

Confidence and support networks are the keys to empowerment

Women's empowerment, career development and mentorship programmes a compelling narrative for companies. But while formalised programmes are important, South African women hold some of the keys to helping both themselves and other women unlock success.



Sibonile Dube

Sibonile Dube, head of communications & public affairs at Novartis South Africa and a mentor at Phakama Women's Academy says that Bain & Company [Last Accessed 6/8/2018 research](#) into how and why the career paths of South African women and men differ, found that in 2017, 31% of South African companies had no female representation in senior leadership roles.

"Considering that recent [research](#) by MCSI concluded gender diversity on the board has significant benefits for both productivity and profits, South African enterprises need to become more proactive about supporting women's empowerment in the workplace," says Dube.

She outlines four key factors that hold women back from corporate and entrepreneurial success, and how these challenges can be overcome:

1. Lack of confidence

A key factor holding women back from achieving their true potential in the workplace – and as entrepreneurs – is fear and a lack of confidence. "As women, we often undersell ourselves – we underestimate our potential, our power and the amount of influence that we have. In contrast, men are typically quite confident in themselves and their capabilities," says Dube.

The Bain & Company survey of over 1,000 women found an apparent loss of confidence amongst women in junior- and middle-management positions that they could rise to the top. At this level, some respondents noted political imbalances that were difficult to navigate; while their male colleagues had access to a sponsor or mentor (normally of the same sex and colour) to help navigate these issues.

Dube believes women need to become more proactive about empowering themselves, equipping themselves with a broad range of skills, and actively working on building their self-awareness and self-esteem. "Building skills goes beyond developing academic or technical expertise – we need to work on our relationship skills and communication skills, because human relations are crucial for success in a setting where you are looking for influence and significance.

"Dealing with fear and lack of confidence is important, because this enables us to have relevance and contribute more meaningfully to in the workplace and in business," says Dube.

2. Lack of support networks

More than women, men generally back one another be it in corporate or in business deals and this has supported their career success a lot, says Dube. "Having a network is important – it is through these networks that opportunities are shared and support is gained. Having a strong network of people that back your career becomes an effective reference point especially in times of challenges. And through these networks, people are also able to find mentors." She believes mentorship is a crucial component of career success, offering both mentor and mentee opportunities to learn and grow. "We need more mentorship. With mentorship, training and coaching, women can actually pull out some of the strengths they possess which they may not be aware of. One is challenged and pushed to aim higher," says Dube.

Bain & Company research found that sponsorship of individuals, especially at the mid-management level, ensures that contributions and performance are recognised and attributable to the individual. Often women, particularly in middle management, feel marginalised, ignored or simply worn down by trying to get their efforts recognised.

Dube, who mentors a number of women, says mentorship can be formalised through a corporate career development programme, but can also extend to informal and virtual mentor-mentee relationships. "You can be guided by simply reading the books, reading articles and watching videos and talks of inspirational leaders anywhere in the world on social media."

Good mentorship can be a mutually beneficial in the exchange of ideas and meeting of minds. "In an effective mentor-mentee relationship, reverse mentorship takes place. In an era where we now have four generations in the workplace, the digital and tech savvy younger generation have a lot to offer to the rest," says Dube.

3. Poor health and wellbeing

In order to cope and remain competitive in the workplace, women have to ensure they take care of their health and maintain some resilience especially when pressure mounts. Recently, there have been a lot of conversations about mental health in South Africa. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), gender is a critical determinant of mental health and mental illness. Gender determines the difference in power and control that men and women have over the socioeconomic factors of their mental health and their exposure to specific mental health risks.

"Women are under immense pressure to perform in various spheres of their lives. Juggling a career, motherhood and marriage or a relationship can be emotionally and physically taxing to the extent of affecting one's health, especially

mental health. It is therefore imperative that women take good care of their health and wellbeing amid the demands of a competitive and fast paced lifestyle presented by the demands of modern society,” says Dube.

Depression is not only the most prevalent women's mental health problem but may be more persistent in women than it is in men. There is more research needed to determine the reasons for this and what can be done to address it.

4. Unlocking empowerment

Dube says women should feel encouraged to be proactive about their own career development, and about helping other women to grow – both personally and professionally.

“As women we should be firm believers in one another. We hold the keys to opening doors for other women. By creating a support structure for one another, we can create phenomenal opportunities to make a difference for fellow women, with the aim of creating leaders and catalysing empowerment that has a ripple effect, benefiting all of society and the economy as a whole. Studies have revealed that women reinvest up to 90% of their income into their families compared to men who reinvest 30-40%. This has far reaching socio-economic gains for any society,” concludes Dube.

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