



## FEATURE

# How-to Guide for Women in Construction Project Management

by Mary Beth Kingsley and Sandy Palmerton, Shapiro & Duncan

As project managers for a large mechanical company, we enjoy being part of a team working toward a common goal and the satisfaction of completing a project from the ground up. We relish seeing real progress and no two projects are ever the same. A “desk job” was never going to work for either of us—we like to change our workplace settings and enjoy project-managing onsite.

As women, we defy the stigma that the construction industry is only for men.

We have been fortunate to work alongside women in important project leadership roles such as architects, engineers, senior project managers, owner’s representatives, site superintendents and safety managers. We have also worked on projects with female electricians, carpenters, sheet metal installers, pipe welders, heavy equipment operators and masons.

Attitudes are changing and the days of any stigma related to the acceptance of women in the construction industry are fading fast, in our opinion. There is no reason why the construction industry should be any different from other sectors in terms of equality. Seeing other women in leadership roles and working in the field has helped us build confidence, provided an unspoken camaraderie, and showed us the diverse opportunities that are available to women in the industry.

### Challenges

No doubt, in the construction industry women are put under the microscope more so than males. There is a perception often associated that women are emotional and incorporate their feelings into their work. It is important to act professionally and demonstrate your level of expertise without feeding the perception.

The key is to be aware of your self-confidence level, your overall demeanor and to stay consistent.

Another gender-based challenge is that women tend to hold themselves up to a higher level of self-scrutiny than our male counterparts. Small details matter that much more to us. At the same time, our work is more closely scrutinized. We have more to prove. Yet everybody makes mistakes. While no business professional enjoys making an error, the real value to your employer (whether you are male or female) is demonstrating self-growth by learning from those errors.

It’s not a question of whether it is fair or unfair. It is our responsibility and our obligation to uphold a professional image. That’s why we always prepare thoroughly for meetings. Ultimately, if you show up for work, do your job and do it to the best of your ability, there is

no place for gender bias. If you don't make gender a big deal and let it affect your job performance, then others are more likely to perceive it in the same way. As long as you are meeting or exceeding your job responsibilities, gender quickly disappears as a job-related issue.

### Top Tips for Success

In a project management role, balancing a heavy workload and keeping all the balls juggling can be stressful. But creating and working from lists is one way to stay focused and gives a feeling of accomplishment when an item is crossed off.

Here are more project management success tips. Some are gender-based, and some aren't.

**No one person has it all.** Don't be afraid to delegate to your fellow team members and reach out when their expertise is needed. Learn from them. Accept praise and positive feedback when it is given. Try to avoid the (sometimes) female tendency to say, "Oh, it was nothing." Be clear and concise in your communication.

**Always remain assertive and present yourself in a confident manner.** Neither of us has a hard time speaking up or voicing our opinions in a room full of men. The sooner you decide your gender is not a factor in performing your job, the sooner others will reach the same conclusion. In those very rare instances where we have sensed hesitation from an "old timer" who is maybe unaccustomed to working with a female, once that relationship of familiarity and trust is established, working together becomes second nature.

**Understand women inherently want to please other people.** If you're inclined to take a stab at an answer that you are not totally familiar with, that can get you in trouble. If you don't know something, answer honestly and say, "I'm not sure. Let me do some homework and get back to you." On the other hand, if there is a topic on which you are knowledgeable, do not be afraid to speak out.

**Mentor the people around you.** Share teachable moments to strengthen co-workers. Demonstrate a willingness to teach, because this builds a better team. Some people are afraid to share information because of job security worries, but reality shows that there are over 500,000 current skilled trade positions to fill in the industry and that number is expected to approach 2 million by 2022. Our industry is in need of qualified project managers and in our view, we have an obligation, now more than ever, to mentor assistant project managers and project coordinators.

**Remain approachable and open-minded.** For managers, it is critically important to know how your employees and clients perceive you. Obtain feedback and build on processes to get better results. Take a look around you—look at clients, subcontractors and foremen. Feed on their strengths to get the results you need.

**Realize what is hot and critical. Be organized.** Prioritize. What has to go out today? In construction project management, attention to detail is a fundamental success trait—for men and women.

**Treat everyone—owner, architect and subcontractors—with respect.**

**Don't present yourself as a know-it-all.** Have an open mind, be willing to learn new things and hear new ideas. Seek out professional and career development opportunities. The industry is evolving every day.

