

My APPA Journey

and the Women Who Inspire Me

By Winnie Kwofie

On one of our early Saturday morning hikes, I asked my two female friends to describe the typical facilities management employee. Their response: “Tough, sweaty, macho guys with huge and rough hands, partially buttoned shirts and having a strong smell of coffee or tobacco.” Their description may have aptly fitted a facilities person many years ago, but to set them up for this article, I asked, laughing sarcastically, “Really?” Thrown off balance, they were curious to know what contrary description I had up my sleeve. They were totally impressed when I revealed that I was planning to share my experience in the male world and my admiration for three inspiring women leaders in facilities.

According to a recent article published in the *McKinsey Quarterly*, there are very few women leaders in the C-suite today and even fewer accomplished women are on the path to the C-suite, although a higher percentage of entry level employees are women. As a 100-year-old organization representing a traditionally male-dominated profession, APPA should be celebrating this crack though the glass ceiling with its four elected women presidents and a number of women leaders in its member institutions. Nevertheless, the gender disparity in leadership and the path to leadership positions continue to be a challenge in facilities.

BE DIFFERENT AND SEEK TO LEARN MORE

My experience as a female engineer working in facilities has been as challenging as the experiences I encountered as one of only two young women in a class of boys and in my working life as a design and consulting engineer. To survive masculine intimidation, I was determined to outsmart my classmates by acquiring early work experience.

At the end of my first semester, I interned with a prominent all-male civil engineering firm whose CEO was an avid advocate for practical training for students. He gladly assigned me a seasoned professional engineer,



Mr. Laing, as my mentor. I credit my survival and resilience to Mr. Laing, who was an anchor to my learning experience even when I made mistakes. In the narrow perspective of “macho” professions, women are “always” expected to make mistakes and then quit out of frustration. I was lucky because Laing was an outstanding mentor who rebuilt my confidence when it was bruised.

SHAMELESSNESS IS A GREAT LEADERSHIP SKILL

My first project site experience was on a ground-level water storage tank installation in an earthquake-prone area. My tasks were to observe the construction activities and provide feedback to the project lead. The site’s “macho” elements in-

cluded a Chinese contractor, a chauvinistic rebar crew, and a British project engineer. After I was introduced and alone on the site, I felt ridiculed by hostile gazes that later escalated to the following provocative actions: poor concrete mix, rebar out of specification, and placement of damaged waterproofing membranes.

Since instant messaging and cell phones did not exist at the time, I had to decide between taking a 15-minute walk to alert the lead, or reasoning with these fierce-looking men. I chose the latter. Feeling cautiously and naively confident, I headed first to the rebar crew and before I could speak, they



FULL DISCLOSURE: THE BASIC PHOTO OF MARY, WINNIE, AND LANDER WAS TAKEN AT APPA'S THOUGHT LEADERS SYMPOSIUM IN APRIL; JERI WAS DIGITALLY ADDED LATER.

A woman and her APPA mentors. From left: Mary Vosevich, Winnie, Lander Medlin, and Jeri King.

intensified their blunders to increase the number of rebar that did not meet specifications. Their chauvinism was laced with profanity, increasing my frustration.

Quietly, I walked away to alert the project lead, who graciously sent me back for more torturous observations. But my persistence paid off because the hostility waned over time. My experience from this incident and many others revealed that the mere sight of a woman in charge can provoke defiance and derogatory actions, requiring the woman to prove her ability to deliver. For example, to respond to a contractor's refusal to take her stop order, a female colleague (who was the lead for a major road project) bravely stood on the contaminated section of the road with a red flag, yelling to prevent trucks from spreading imported soil, while ignoring the ridicule she faced. Her actions showed that boldness is the key to overcoming humiliation.

I landed in educational facilities by accident. My interest began when I stepped up to deliver a capital construction project on a critical path. Unknown to me, the facilities department was not actively engaged in the process, so I solicited their involvement right away. I was astonished at the expertise of the facilities team, and it was this exciting interaction that led me to my current position at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) as an advocate for facilities on all capital projects. But my first two years in facilities were quite daunting, and I was ready to move back to my previous career by the end of the second year.

DRAW FROM THE PAST

Since mentoring had served me well in the past, I eagerly solicited a mentor in another facilities organization. My mentor was empathetic and practical, and he provided the compass that helped me survive. I was not yet involved in APPA, but was participating in a professional engineering organization having few female members. The medical research environment at UCSF was also new to me, and I was fortunate to find a woman mentor there. I cherished both mentors—while they had different leadership styles, they both advocated staff engagement, development, advancement, and diversity. For me, they provided a balanced perspective.

