest executive search group. Landelahni places executives in a range of sub-Saharan Africa countries, often on a project basis.

Some industries – the mining sector, sections of

the financial services industry and technically orientated business organisations among them – still tend to be predominantly male.

The most notable shift, Burmeister believes, has been in the number of women coming on to company boards. Since Landelahni introduced its board recruitment process in 2001, the company has seen significant shifts in the number of women appointed to executive positions in mining and parastatals.

“Women in general still face domestic pressures and are responsible for bringing up children, but the platform has evened out and today women have a much greater degree of choice as to the route they want to take,” Burmeister points out.

Burmeister originally set up in business with a partner in 1994. “Part of what I was doing was to help bring back South Africans who had been living abroad, back into South Africa – and so the issue of black empowerment was something we experienced very early on because we were working within the new regulatory framework.”

At the time, Burmeister recalls, there were no black-owned executive search businesses in South Africa. “So launching Landelahni as we did in early 1997 seemed entirely appropriate. But we were way ahead of the market and certainly ahead of our time.

“We launched at a time when it was still a double-edged sword to be both black- and women-owned because there was all the suspicion around whether we would be capable of doing a proper job.

“I do not believe that this is a racial issue per se – but very much one of gender. The challenge for women in senior positions is that the business environment is still predominantly male. I would

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hope that we get to the point where both race and gender become irrelevant and the best person is chosen for the job on merit. But the truth is that there is still a long way to go in this regard."

Burmeister contends that recruitment by its very nature is a discriminatory process – selecting people to do a job at the expense of others. "So what we've worked very hard to do at Landaladni is to try to level the playing fields.

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Quota systems, official or unofficial, used in appointing pre-determined numbers of blacks/women (or both) in organisations are another double-edged sword, Burmeister believes. And she can relate to that at a personal level.

"If you don't have a quota system in place, often people will not be given the opportunity to come through. We were not supported by white business or the private sector when we set up as the first black-owned executive search firm.

"The people who supported us were primarily brand new black executives in their own right, driving specific transformation programmes. The same applied when it became apparent that we were the only women-owned executive search firm – we had female government ministers and executives supporting us, for example.

"But the truth is that we would not have grown at the rate we have done if we were not delivering. You can only use the quota system to open the door – but at the end of the day, the individual still has to



deliver the job outputs. So if you use the quota system to accelerate both gender and race objectives, you are bound to have people who are going to succeed – but you will also have people who will fail.”

The difficulty with a system based on numbers alone, Burmeister adds, is that employers may take on women employees – for instance – simply for the sake of meeting the required numbers, rather than seeking to use the skills and abilities that women are able to bring to the job ... “and dare I say it, women often bring unique attributes such as intuition into that kind of working environment”.

Landalahni also has a competency-based assessment company within its stable. The assessment centres were designed during the last decade, when the company undertook research in a number of countries, interviewing several hundred successful leaders in a range of different environments, both in the private and public sectors.

Essentially, the aim was to find the common successful competency for success and then to build an assessment to measure this.

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“What was fascinating,” says Burmeister, “is that no matter in what country we did the research, the 11 top core competencies were the same.” But what differed, she adds, was the priority accorded these competencies. So that in developing countries, where the growth in new business environments was manifesting itself at a much faster rate, flexibility and the ability to think strategically and conceptually gained a higher ranking than would possibly have been the case in Europe.

“We were re-doing this research recently and that differential has now gone completely. Flexibility and the ability to think on your feet and think conceptually is the number one leadership competency across the board. And there is no gender or cultural bias to it – and certainly no economic or country bias.

“This is only one of the 11 competencies that

we ourselves would look for. But it is interesting that it has suddenly taken on a new significance, which previously may only have been evident in developing economies.”

At a competence level, Burmeister explains, Landalahni would be looking for executives with strong business acumen, who are able to run successful organisations and manage people – and who are able to plan, organise and think strategically.

“People talk about leadership being born – but in fact it is made.

The work environment is conducive to growing people. We did a study several years ago on the impact that a first boss can have on the way people work – and on their style.

“The results suggest that if someone spends time coaching and mentoring you, you tend to move on to a management role. If someone relegates you to a corner of the office and merely passes work down the line to you, you tend never to develop those skills. I believe that the same applies to leadership.”

Burmeister adds: “There has been much emphasis placed in recent years on ‘emotional intelligence’. But the bottom line is that you cannot be in a management or leadership role unless you can get other people to do things for you. And how you achieve that is a matter of style and training. This is where the role of coaching and mentoring comes in.”

Landalahni, for its part, partners with a coaching and mentoring specialist, in what it insists is a very specialised field.

“We are finding that we are placing many more first-time leaders into these types of roles,” Burmeister says, “whether they be first-time executives, chief executives or board members.

“The world has changed significantly in that the executive search cycle to hire a CEO used to take six months, from briefing to appointment – now the cycle is eight to 12 weeks

“Executives, in the past would have had six months, possibly a year, to settle in and to start making an impact in an organisation. Today, executives are expected to sign a performance agreement, which lays out their key deliverables for the first year – and to sign this within the first three months of their appointment. This is standard in the marketplace. And it means they have to commit to a whole range of outputs, having spent just three months with a company.”

So executive coaching, Burmeister explains, is undertaken very much in the manner of a sounding board – asking questions to help executives assimilate and come to terms with their new business environment – while mentoring deals more with practical issues that may come up on a daily basis. ▀