### Key Takeaways

Women employed in male-dominant industries, possess the tools to change stereotypes and break gender barriers by remaining professionally passionate, by staying hungry for excellence, by executing assigned tasks with care and by taking initiative to be a self-starter. Stay focused on the finish line until completion is achieved. Then, ask your superiors for your next task or

project—don't wait for them to figure it out. We would like to think that our current project manager positions have been obtained, and maintained:

- By our respective willingness to accept the obstacles of the industry;
- Our respective interest in learning new technologies;
- Our dedication to upholding ethical treatment of clients and co-workers; and finally,
- Our commitment to delivering results.

Although both of us were on initial paths to enter the workforce in predominately female roles, both of us shifted gears and instead chose a career in a predominately male industry. We have zero regrets. Like a lot of other people, we didn't choose our profession. We grew into it.

Yes, over the years both of us have been mistaken for the secretary or the accounting manager—but we don't take it personally. We are always quick to hold our heads high and (politely) set the other person straight. Once that individual realizes that we are in a leadership role, the initial shock wears off and they expect the same results from us as they would a male counterpart.

Our advice to women considering the construction industry is the same advice we would give to anyone entering the field—find solidarity through networking, accept all opportunities to further your education and training, ask questions, speak up for yourself, and treat everyone equally and with respect. Simple tools to live by, no matter what career path you choose!

*Mary Beth Kingsley and Sandy Palmerton are project managers at Shapiro & Duncan, Inc., a third-generation family-owned mechanical contracting business serving customers in the Washington, D.C., area since 1976. Shapiro & Duncan is the "Provider of Choice" for complex commercial, government and institutional design-build projects that require first-rate performance, work quality and customer service.*

## **So You Want to Be a Female Project Manager in a Male-dominated Industry? It Takes a Team**

*by Mary Beth Kingsley, Shapiro & Duncan*

Jerry and Sheldon Shapiro, president and CEO, respectively, of Shapiro & Duncan, gave me the nudge to take on my first mechanical project in 2003. Starting off as receptionist for their company in 1996, they decided to back me 100 percent, so I could take the next steps to further my career. After working as project coordinator and assistant project manager, I became the first female project manager in their company. The contract value of my first project, a middle school, 15 years ago was \$500,000. Last year, I completed a complex, fast-track healthcare project with a contract value of \$24 million.

Each (sometimes reluctant) step up the ladder has been backed by my Shapiro & Duncan teammates—who, by the way, are predominately male. Many individuals have served as mentors to me and provided support aiding in the success of my career.

In particular, Shapiro & Duncan project executive Ron Chazin, my team leader, has been and continues to be instrumental in my career. He serves as a sounding board, assists me as I work through project hurdles, and lends his technical experience while always teaching. Never one to just give me the answer, Ron encourages research, independent thinking and confident decision making.

Shapiro & Duncan's greatest strength is our people. Our team atmosphere promotes and fosters the success of the individual and the project—gender notwithstanding!

## **Four Years Later, A New York Minute**

*by Sandy Palmerton, Shapiro & Duncan*

"Sandy, we need your resume for a bid that is due today, and we also need you to provide a listing of (county) schools you have worked on recently."

I am asked this via email late in the afternoon on the day the bid is due. After our company successfully makes it through the first round of pricing submissions, an internal meeting is called to discuss technical interview approaches for the bid to bring 100-plus schools into code compliance.

That evening, while I am driving home after we receive notice that we are awarded the work, the anchor of reality and challenge takes hold. This is an open format project; the owner expects the successful contractor to engineer, design, schedule, install and close out mechanical construction in more than 100 schools—with no owner-provided project manager or liaison.

A team approach is instituted. Although I have a heavy hand in creating and implementing the processes and procedures, the jump start comes from my surrounding professional supervisors and co-workers with years of experience. Constant support and constructive feedback help keep things moving.

Four years and 167 schools later, achieving completion is equal to sitting atop a red Harley moving 80 miles an hour on a bright sunny day. Looking back, the sense of accomplishment is reinforced by confidence to move forward progressively. No matter how large the project, I feel equipped to reproduce the project management processes with renewed spirit.

Would I do it all over again? In a New York minute!