

Towards gender neutral supply chains

Women are their own worst enemy.

This is the view of Ken Titmuss, facilitator of the recent panel session on the role of women in Supply Chain Management at the 37th Annual SAPICS conference. The panel consisted of top female supply chain executives Kea Mpane, Onicca Mailula, Monika Wates, Joyce Lewis and Claire Bloom and provided significant insight into the issues facing women today.

“Women are their own worst enemy because they think they are inferior when they are simply not,” says Titmuss. “Unfortunately they face a difficult market and continue to receive lower wages than men. Attitudes have to change. We need to stop seeing gender and start looking at people in terms of their abilities, skills and experience.”

This view is shared by Joyce Lewis, President of the Los Angeles branch of APICS in the USA. APICS is the premier professional association for supply chain and operations management.

“There are two major challenges that women continue to face in supply chain management,” she says. “External factors created by the industry and internal barriers created by women themselves.”

Talentism not capitalism

According to Lewis the majority of the executive leadership roles that influence leadership style, selection and promotion are held by men and they often mistake confidence for competence. Both Lewis and Titmuss believe that women need to develop deeper reserves of self-confidence and recognise the value that they bring to any organisation.

“Women continue to lack awareness of their natural leadership abilities such as empathy, agility, adaptability and commitment and how best to use those skills to succeed in supply chain leadership roles,” says Lewis. “Their lack of confidence can be perceived as a lack of competence to a hiring executive.”

Titmuss adds: “Women should not feel less than men and some of them do. They feel that they need to do more whereas men just feel as if they can walk in and start working. Women have a lot to bring to the table and we desperately need them in this industry.”

Organisations should recognise talent rather than gender or colour and Titmuss believes that while many of the challenges around colour are being dealt with, the ones around gender remain largely untouched.

“It is the sign of a progressive industry that looks at people based on talent and not gender and currently SCM is not ticking this box,” says Titmuss.

“Women need to come to work knowing that they are not going to be treated differently and that their skills and experiences are enough.”

Transformation in the wings

On the outside it seems as if the gender issue remains unchanged. Women continue to feel as if they have to work harder, they still receive lower wages and they struggle to find jobs that allow them to gain valuable industry experience. The question that has to be asked is – has there been any level of transformation within this arena?

“One of the primary issues that has seen transformation is awareness of the problem itself,” says Lewis. “Although the lack of opportunity and equality for women in SCM has existed for many, many years, it was never at the forefront of discussions until recently. Research, conferences, books and social media are all creating awareness and stimulating discussion which has helped catapult the issue to a level where true change can occur.”

For women, the fight to gain prominence in a male-dominated SCM industry has just begun, but at least there is now a light being shone on the challenges and change has begun.

“The adjustment for organisations must come in the form of education and they should perform an analysis of their employment practices to see if hiring needs to be refined to ensure gender equality,” concludes Lewis.

“Stereotypes within the SCM field must be broken, especially in the area of emotional intelligence or the acceptable behaviours for men versus women in the corporate environment.”