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DIVERSITY & INCLUSION MAKING PROGRESS BUT NOT YET AT FULL POTENTIAL IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

by Patricia (Pat) Taylor-Woodyard-SVP, Chief Strategy & Development Officer. Pat served on a special panel on Diversity & Inclusion at the Environmental Industry Summit in San Diego in March 2019. Pat Taylor-Woodyard has 42 years' experience in the environmental consulting industry across 6 firms joining Weston Solutions 2½ years ago. Her overall career has been both national and global focused with a remediation and compliance technical background. Her career grew from technical execution to project/program management; subject matter expert to technology leadership; Department Manager to Global Operations Director; and from Client Service Manager to Business Development & Strategy Director.

Weston Solutions is a mid-size environmental and infrastructure services company with a 60+ year history. The company has over 1,000 employees across 25 strategically located offices nationwide. 2018 Gross Revenue was \$424M of which environmental services represented \$205M. They offer a wide range of diverse environmental services that include remediation, compliance, siting-licensing-permitting, surface water-storm water, water-wastewater, information management, munitions response, and rapid-emergency response. They also provide infrastructure services including fueling systems repair and upgrade, disaster infrastructure, facility repair and upgrade, sewer/pipeline/lift station engineering, storm-water control engineering, and dams/levy repair. They have a diverse client base serving the federal government such as the US DoD, US EPA, USPS, and other federal agencies; state and local government; and industrial, power and commercial clients. As a disaster response contractor across multiple contracts and clients, they had over 40% increase in business in 2018 based on the multiple environmental response needs of their clients and a 4.5% growth on their core non-response services.

EBJ: There has been an increase in the number of women that are now part of the board of directors in large US companies. Is this also a trend within the environmental industry? Have these trends remained only in the boards or do you see increasing diversity in senior executive roles as well?

Taylor-Woodyard: The trend of having women on boards has been slowly increasing over time in the environmental industry as board positions become available and the value that women bring to the board becomes an imperative. As a women senior executive within Weston Solutions myself, the trends of women at the executive level of environmental firms continues to increase. These shifts are being driven by a combination of factors depending on the company such as the workforce de-

mand for diversity at the senior levels of their companies; the recognition that clients often expect to see a diverse leadership in their suppliers; an increased recognition that diversity brings real value for the company in these positions; and an increased acceptance and interest for diversity and the value it brings among the leadership making the selection decisions. As a mid-size firm, Weston Solutions is comprised of 30% women in senior management.

EBJ: What are the main gender challenges that you've faced in your career?

Taylor-Woodyard: The main gender challenges that I faced over my career varied over time more aligned to the culture of the specific environmental firm I worked in and where society as a whole was on acceptance of women technical professionals

in the workforce and in leadership/management positions.

Early in my career, gender bias was blatant and ranged from men rubbing women's shoulders while they were working, sexual innuendo, disparaging remarks, disregard/disrespect, to outright sexual advances. In a male dominated field at that time, it was best to either ignore/dismiss, let the comments and advances not bother me, make sure I was not in a place to make myself vulnerable, or resign and try another firm that was more accepting of women technical professionals.

That was the late 70's /early 80's and improved in the mid-80's and beyond as our industrial and society in general began accepting women technical professionals in the workforce and in leadership.

The challenges changed for me in the mid-80 as I moved into leadership positions. My first two leadership positions had "Assistant" in front of my title for the same job and responsibilities that all my male counterparts had without the word assistant in front of their title.

It took a couple of years of performance and results to get that "assistant" off the title. With mainly men in the workforce and leadership at the time; learning to work with professional technical women side by side varied in acceptance based on the male's background and past experiences with women in their life and their exposure to women with varying social styles.

Gender bias was not as blatant in the 80's and 90's. The gender bias included bias against women like myself that had leadership styles more like their male counterparts than how they perceived a woman should communicate and behave.

Gender bias was also more about how I and my peers were treated, included, and opinions acknowledged and accepted. A frequent example of that time period was sitting in management meetings where I injected ideas and solutions and at times

the leader would outright ignore my comments and after 2-3 tries injecting the same comment, a male peer would state the same comment and the idea/solution would then take hold. I learned it was more important to get my comments/ideas considered than who got credit.

There were times with a few male leaders that being treated with respect was the issue. I learned to handle that by voicing my concerns and making them transparent to the individual(s) and others in authority. As I moved up the career ladder into higher and varied management positions, the gender bias again changed becoming even more subtle and no longer being aimed toward me but rather seeing it play out as I had a seat at the decision-making table. I took the courageous leadership path and continuously injected women into consideration for promotions and recognition side by side with their male peers.

Here are some examples of what subtle gender bias looked like circa 2000+.

- Qualified and/or capable women eliminated from hiring early on in resume review stage so they were not brought forward for selection consideration.

