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Forthright approach leads to success as engineer at LaBella

Woman oversees work in hydropower among mostly male colleagues

By NICOLE SHELTON

Engineering has traditionally been a male dominated field, and while more and more women are entering the profession—and the STEM fields as a whole—the playing field is not yet level. Caroline Wheadon, an environmental engineer, project manager and hydropower business unit leader at LaBella, is one woman shutting down such workforce stereotypes.

Wheadon lives by a quote that her father likes to use: “Take the game out of the ref’s hands.” In other words, play so well and have the game in the bag so that a referee can’t make a bad call and take the win away. At work, Wheadon does her job to the best of her abilities so that she can “take it out of any critic’s ... hands and take the typical gender roles right out of the picture.”

Wheadon was drawn to engineering because of her passion for the environment, which began at a young age.

“It was always innately part of my personality; I was curious about the environment—I wanted to know how it worked; I liked being in nature,” she says.

Going to SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry was a practical choice after graduating from high school in the Hudson Valley because she consistently excelled at math and science.

“Pairing what I was good at academically with my interest in bettering the environment and sustainable development made sense for me to go into environmental engineering,” says Wheadon.

Wheadon, 38, graduated with a bachelor’s degree in environmental engineering in 2003. From there she gained experience in the field doing environmental work in New Jersey and New York City. In 2006, she returned to her alma mater for her master’s in environmental engineering, which she obtained in 2008.

Drawn to Rochester after meeting her husband—a Canandaigua native—in graduate school, Wheadon briefly worked at a local engineering consulting firm before becoming a contractor for Rochester Gas and Electric Corp. and New York State Electric & Gas Corp. in 2009.

Five years later, Wheadon joined one of the leading engineering firms in Rochester, LaBella. She was drawn to the firm because of “the fact that they were a growing company with a really good client base,” she says. “Their core company values ... and the fact that the senior leadership team empowers their younger staff and recognizes and supports younger leaders” were other notable factors that garnered her interest in the company.

She started her career at LaBella as an engineer, but was promoted to project manager just over a year ago. Her primary clients are RG&E and NYSEG, projects



Caroline Wheadon

Photo by Kate Melton

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that are right in her wheelhouse.

“As a project manager, I take an improvement or building project from concept and build the entire project management process so we can execute it,” explains Wheadon. “I’ll work with design engineers to develop a detailed design, which can be structural, mechanical and electrical—there are all different multidisciplinary components to a hydropower plant system. I also facilitate construction and lead a team of the owner, engineers, construction contractors and everyone else involved.”

Wheadon is knee deep in managing the RG&E Station 2 Modernization Project. Station 2, a hydropower plant located at the base of High Falls, can generate 45,900 megawatt hours of electricity each year.

The goal of this project is to install a new generating unit, powerhouse and updated infrastructure for an added 26,500 hours of electricity. The Station 2 project is expected to be complete in 2025.

Besides leading highly technical, long-term projects, Wheadon also leads the Hydropower Business Unit, which she had a hand in forming last year. Before forming their own hydropower division, the hydropower team was part of the buildings engineering group. Although the hydropower projects are multidisciplinary, forming their own separate unit to consolidate their goals served them best and gave them a home under the LaBella roof.

The Hydropower Business Unit started as a team of two, with Wheadon at the

helm from the get-go. Over the past year, she’s overseen the unit blossom into a team of six, consisting of four project managers and two junior staff engineers.

“Between the six of us, we have 40 or 50 years of experience just with RG&E and NYSEG facilities,” she says. “We basically eliminated our competition when we formed this unit, so we have a stronghold on this market.”

As a project manager and a leader of her own unit, Wheadon instills trust in her team to get the job done. She’s not a micromanager; rather, she spends her energy lending an ear to her staff.

“I give each of my team members an hour of my time every other week where I listen to them and get a feel for where they are and ask them what they need from me,” says Wheadon. “I hold myself accountable for delivering on what they need. Then I get out of the way and let them do their jobs.”

At work, Wheadon is surrounded by men, like most women engineers. Over the course of her career, she has found ways to deal with the gender biases that crop up in the workplace, and she helps other young female engineers work through the inequities that are commonplace in the industry.

“The advice that I give a lot of women coming out of college as junior level engineers is to speak up and ask for work,” says Wheadon. “(Gender inequality) is not always in your face at work. It’s a much more subtle culture, so be aware of it and make sure you’re clear about what you want and the assignments you want and speak up for yourself. Sometimes we feel like we have to prove ourselves capable (to do the same jobs as men). It’s unfair, but I try to stay focused and I try to deliver on what I say I’m going to deliver.”

Wheadon also adds that although men are oftentimes favored over women in the work space, she is proud of the group of men that she personally works alongside.

“I am extremely fortunate to work with an amazing group of men, men who also have young kids, men who are incredibly supportive,” she says.

Over a decade into her career, Wheadon says that it’s vital for young professionals to get out from behind their desks and talk to people face-to-face. Improving basic interpersonal skills is imperative in any field.

Furthermore, the first few years after college are meant for self-exploration and figuring out where you want to bring your career. Mentors are key for young professionals as they navigate the beginning of their career and develop their self-awareness.

“Find mentors. Keep the contacts. Check in with them,” stresses Wheadon. “Don’t ever lose contact with people who encouraged and empowered you, even if you move jobs, move states, move countries. Always make it a point to stay in touch with those people who helped you along the way.”

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