

Diversity can boost the bottom line

There is a strong business case for increasing diversity and inclusion in the petrochemical workforce. EPCA's new initiative on the subject aims to discover best practice and embed diversity and inclusion into management thinking and company DNA

JOHN BAKER LONDON

Talent, diversity and inclusion. Three apparently simple words the petrochemical industry has to take on board if it is to recruit, encourage and empower employees in today's challenging labour market and unlock their potential for the benefit of the business.

But the practice is by no means so straightforward. While many senior managers are increasingly convinced of the business case for increased diversity in management teams, and even the workforce as a whole, making it happen is a big challenge.

It is one that needs attitudes and mind-sets to be changed across the business so that managers focus on selecting people on the basis of their diverse backgrounds, views and abilities, and not just because they fit in with "people like us". And once they are in place, to ensure that they are fully included in discussions and decisions and made to feel they are valued for themselves.

The debate has often focused on gender and nationality diversity, as these are reasonably easy to measure, but diversity also extends to considerations of nationality, culture, education and age. The main tenet is that diversity will lead to more innovative thinking and better decisions and hence to enhanced corporate performance.

EPCA has taken up the gauntlet in this area and is challenging member companies in Europe to step up to the mark and improve their performance on talent and diversity.

Last year it established the EPCA Talent and Diversity Inclusion Council (TDIC) to in-

vestigate the current position, look at best practices and encourage companies to embrace diversity and inclusion.

The initiative complements what EPCA has already been doing on attracting schoolchildren and students into science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects and hence into the industry.

Nathalie Brunelle, member of the management committee of Total Refining & Chemicals as general-secretary in charge of corporate affairs, and first chair of TDIC, comments that there is already a strong interest within EPCA for talent and diversity. It is important, she says, as in the so-called "war for talent", petrochemical producers need to compete with other sectors to recruit, train and retain talented individuals.

"The petrochemical industry is certainly challenged in this respect", she notes, given its perceived conservative image compared with many other industries. It needs talented individuals as the sector is one where innovation



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NATHALIE BRUNELLE

Senior vice president strategy, development and resources, Total Refining & Chemicals



and problem-solving are key. And, points out Brunelle, "there is strong correlation between the diversity of a team and the creative outcome."

Diversity, she adds, can improve the way companies serve society through the products they create, and can help tackle the problem of the aging workforce in the sector by managing the pipeline of new talent effectively, and in many ways differently to how it has been done in the past.

Employees today, for instance, find it more difficult to move around the world from post to post at the whim of the company, given the Millennial generation's focus on life balance and dual careers.

CONCRETE APPROACH

TDIC is focused on the concrete challenges facing the sector in Europe in the area of diversity and inclusion. Last year it commissioned a study to assess the current situation and quantify the factors inhibiting greater diversity in the industry. It presented these base-line findings to the EPCA annual meeting in October last year and has spent the time learning more



Getting a better job done: diversity reaps rewards

Image Source: iStockphoto.com

from its member companies' experiences.

The overall findings and learnings on best practice will be shared with EPCA members at this year's Annual Meeting in a workshop on the Monday evening. The goal, says Brunelle, will be to encourage companies to go further by showing how specific problems can be addressed.

The session, entitled "Diversity Inclusion: Key to Business Success between Now and 2040", will be chaired by Brunelle with the participation of Eelco Hoekstra, chairman of Vopak and EPCA board member, and Stefan Grolsch, professor in the department of management at ESSEC Business School, based in Paris and Singapore. Grolsch is co-founder of the ESSEC Leadership and Diversity chair and is widely known for his expertise in diversity management, responsible leadership, international human resources management and organisational behaviour.

The main findings and recommendations are that the industry needs to be more vocal on the business case for diversity and inclusion and that this needs to be embedded more deeply in the organisation. "We know diver-

sity brings good results but we need to convince business entities to push forwards more", says Brunelle. "We also need to fully engage line managers – currently diversity and inclusion is still very much a part of the human resources function."

