

Betty-Ann Heggie explains why we need more women at the top

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Supplied photo

Photograph by: GREG JOHNSON

Betty-Ann Heggie worked her way up the corporate ladder and became a senior vice-president at Potash Corp. of Saskatchewan Inc. before retiring. She now sponsors the Womentorship program, administered through the Edwards school of business. She answered five questions from StarPhoenix business reporter Jenn Sharp and explained why businesses and society benefits from having more women at the top.

Q: Why did you start the Womentorship program in conjunction with the Edwards school of business?

A: In my last few years at PotashCorp I did a lot of mentoring. I was a senior executive and had been in the company for a long time and knew my job well. I was getting ready to pass the torch and was mentoring younger people in the company. I found it gratifying and could see the value in knowledge transfer. When you're mentoring you believe in others before they have the courage or confidence to believe in themselves. You can share and say, "I was there once and know exactly where you're at." That's heartening for someone coming up through the ranks. Research shows if you're a woman or from a diverse culture that you benefit more from mentorship because the doors don't automatically open for you. Companies and individuals feel more confident promoting those that are like themselves. The doors naturally open for Caucasian men and if you don't fit that model, you need some help getting included in meetings, getting information shared with you and getting someone to tout your attributes.

Q: Is that why you chose to mentor women?

A: Yes. I'd been a woman in the system and knew how difficult it can be. I wanted to help create a winning legacy where I knew that companies create better value and make better decisions if they have more women at the decision-making table, and it's better for society. Research shows that countries that have more women in higher positions have a higher socioeconomic status. If you ask a successful woman if she's had a mentor, 98 per cent of them will say yes. If you ask a successful man, fewer than 30 per cent of them say yes. Women understand the value of having someone that helps get them to the table. This program is aimed at women out working because I believe we need more women at the decision-making table, and in politics too.

Q: Why is the program for women established in their careers and not for students?

A: Everybody runs mentorship programs for students in school, but frankly when you're in school you don't even know what you're going to face. Once you get out and start working, you realize you need that advice and help. Women are trying to balance work and motherhood and they benefit from someone that's walked in that path before. Women aren't good at networking because we work and then rush home to our families — we don't meet the women that we can turn to for advice. Women want to have a home life and a career but don't have anyone to talk to about it because there are not often women higher than them in their own company so we needed a program for women to mentor women. One woman stepped up and said, "I waited until I was in my 40s to have kids because it took that long to build up my credibility in my career and I don't want it to be that way for the next generation."

Q: How is the program structured?

A: It's a one-year commitment with four one-hour meetings once a quarter. It runs from September to June. At the end of the year, the mentor has become a friend and you end up becoming part of that person's network. Throughout the year we have professional development days and we bring in guest speakers. We're lucky to have a lot of good partnerships in the city and get speakers that way. There are three things we try to work on each year: Presence, belonging and resilience. How do you find where you get your energy from, how do you build up a sense of belonging within your organization and how do you build self-reliance?

Q: Did you have a mentor when you were working your way up the ranks?

A: When I started at PotashCorp there were no women that were higher than me and there weren't any that weren't working in the secretarial division. I was lucky that I had a lot of good male mentors that I turned to a lot. On a personal basis, my mother was my first mentor and most women will say that because they know how important that relationship is.