

Tilting the gender balance – women at the helm in Engen

The oil industry remains remarkably male-dominated, with comparatively few women coming through higher education with the required science and engineering skills.

Bucking the trend, leading fuel company Engen Petroleum channels considerable investment into female leadership development, making the task of profiling its women leaders positively easy.

Mpumi Nsibande – Plant Supervisor and Acting Depot Manager

Mpumi's presence and that of other black women in the oil industry is a triumph of our young democracy and holds much promise for the industry. Equal access to quality education has deepened the country's talent pool, improving competitiveness and the personal fortunes and dignity of women.

By no means the only woman in a responsible position in operations at Engen, Mpumi's role of plant supervisor at Engen's Johannesburg Distribution Centre involves overseeing manufacturing and distribution of bulk chemicals and lubricants. At the time of writing she had just been made acting depot manager, as the depot manager, Dieketseng Meletse, another female leader on the team was on maternity leave.

Mpumi leads through training, team engagement and honest feedback, and believes in results, balanced by setting realistic expectations. She takes a balanced view of risk too. "We take calculated risks and accept ownership of choices and outcomes."

She finds motivation in her team and the knowledge that one's interactions can have life-changing effects on others. "Influencing other managers and supervisors to realise the obligations that come with that can prove a challenge," she admits, "but it is vital to improving the safety culture of the distribution centre and it can be achieved through effective leadership. I see leadership as a process and not a position and therefore we all need to work together to make our workplace a safe place."

Mpumi likes to relax with her family, but says a woman's contribution goes further than the home. "Woman's Day reminds me that there were women who took a stand and that we have what it takes to influence change."

Jackie Marais – HSEQ Supervisor

Jackie joined Engen in 1989 and rose through the ranks to her current role, which involves overseeing compliance of the depot with health, safety, environmental and quality (HSEQ) standards and laws.

The company's extensive supply chain sees it manufacture, package, transport, store, transfer and dispense lubricants and chemicals, some of which are hazardous substances. It must therefore comply with a mass of regulations, laws and standards intended to protect staff, the community and the environment. Jackie's position is not only extremely sensitive but also central to the company's operations and public safety.

What got her to this key position? Jackie credits honesty, communication, commitment, a positive attitude and fairness. "Taking the easy way out is no way to succeed," she says.

For inspiration and motivation, she draws equally on a loving family and some tough obstacles. "I have realised through setbacks that I can never give up."

One example of things not always going according to plan is her teaching qualification. "I didn't foresee being in this industry, but there is a teaching component. Engen focuses heavily on mentorship in skills development, and places special emphasis on women, especially women of colour."

Jackie's biggest challenge, she says, lies in creating a safe working culture. "My department can't do it alone. We must inspire others to play their part. It's very difficult, but patience and persistence win out over time, even if it makes you unpopular."

To get her mind of the work's stresses, she finds peace in music and gardening.

Tersia van Eeden – Administration Supervisor

Tersia van Eeden, Jackie's counterpart in the administrative function of the depot, joined Engen the year before. Their long service record supports the view that oil companies are hungry for female talent and will provide a rewarding work experience for women of value.

Subscribing to classic job-defined concepts of leadership, she nonetheless believes life is about taking risks. "We never know what blessings await us until we take the first step. It doesn't always work out, but then you walk away learning something."

Like her colleague, she draws inspiration from family, and acknowledges the recognition and trust of management giving her a platform to excel, trying to pay it forward by being a trusted confidante for colleagues.

But it's not always easy. Forced to turn in a poor performance appraisal for a subordinate, she regained his trust only by explaining that it had not been malicious and was moreover necessary as a starting point for improvement. "Taking ownership of failure builds the foundation for success," she explains.

Asked about the lessons she has for other women coming up through the ranks, she comes up with the following gem: "Vision without action is a day dream, and action without vision is a nightmare."

"Also, never compromise on integrity, moral standards, trust and work commitment," she adds.

Tersia sees Women's Day as a way for them to celebrate their independence, respect their own worth and stand together against discrimination and abuse.

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