Setting key performance indicators and objectives on diversity for line managers "makes a difference," she adds. But most importantly companies need to build diversity and inclusion in their management culture so that it becomes part of their DNA.

DIVERSITY IN DOW'S DNA

Ester Baiget, business president of Industrial Solutions at Dow Chemical and a member of the TDIC and EPCA board, believes that Dow already has diversity and inclusion embedded in its DNA as strongly as the need for safety, and actively promotes it in practice. "Because we believe change starts at the top, leadership plays a key role in our diversity and inclusion strategy at Dow."

Dow, she adds, has a series of employee network groups across the globe that help the company connect and engage with talent

while also focusing on gender and cultural issues. Each member of Dow's executive leadership team leads one of the employee networks. The objective is to drive efforts that enhance the workforce so that it reflects a truly diverse and inclusive environment.

Because attitudes and behaviours can be influenced as much by instinctive feelings as by rational thought processes, Dow requires diversity and inclusion training to help remove unconscious biases when hiring and promoting. The aim, says Baiget, is to make sure everyone plays an active role building an inclusive environment.

Embracing diversity and inclusion "is a way of ensuring you have a future, that you have the right pool of talent and the right environment to encourage that talent and diversity," says Baiget. "It's not only a matter of doing the right thing – it's the best business decision too."

LOCAL DISCUSSIONS

In addition, as a senior leader within Dow, Baiget ensures that every time she visits a Dow office or location she takes the time to organise a discussion with the local teams and promising talent to promote the message of diversity and inclusion and foster networking. "We are all part of diversity", she concludes.

Loraine Phillips, head of global supply chain at ExxonMobil Petroleum and Chemical in Belgium, has worked in the chemical sector since leaving university with a chemistry degree some 30 years ago, and has worked all around the world. She believes the situation for women in terms of diversity has certainly improved over the years and that explicit prejudice is receding and rarely seen these days.

But, this makes further progress difficult. "You really need a mind-set change and this is challenging. Things seem to be moving slowly in Europe – after returning from working in the US I really felt I was going backwards [in terms of the practical recognition of diversity]. We can't be left behind as an industry or as a region."

Like Baiget, she too sees parallels with safety, which the industry as a whole has embraced widely as part of its culture. "We currently have a lot of good policies [on diversity] in place but are not using them as well as we might. As with safety, a lot of the onus comes down to the individual to really make the difference."

She argues the industry needs to find a way to talk about and explain how to improve diversity in practice. "We have the infrastructure, but how do you use that when recruiting and developing people? We want to use 100% of the talent we have – it's a big opportunity to get a good creative mix of gender, culture, >>>

» background and experience.”

Senior managers get the message, she adds, but there is a need to communicate this down the line. “We need specific programmes in place and some form of measurement. But target setting is tough.”

ExxonMobil has established women leadership teams and networks which gives them a voice in the organisation and becomes interesting when women reach more senior levels, she says.

In general, she says, mentoring and role models are useful in helping change middle management mindsets. And, she adds, line managers make a big impact in the first three to four years of a new recruit’s career in shaping their experience of the company and attitudes to diversity and inclusion.

“The case for action is clear, but things are not moving as fast as they could. If you have a leadership position you have the responsibili-

ty to guide and support and find out what will make the difference [in terms of diversity].”

At Total, where Brunelle is a member of the group’s diversity council, there are a number of targets set to drive greater diversity in terms of gender and nationality.

TARGETS SET AT TOTAL

By 2020, the company is looking to achieve a proportion of 25% of its senior executives being women and 40% non-French nationals. The proportion of women on management committees is targeted to be 20% and the company wants to have 50-70 non-French nationals heading up regional affiliates, to boost local management content.

These targets were set a few years ago and a road map for their achievement drawn up for each division of Total, to ensure a pipeline of diverse talent was created. “Measuring progress has put more focus on diversity”, ex-

plains Brunelle, and the results are coming through already, both at main COMEX level and in Refining & Chemicals.

