

# Helping women climb the corporate ladder

They have potential to be great managers, given good training

## WORKPLACE STAFF

**A**LTHOUGH more women are moving into higher-level positions, their rate of advancement is slow, and halfway up the corporate ladder they tend to fall behind their male colleagues, says Sandra Burmeister, CEO of the Landelahni Recruitment Group. She believes it's time for organisations and women themselves to reverse the trend.

Women have made strides in practically all careers. They include Christine Lagarde, the first female head of the International Monetary Fund and Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, the newly head of the AU Commission.

SA has produced a myriad influential businesswomen, with Absa CEO Maria Ramos and ArcelorMittal SA chief executive Nonkululeko Nyembezi-Heita making the Forbes list of the world's 100 most powerful women.



Sandra Burmeister

However, the Grant Thornton International Business Report shows that globally only 21 percent of women are in senior management. SA does better at 28 percent, but only 8 percent of local companies have woman CEOs.

"The slow progress of women as leaders tends to be based on entrenched corporate practices and outdated gender stereotypes," says Burmeister.

"As a result, men are frequently promoted on potential, while

women are promoted on performance and hence advance more slowly. This can deprive the organisation of leadership talent, at a time when it is in short supply."

Research shows that diversity of leadership generates better performance and increased profits.

Women can bring a broader set of ideas, leading to more innovative workplaces and better decision-making.

"Women tend to practise an inclusive style of leadership and value compassion and support," says Burmeister. "This has a positive impact on staff performance and achievements.

"In an economic crisis, women tend to come to the fore. They are less likely than their male counterparts to take high risks. Generally less competitive, women may be less likely to show knee-jerk reactions in high-pressure situations."

Globally, organisations ranging from the World Bank to the World Economic Forum are taking up the cause of gender equality.

"There is also a great deal that organisations and women themselves can do to achieve equality in the workplace," says Burmeister.

"Companies can embark on

accelerated career programmes to assist women to make transitions into higher-level positions.

"Transition training and formal coaching are critical, yet organisations tend to provide less rather than more support as women move up the leadership ladder. Providing opportunities for women, combined with formalised succession planning at all levels of the organisation can provide dividends.

"The provision of childcare is an important element, as are flexible working hours, at this stage provided by only 39 percent of large corporates in South Africa."

But it's not solely up to the employer. Burmeister believes that women themselves are frequently their own worst enemies.

"Women can do a great deal to push back outdated policies and practices and make the most of opportunities in the workplace," she says. "Women should be more open about their career aspirations and be proactive in advancing their careers. They need to put themselves forward, learn to negotiate for themselves and volunteer their opinions. They should raise their hands for new assignments and initiatives and not be afraid to get

their hands dirty.

"It's important for women to get better at building relationships. Connecting with influential people who can provide strategic advice is important in advancing your career. Build networks at the office as well as in your personal life.

"But keep your work and private life separate – at work and on the internet. Never post anything on your social network pages that you wouldn't want colleagues to see.

"A crucial element is finding a sponsor several levels above you who can act as a mentor, introduce you to the leadership network, recommend you for projects or promotions you may not otherwise have access to, so you can advance up the corporate ladder.

"The next step is to be confident in projecting your authority rather than wanting to be seen as 'nice'. Be prepared to take reasonable risks and don't miss opportunities through fear of making mistakes.

"It's important to understand the politics of the organisation and your place in it."

"Be resilient and tenacious. Setbacks are inevitable – but you've got to be steadfast in your quest if you want to reach the top."