

Women executives at natural advantage

■ Unprecedented, difficult economic environment a challenge for everyone



Adriaan Groenewald

IT IS Women's Month and therefore appropriate to share leadership gems from some women leaders we have met over the years. There is no doubt in my mind that women leaders possess – mostly naturally – the leadership attributes society needs more than ever before in its history.

I recently asked a friend which leaders she would like to meet, should the opportunity present itself. Two of the leaders she named were women leaders, politicians. I mentioned that I had met these two individuals and she asked what they were like.

My response: "Both are seasoned politicians, sharp with fairly genuine motives. Women just seem more 'clean' and authentic than male politicians." She of course agreed and added: "You don't have to convince me. I always said if women ruled the world there would be no wars."

Though there are exceptions, in essence I agree, and not only because it is Women's Month.

We have spent much time analysing leaders from all walks of life on our Leadership Platform. While it is risky to generalise, women seem to have a greater predisposition than men to be sensitive to the needs of others, and to foster nurturing environments because of their socialisation. Not that men can't be that way too, but women are generally more aware of the communal world around them, and the importance of understanding and valuing people's emotions.

Ironically, while women have paid the price for their "caring responsibilities", which often means they have less time for networking out of office hours – and thus less time for the everyday bonding activities that are so much a part of the "old boys' network" – it seems that the ability to nurture, to foster co-operation, and to integrate the aspirations of others may in many ways be placing women in a position of natural advantage when it comes to everyday

leadership in the 21st century.

Organisations today have changed; the days of treating employees disrespectfully or unfairly and expecting them to stay are disappearing fast. Collaboration is fundamental to making things work, with the ultimate aim of bringing about profitable movement, which does at times necessitate tough calls and action, especially during difficult times.

As a result, leaders need to acquire the skill of balancing two critical fundamentals: understand what motivates people and gives meaning to their work and ultimately their lives; and understand the needs of the organisation, which includes all-round pressure to move it profitably (successfully).

Unlike the first fundamental that seems to come fairly naturally to most women leaders, the latter can be more challenging as many variables have a direct impact on being able to achieve this: numerous organisational dynamics; socio-political and economic factors; being appointed from the outside (fairly common phenomena as organisations compete to secure top women leaders); societal and personal prejudices and expectations; and much more.

Some commentators question the ability of female chief executives to achieve the second fundamental and list as examples Cynthia Carroll (Anglo American), Maria Ramos (Absa) and Nonkululeko Nyembezi-Heita (ArcelorMittal South Africa). But perhaps referring to these individuals as examples of struggling leaders could be viewed as premature, considering the persistent and even unprecedented difficult global conditions all leaders currently face, resulting in many male leaders also struggling. We need much more time and objective analysis to make credible judgements.

The big question is whether or not the intense and increasing involvement of women in the "tough" corporate and political environment will enhance or erode these natural qualities that at present seem to give them a leadership advantage, as far as the first fundamental is concerned, especially in extraordinary times amid increasing pressure to perform according to shareholder and market expectations. Time and history will tell.

Adriaan Groenewald, a lead contributor to the BR Leadership Platform, is a leadership commentator, managing director and co-founder of Leadership Platform (www.leadershipplatform.com).

■ The following are some comments and extracts from conversations with women leaders:



Reserve Bank governor Gill Marcus

PHOTO: SIMPHWE MBOKAZI



Dawn Nathan-Jones, Europcar South Africa's chief executive



Businesswoman Wendy Luhabe



Kutana Investments chief Thoko Mokgosi-Mwantembe



Monhla Hlahla, chairwoman of the IDC



Olympic swimmer Natalie du Toit

PHOTO: ANTOINE DE RAS

Gill Marcus, governor of the SA Reserve Bank

"When you are exercising your role or responsibility you have to take more into account." This "more" to Marcus is "the greater good". So, as a leader it is not only about what is right for you but what is right for the greater good. Marcus explains further: "It (the role) can't be against your values, but it's not about yourself and when you are exercising judgement it is about the greater good."

According to Marcus this mindset lifts the leader to another level where, "it is not about how I feel today; this is secondary. I could be feeling totally lousy today but if this is what I have to do then this is what must be done."

It seems that it is therefore about understanding yourself, the greater good and then the "office" or position that is thrust upon you. She says: "The question is to draw the distinction between what is the authority of the office and what is your personal authority, because [the] office has huge authority."

Marcus believes the leader's personal

conduct can add to the office or detract from it, and "your best combination is when you can combine your personal leadership and authority with the authority of the office, because then you can use that combination to effectively achieve what needs to be done".

Dawn Nathan-Jones, chief executive of Europcar South Africa

"Everybody has a hierarchy of values, which are unique to them or what makes them tick. It is important to take the time to learn what those values are and communicate within those values because people need to feel they are not just working for a pay cheque. People's jobs need to be aligned to their value system so they actually feel that they are working for the betterment of themselves and not just for the company."

Wendy Luhabe, businesswoman

"I am suggesting to leaders out there that this is not a time to abdicate responsibility to (the) government. We ourselves must exercise responsible

leadership in our respective spheres of influence. We must become architects of strategies and policies to manage risks, issues and opportunities. We must build human capacities to generate opportunities and to manage problems."

Thoko Mokgosi-Mwantembe, chief executive of Kutana Investments

"Focus on winning the war, but understand that you lose some battles in the process. But, ensure that those battles you lose are not the strategic ones. It is okay to allow yourself to lose here and there. Don't get hung up on winning everything. Focus on ensuring that you win that war. Whatever your objective is, stay focused on that."

Monhla Hlahla, chairwoman of the Industrial Development Corporation

During her ten years as managing director of Airports Company South Africa, a very challenging state-owned enterprise, Hlahla learned some valuable principles that can assist every leader to lead more effectively:

■ Keep focusing on the core purpose of the organisation and its goal. When the difficult times arrive and counsel comes from all angles, one can listen sincerely and then make a decision that is good for the organisation and its purpose.

■ The ability and humility to hear all views.

■ Decisiveness is critical. Sometimes a situation needs someone to just make a call rather than someone to necessarily make the right call. What becomes more important then is one's ability to manage unintended consequences.

■ Guts or courage.

Natalie du Toit, swimmer and Olympic award winner

What drives Du Toit is more than swimming. Was the loss of a leg at the age of 17 really a setback? Ironically, I don't think so. It was an experience that put her on a more visible platform from which to inspire the entire world. She won the Open Water Award for bravery during the 2008 Olympic Games, even though she came 16th in her event.