During the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in early 2016, the world’s leading oil and gas companies, including Total, signed a charter to improve the participation rate and development of women in their organisations – an important signal to both internal and external stakeholders about the importance of further improving the current standing in the oil and gas industry.

Indeed, across the industry there is still much to do to embed diversity and inclusion in everyday thinking and decision-making. EPCA’s TDIC will play its part.

As Baiget notes, is it there “to support and aggregate EPCA activities on diversity and focus companies on the need and value of diversity in the petrochemical industry.” ■

VOICES FROM THE INDUSTRY KATHERINE SWEENEY AND NED WEDDLE LONDON

WOMEN WIN GROWING ROLE AND RESPECT IN THE WORKPLACE

ICIS talked to women in the industry to hear of their experiences. We asked how much of a factor gender has been in their careers and what would their advice be to women coming after them. This is what they said:

Ruth Sandelowsky, CEO, Kolmar

I got into the business by pure chance... and can indeed confirm that I have been working with mostly men. It did not make much of a difference then and not ever since.

No matter what your gender is, you must prove yourself every day. Nothing is taken for granted and whatever you achieve today is a past event. Tomorrow is another day.

Gradually over the years you see more and more women in commercial positions and I think that it is a great development.

Men are feeling comfortable working with women in most companies, although I hear of some conservative enterprises that as a matter of principle would not allow women to progress beyond a certain level.

I would advise women to allow themselves to follow their ambitions and earn their position by positive contribution. Their perception should be that there is nothing that

cannot be achieved if you strongly what it. It is a matter of hard work, perseverance and focus.

To attract talent, one needs to actively employ young talented people and provide them the environment for growth and innovation with new ideas. This holds good for both genders.

Chantal Fitting, Invista

I won one of two Hoechst Holland industrial scholarships... and afterwards got a role in purchasing petrochemicals. During my first jobs in planning and customer service, gender did not play a role. In the purchasing role, I became aware I was one of few women in that area of business.

At the start of my career it was difficult to get taken seriously by my male counterparts; they preferred to talk to my boss or even my male colleagues. Fortunately, my bosses did not make any difference by gender, so supported my development and stayed in the background as much as possible.

I noticed I earned the respect of my counterparts by my knowledge of the market and our way of working together.

Nowadays, women in our industry are no longer an exception, so that first hurdle is taken more easily. Networking is important to a career and unfortunately still a

very male dominated activity. I think women should do more in this area, to catch up.

Yes, I think times are changing and men experience women as very dedicated and hard workers, both as colleagues as well as business counterparts. I feel well respected, also in new business relationships, whereas in the past there was a certain reservation in the beginning. But we’re not there yet.

Lineke Keizer, trader, Interchem

In trading, we still do not see a lot of women. In industry though we see more and more women in the former “mens” jobs.

Be yourself. Being a woman or a man, to my feeling, isn’t the difference. It’s the personality that counts. You have to build a relationship with your customers, that’s the key! You have to work hard and step away from the 9-5 attitude

I think the challenge is the same for males or females. The petchem industry is changing. Relationships are still very key but also it’s key to position yourself in stable company and become a steady partner for your customers. Again, I do not see here a gender difference.

Traineeships, internal courses, options to work in other countries

(for the same company), learning by doing – these are all important.

Emel Emek, global category buyer, INEOS Styrolution

I got into the chemical industry by sheer chance and was not aware that the procurement part had been more a male driven business. As a woman you have to work harder and prove yourself to get recognised and promoted to a more senior role.

Once you manage to step up, you get the respect and the appreciation. Still have to work hard, but people appreciate your work and efforts. Meanwhile, I personally don’t see a challenge for myself anymore being a woman in a man’s world.

However, I see still a great challenge for women, if they want to step up to the next career level, but this might be a general challenge to women in any branch.

Never give up on your goals. If you want to achieve something you can do it. Believe in yourself, be open minded, be strong and stand behind your opinion and decisions.

I see the world of the petchem industry moving, hence I see a great chance for women behind me to work in a great industry with great chances and opportunities. I see rather chances than challenges for the next generation of women. ■