



I WANT TO LAY THE FOUNDATION FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF WOMEN



Behr South



SANERA MAHARAJ | EMPLOYEE



Name of Company:

MAHLE Behr South Africa



Highest Qualification:

BSC Hons. Engineering & Technology Management



Age:

31 years



Position in Company:

Industrial Engineering Manager



Academic institution:

University of KwaZulu-Natal



Years in the organisation:
Eight years



Location:

KwaZulu-Natal, Glenwood

I FOLLOWED MY LOVE OF MATHS AND SCIENCE

Industrial engineering hasn't always been my goal. Throughout school I loved animals and sciences and had my heart set on becoming a vet, but in Grade 11 the thought of having to put animals to sleep started to get to me and I realised I needed to change direction.

My love of, and natural aptitude for, maths and science, together with support from siblings who convinced me these subjects are the future, brought out a desire to do engineering and specifically industrial engineering.

I DIDN'T ALLOW ANY LIMITATIONS TO BE SET ON ME JUST BECAUSE I'M A WOMAN

When I finished my degree, I started my career as an intern, and out of four interns I was the only female. There were lots of comments along the lines of 'you are not supposed to be here' and I had to work to not let the stereotypes get me down. I think what helped me is that I didn't allow any limitations to be set on me. I did everything. If the men worked in the workshop, I worked in the workshop.

If they were producing a certain quality of work, I made sure I produced that quality and more. I focused on proving them wrong with my ability and hard work and concentrated on what I needed to do. You have to be strong willed, humble yourself to learn and not be afraid to ask questions.

GROWING MY CAREER

After my one-year internship I was accepted into this company's two-year graduate programme, which gave me great exposure to different people, different departments, and different working methods. I was then selected for a three-month internship at one of the company's plants in Germany, where I worked on various projects.

I returned to Durban but the call of Johannesburg, along with an opportunity for a more senior role in another company, made me realise it was time to step up and grow my career. It was the first time I had an opportunity to lead a team of my own.



ONE OF MY MAIN MOTIVATORS IS SELF-GROWTH. WHAT DRIVES ME IS THAT THERE IS SO MUCH KNOWLEDGE OUT THERE



An opportunity to do process optimisation back in the team at my original company prompted a move back to KwaZulu-Natal, and I have recently been promoted to the role of Industrial Engineering manager.

Here, I have also had the opportunity to work on a revolutionary new technology. It came from an idea of sanitising in taxis using a light with special FAR UV-C technology. I joined a small team of colleagues and we entered and won a global innovation competition. We have now entered what we call an incubator in the hopes of launching our business. Learning scrum methodologies and applying lean corporate start-up principles, has been eye opening for me.

YOU LEARN A LOT ABOUT YOURSELF AND WHAT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE

Since the beginning of my career, I have been working towards combining my technical engineering skills with the management side of things and now I am managing people, resources, and projects together with learning about running a business through my involvement in this start-up. That level of authority and responsibility grows you a lot. Hopefully one day I'll be able to use the combination of these skills to head up an organisation and lead teams to achieve amazing things.

IF YOU WANT TO GROW, YOU HAVE TO PUT YOURSELF OUT THERE EVEN IF IT'S SCARY

One of my main motivators is self-growth. What drives me is that there is so much knowledge out there and I have learnt so much online, all self-taught. The big game changer for me has been the opportunity to work on the start-up innovation I mentioned. I think one of the main reasons I got the opportunity was that I put myself out there. It was a little bit scary and a lot of hard work, a lot of after-hours and a lot of weekends sacrificed. I took a chance on something new, and it paid off, even better that I have grown immensely through the process.

THE ONLY WOMAN IN THE ROOM

When I started out my career as the only female intern, it was overwhelming, and there were moments when I wondered whether I should change careers. I have females in my team now which is great but there were many occasions in my previous company where I was the only female, whether presenting to board members or working in a team.

There are a lot of barriers that us females face when pursuing a career in engineering, starting from school where girls are discouraged from taking maths and science. Then when you enter the workplace there are all those negative stereotypes about females. Not having many female mentors around is also a problem, as there can often be no one to turn to.

PROVE THEM WRONG BY ACTUALLY DOING IT

I really enjoy what I am doing and that has helped me persevere against the naysayers. The main way I counteract some of the negative stereotypes is by getting out there and proving them wrong by actually doing it. I also make sure I have a watertight argument and confidence in my facts whenever I present!

Every achievement is motivation to keep going. I have had phenomenal mentors throughout my journey (both male and female) which has helped shape me into the leader I had always aspired to be. I have much to learn about leadership but feel supported on my journey to my next big achievement.

However, as much as we know there are challenges in promoting females in the industry, I do see things slowly changing for the better. The company that I work for is involved with the Science2Go programme and there are many different initiatives promoting female engineers. My promotion could be seen as one of the examples of the changes in Industry, but there is still lots of work to do.

A SUPPORT STRUCTURE HELPS YOU FLOURISH

It is easy to get pulled down by negativity. I have seen people who have their self-confidence crushed because they are surrounded by people who tell them they are not good enough. It is important to have a good support system to pick you up. One of the reasons I came back to KwaZulu-Natal is to be close to family. Family is really important, and I think that when you are surrounded

by that supportive structure, it helps you flourish. My Mom has been a key role model for me. She always emphasised education.

PAVING THE WAY FOR WOMEN

I think each culture has their own stereotypes and for me, a woman at the age of 31, the stereotype is to be married with kids. I am neither but I am completely happy because my goals are in other areas. I have a niece and nephew and I feel there is some responsibility, especially to my niece, to show that a successful career in STEM is achievable for women.

I want to be a good role model and lay the foundation for the next generation of women to go out and achieve more. When I reflect back, I do feel I have achieved a lot but I have far more things ahead of me that I want to achieve and I hope that my small success as a female engineer has made it a little bit easier for the females that come after me.

6 Lessons that I have learnt:

- 1 Don't allow societal stereotypes about women's roles limit your abilities
- 2 Being responsible for other people's growth enables you to grow too
- 3 Don't be afraid to put your hand up and open yourself to new challenges
- 4 When you are the only women in the room, let your work speak for itself
- 5 Surround yourself with people who support you and build you up
- 6 Pave the way for other women by rising above what is expected of you as women