The poignant lesson I learned about the difference between my prior and present experience in facilities was the length of time I spent interacting with the same group of men. Most of my design and capital projects were completed within three years or less, offering me some wiggle room to unwind and allowing me to adapt and cope.

The environment in facilities, on the other hand, is more stable with cultures that are usually engrained with chauvinism. It consists of networks of “boys’ clubs,” entrenched with loyalty and mutual benefits that tend to serve members well in lobbying for advancement and promotion, presenting a challenge for any woman hoping to stay in facilities and or navigate to the top.

HUNT FOR COURAGE, APPEAL TO THE EMOTIONS

Obviously, we need women leaders as mentors and role models. This is a call to action that should include a dialogue on the state of affairs for women in the profession today, on male perceptions, and on the female fear of failure. The desperation to deliver is driving most women leaders to become overly entangled with meeting every expectation—a “make everybody happy” mentality.

Yet the boys’ club goes easy on its members and still dominates this profession. Our starting point is to appeal to our male colleagues as mentors and sponsors and engage in exploring ways to make the environment conducive for women to thrive. Nevertheless, this profession is starving for women role models and sponsors to help retain and attract more women.

FIND ENERGY AND EXCITEMENT THAT INSPIRES

I had the pleasure of meeting three inspiring and remarkable women leaders on my brief APPA journey. It was during my third year in facilities that I met Lander Medlin, APPA's executive vice president, at my first PCAPPA conference in San Francisco. Like the Oprah Winfrey of APPA, Landers gives everyone a big welcome smile and ample hugs. Her energy was contagious, her passion was transforming, and she had the right demeanor to provoke laughter while keeping you at ease.

Lander spoke about the profession in a way that got me thinking. Since I was looking for ways to sustain my interest, this was an “aha” moment for me to explore such opportunities. Lander exhibited great mastery on the subject of facilities, highlighting the interconnections and the opportunities APPA offers to assist professionals.

During the breaks between sessions, she walked across the hall, stopping to high-five many and to share a laugh. For newcomers, such an encounter could be the game changer when the road seemed bumpy. Lander demonstrated a leader's ability to fill the room and to create a safe and trusting environment for all. It was this experience led me to get involved with PCAPPA, and I'm totally supported by my fellow board colleagues.

CALM, FOCUSED HUMOR

My first encounter with Mary Vosevich—past APPA President and now at the University of Kentucky—was in Denver at the PCAPPA/APPA conference. Her presidential theme was “Lift as You Climb,” a herculean task for women in a male-dominated world. It contradicted current opinions alleging that women leaders are less effective when they advance other women, or simply become a bottleneck for advancing other women. With her captivating sense of humor and calm delivery, Mary urged us to invest in others by enabling their success.

EVERYONE LOVES JERI

I have enjoyed my time on the APPA Information and Research Committee, led by Vice President Jeri King of the Uni-

versity of Iowa. With a smile, Jeri gives us the big picture and guides us through the details. She reminds us that in facilities, we are always responding to emergencies and we have less time to pause, take a breath, and ask questions. But her leadership influences our ability to think beyond the moment so we can set a more strategic, long-term approach. This kind of farsighted reasoning may seem daunting, yet it allows us to explore options for more effective solutions.

CAN APPA CHANGE THIS STORY?

APPA is a complex organization that is rapidly evolving. The keys to successfully leading such an organization will require diverse talents and the ability to lead across the gender aisle. With four past female APPA presidents, and when the United States may one day elect its first female president, the old story that women are not equipped to lead such complex organizations is no longer valid.

APPA can and should change this story by creating a pipeline to develop and advance more women. The facilities profession provides many avenues for such development, from the entry-level administrative, clerical, and business services positions

dominated by women to the technical positions dominated by men. The discussion should focus on the disparities in positions and technical skills and also highlight the opportunities available for developing great female managers and leaders to run an effective and successful organization.

The challenges most women encounter are the fear of stepping up to take on these leadership positions without role models to provide guidance. But APPA has a growing number of female role models that can be engaged to establish a best practice on this task. As a learning organization, this could be a great opportunity to work with our male colleagues on an issue that can transform this profession. Most of all, we need more women like Lander, Mary, and Jeri to lead the change. ☎

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