

Diversity and representativity make us all better and stronger

By [Shawn Govender](#)

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It's a conversation that's on rinse-and-repeat annually: each year we celebrate Women's Month. Each year many people - far, far too many people - point out that the event rings hollow in the face of South Africa's shameful record of gender-based violence, of its poverty, inequality and unemployment that disproportionately affect women.



Shawn Govender, plant manager of the Ford Struandale Engine Plant | image supplied

Each year there are many who say that any celebration is inappropriate, even cynical and callous. Many of those voicing those concerns and objections have, sadly, first-hand experience of why they feel that to be so.

While it's certainly true that marking this month should go beyond platitudes and bouquets, goodie-bags and social media campaigns, there's a deeper, more powerful reason for continuing to do so.

But should I, as a man, and one who holds a senior position in business, not check my privilege and hold my tongue about the advancement of women? As a man, I speak from a position of some privilege and I try to use that privilege to highlight the barriers that women still face, as well as their achievements in overcoming those barriers.

I would humbly contend that my privilege brings great obligation, a moral imperative to ensure the obstacles to the progress of women are dismantled, that injustices are redressed.

I need look no further for examples than my colleagues throughout the business and here in Gqeberha, like Simoné Joseph (launch engineer), Glenda Strydom (safety engineer), Siphokazi Nomatye (quality manager), Ayanda Mathabatha (HR business advisor) and Mariona Padayachee (environmental engineer). Each excels in what has traditionally been a male-dominated business. Each exemplifies tenacity and personal excellence.

Diversity extends beyond race, gender, orientation

Consider too, the example of Yota Baron, who this month was appointed Ford's first female chief financial officer in South Africa. Yota is a potent advocate for education and mentorship, especially of girls and women: she points out that she's the first female in her family to have completed university, and that her maternal grandmother was illiterate. We see there the power of education to change one's destiny in a single generation. We see the need for all girls to have opportunities to excel.

Just one example of mentorship that she cites: imagine for a moment a young woman taking several minibus-taxi from her parents' township home to the world of glass-and-steel corporate head offices, plush boardrooms and hushed cubicles. A rite of passage, yes, and an opportunity, but also very intimidating.

Diversity, she contends, extends beyond race, gender, orientation and physical ability, but to experience and age. Privilege comes in many forms. Experience is one. Again, the obligation is clear: pass on your experience and insights and be willing to learn to see through the younger and perhaps fresher eyes of newcomers.

Empathy in the workplace

Of course, all businesses claim to put people at the centre of their operations. The impact of Covid-19 has for, example led to a – perhaps long-overdue – focus on humanity and empathy in the workplace. The results? A mixed outcome despite the best of intentions.

Time magazine recently reported on the *2021 State of Empathy Workplace Study* in the US, in which only one in four respondents felt their organisations were sufficiently empathetic.

The report's author writes, "Companies know they must start thinking seriously about addressing their empathy deficit or risk losing workers to companies that are. Still, I've also heard from workers who think it's all nonsense: the latest in a long string of corporate attempts to distract from toxic or exploitative company culture, yet another scenario in which employers implore workers to be honest and vulnerable about their needs, then implicitly or explicitly punish them for it."

So, equity in the workplace remains a work in progress. In the same way, initiatives like Women's Month will ultimately only be effective when they're measured in destinies that are changed, and when they ultimately become archaic because they're superfluous.

The tennis legend Arthur Ashe is credited with saying, “Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can” as a way to start changing the world for the better. Ashe himself overcame the many casually cruel everyday prejudices and exclusion of the USA in the 1960s and went on to become one of the greatest tennis players of all time.

These days, when the right to protest is taken for granted, we forget what courage it took. The world – and indeed South Africa – were very different in 1956, when Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa, Sophia Williams, and 20,000 others stepped out of their comfort zones and across the barriers of race and class to confront injustice. Their dignified outrage at the calculatedly dehumanising “pass laws” of the Apartheid era should inspire us to overcome obstacles facing women and girls until our efforts are unnecessary because the obstacles have been resolved.

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