

MANAGEMENT

Gender roles melding inside firms

There are more women in upper management roles and they are not afraid to encourage other women.

By JULIE KYLE
Editor

Although women are not well represented in upper management roles at A/E/P and environmental consulting firms, they are hiring, mentoring, supporting, and promoting other women to relevant roles. In doing so, they are proving that old stereotypes no longer apply, such as that women are threatened by other women.

Bioengineering Group (Salem, MA), a 70-person environmental planning and restoration firm recognized by Inc. and Fortune magazines, and has been named to **THE ZWEIG LETTER** Hot Firm List two years in a row, is led by a woman: Wendi Goldsmith, who is president and CEO. The firm's success could arguably be linked to progressive strategies, which include the appointment of several women to management roles. Goldsmith's research supports her conclusion that firms with a diverse BOD and management team have better gross profitability and resilience than firms with more homogeneous leadership. Further, firms with diversity in the management structure lead to more engaged, optimistic, career-pursuing employees.

"It's clear, a BOD is a highly symbolic component in the direction of the company, and it says quite a lot about the direction of the firm," Goldsmith says. "Firms with a large amount of diversity – not only in gender, but also people from different ethnic backgrounds, with different interpersonal styles; this leads to improved decision-making. Not only do I think it makes a difference, but everything I've learned from my absorption of that information is entirely consistent with what I know as a professional."

Goldsmith's early work experiences for hugely male-dominated companies were "remarkably stifling and discouraging." In starting her company, she has taken proactive steps to fill the



Wendi Goldsmith,
President and
CEO,
Bioengineering
Group

board of directors with people from diverse backgrounds. Bioengineering Group's BOD is majority women, and the management teams are majority women, "And not because of really trying," Goldsmith says.

WOMEN HIRING

WOMEN. All things being equal, Goldsmith would opt for the female hire. "And for several reasons, including one being a very sad truth, in that when I hire and promote women, they are more loyal and less likely to be hired away to the competition, because they believe and perceive they are being recognized as individuals."

Debra Lupton, CEO at **TLC Engineering for Architecture** (Orlando, FL), a 286-person firm, says, "When we look for senior management candidates for placement at TLC, women that have the credentials for the position get equal consideration. Any candidate has to have the right skills and cultural fit, sharing the same values that the firm espouses."

Although the female candidate pool is a relatively small percentage of the total available pool of senior licensed professionals on the technical side, Lupton says female leadership is a part of the firm's history. "We have had woman principals in charge of an office (profit center), in project management, in design, and in our corporate services group, leading HR and marketing," she says. "I have had the privilege of being a principal and corporate leader of my firm for over 18 years, first as director of marketing, then as CEO, and now as chairman and CEO."

The leadership of TLC gave Lupton the chance to excel, with the benefit of mentorship from numerous very talented colleagues. "Understanding the value of that, it is my goal to pass it for-

ward and assist other up and coming professionals," she says.

Firms are also dispelling stereotypes.

"Our women leaders absolutely will hire other women in the profession for management roles," says Fred Kramer, president of **ADD Inc.** (Cambridge, MA), a 160-person architecture and engineering firm. "There was a time not so long ago where there was competition and a woman leader was considered a threat to other woman leaders. That seems to be subsiding in our business, at least where several of the top-line principals in the company are women. More than 50 percent of my senior associate principals are women."

Lupton doesn't think women leaders she knows in the profession feel threatened by other women. "It may be because they are just that good, and aren't threatened by others, male or female," she says.

Jo Staffelbach Heinz, president and CEO of **STAFFELBACH** (Dallas, TX), a 75-person interior design firm, feels women in management roles hire the best qualified individuals to fill management roles.

"I believe women are looking for individuals that manage with their head and their heart and are looking for that critical balance to bring top management skills to their firm," she says. "I hope we are past the days of women hiring women and men hiring men; the talent pool allows us options to simply hire the best qualified individual."

Kevin Phillips, CEO of **FPM Group, Ltd.** (Ronkonkoma, NY), an 80-person environmental consulting firm, agrees.

"I can only speak for my own firm and my experience with other firms," he says. "I don't think there is any gender bias when it comes to women hiring women."

"Subliminal gender issues will always exist at the personal level. Hopefully upper management reviews the mix of people being hired and sets a course for expertise, not gender bias," Phillips says. ▀▀

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