- Women not always being brought up at the promotion candidate discussion table for consideration equivalent to their male peers.

- When women's names were brought up for promotion consideration, there

were times where a male leader would raise a question or concern about the woman that would cause the group to move to the next candidate and dismiss the woman from further consideration without discussion or verification that the issue was relevant or even real. In my many years at that table—there was never a male candidate questioned—it was odd that it was always the woman.

- When women's names were brought forward for leadership advancement consideration, at times a male leader would raise their parental status and whether they can handle the additional responsibilities and expectations with children at home. To me, that should have never been discussed or considered as it is not for the male counterparts. Women like men need to make their own choices and not be eliminated before the opportunity is brought forward to them.

As a woman leader in this field, being at the decision-making table allowed me to counter gender bias in real time so that other women professionals were equally considered for advancement and were given the recognition they deserved.

**EBJ: How are things different today?
How have issues evolved in your career?**

Taylor-Woodyard: This male-dominated environmental industry has made significant strides over my career to today where the female population overall has increased significantly and women are mov-

ing up into leadership and management positions, but still not at its full potential with the talent that already exists... plus new entrants. More inclusion is evident with more male leaders promoting women than ever before but more is needed.

Women themselves are coming into the workforce with more confidence in their capabilities and women in the workforce are more setting the example for others to follow in leadership. There is more recognition by our industry that women professionals bring diversity of thought, perspective, and insights and often solid communication capabilities that bring value-add to decision-making at every level.

What helped the evolution of women in leadership and management careers from the bottom up was the male and female workforce together bringing forward their expectation for diverse leadership at all levels.

EBJ: What programs are being implemented within your company to promote diversity in the workplace?

Taylor-Woodyard: We do not have, nor have we needed, a formal training program to promote diversity within the firm as acceptance of diversity is in the fabric of who we are and how we operate. We do educate managers on legal issues during the hiring process and through bi-annual training. The culture of Weston Solutions includes being intentionally inclusive such as being very intentional to put diverse groups of people into front line leadership.

We have and continue to create programs and leadership positions that provide opportunities for more of our diverse workforce to grow in their careers from a Program/Project Manager In-Training Program and Client Account Manager In-Training Program; Technical Practice Leader positions; and a Developing Leader Council that reports to the CEO.

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We are always open to new ideas brought forward by our diverse workforce and diverse leadership such as we instituted paid paternal leave brought forward by one of our women professionals.

EBJ: Having a diverse workforce can bring benefits, but it comes with the challenges of promoting a culture of acceptance and respect. How does Weston Solutions deal with this?

Taylor-Woodyard: We don't see promoting a culture of acceptance and respect as a challenge as it is core to who we are as a company with a proud 60+ year history of inclusion and diversity. Among Weston Solutions core values is "teamwork" that includes our expectation that we assemble the right people for the job, leveraging individual strengths and diversity that results in greater productivity and enhanced results.

We have zero tolerance when employees do not exhibit acceptance and respect. We also train everyone each year on key points of harassment through our ethics training. We also have an ombudsperson hotline where employees can anonymously register concerns about any ethical/moral issue that concerns them. In addition, all managers are trained bi-annually on how

to identify and intervene when they observe (or are made aware of) behavior that displays disrespect. When interviewing, our interviewers are looking for fit which includes the candidate's ability to embrace diversity in all its forms.

EBJ: What is the greatest value that a diverse workforce brings to the company?

Taylor-Woodyard: A diverse workforce's greatest value is diversity of thought from ideas, insights, perspectives, and instincts beyond just their technical acumen that brings with it better overall solutions, and more holistic and well-rounded decisions than might exist without their presence and leadership. In addition, women are known to have strong communication and people nurturing skills that is a real asset in our field where managing people, effectively communicating with clients, and bringing teams together is often key to business success and workforce retention.

EBJ: What are the diversity challenges that are unique to our industry?

Taylor-Woodyard: There are two key challenges I see that is unique to our type of industry: 1) recognizing the need and/or value in aligning the diversity of our tal-

ent to that of our client's organizations at all levels, and 2) the increased competing forces to attract talent between our industry, our clients and the marketplace overall.

While our client leadership has shifted to more women, minorities, and younger professionals in leadership and decision-making positions, the environmental industry has tended to lag behind our clients in recognizing that these same type of professionals are leadership ready equal to our client counterparts. For women, this has improved over time but the percentages of women in leadership positions often still does not align to our counterparts in our client's organizations.

Another challenge is the competing demands of the market for STEM degreed professionals and women and minorities in particular. Often these diverse professionals, depending on degree, can have multiple career path opportunities when they get out of school including higher margin businesses that can offer higher compensation packages as a result. We welcome and embrace diversity in our workforce and see it as a real competitive advantage. ▣