



BREAKING BARRIERS: Maria Teresa Menendez

Maria Teresa Menendez, the Sustainability, Communications, and Relationship Manager at DELSUR, spoke to the Engendering Industries Partner Network about the importance of mentorship, engaging men in the workplace, and the actions men, women, and organizations can take to advance women in male-dominated industries.

YOU OVERCAME MANY CHALLENGES TO BECOME A LEADER AT YOUR ORGANIZATION.

NOW THAT YOU'RE IN A MANAGEMENT ROLE, HOW DO YOU HELP ADVANCE OTHER WOMEN AT DELSUR?

Through empathetic leadership. Sometimes the word “leader” inspires a certain image of authority; of being superior to someone else. That’s not how I think about it. I’m part of a team, and my role on the team is to coordinate actions so everything runs well. I’ve had experiences where bosses didn’t give me opportunities, told me my ideas were bad, made me work additional hours, tried to block me, or weren’t empathetic. I’ve worked in environments and with people that were so toxic, I became physically sick. While this was hard, these experiences taught me what not to do as a leader. I never demand things from my team that I wouldn’t do myself. I listen to everyone because anybody can have a good idea. I never humiliate anyone. If someone doesn’t have the experience to get the job done, I find a way to teach them. Life is about being of service. The question should always be, “How can I support others?”

HOW IMPORTANT IS MENTORSHIP FOR WOMEN IN MALE-DOMINATED WORKPLACES?

At work, women need to be surrounded by people who will support them professionally as mentors, and others who will support them personally, as friends. Our mentors teach us about life, work, how we can become better professionals, and better human beings. Our Engendering Industries coach has been an incredible mentor for our employees, helped them in their daily lives, helped them become better

professionals in their field of work, and helped them make important gender equality contributions to the organization.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGAGING MEN TO ADVANCE GENDER EQUALITY?

There are many challenges to reducing the gender gap in the energy sector, and we need to provide sensitization and training spaces for both men and women. Some men have a difficult time changing their perception of women. This has been a challenge not just for me personally, but for the industry, our country, and women who are studying and pursuing technical careers right now. We need to provide men with more education about gender equality and ask men to give women more opportunities. Don't overshadow women. Don't humiliate women. Give us the opportunity to prove that we can do it, and we can do it well. The Executive Director of our company is a woman who has broken many stereotypes. She is knowledgeable, well-prepared, and on top of her game. They need to see these examples and see that we have the same abilities that they have.

At the same time, we need to teach women to believe in themselves, and support them to make it through those tough situations at work where they are blocked or hindered in some way. Women need to believe in their potential and not give up. When we give up, we lose.

WHAT ELSE DO WOMEN, PARTICULARLY THOSE IN TECHNICAL ROLES, NEED TO ADVANCE THEIR CAREERS?

Bathrooms. This is basic, but important. We need the right infrastructure for both women and men in the field. Women need regulators, national government authorities, and business leaders that believe in gender equality. Women need to be encouraged to study STEM careers; this is important. Here in El Salvador, we are creating a strategic international alliance to invite girls and female teenagers to study STEM.

You'll also hear me talk a lot about my husband, and that's because women need teamwork in their personal and professional lives. My husband is part of my team, and there is equality in my home. He cooks. He takes care of our children. This is very important.

WHAT HAS DELSUR DONE TO CREATE A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN?

For the last five years, DELSUR has been working on programs that promote the participation of women in the sector. We joined Engendering Industries and conducted a study with the program to identify gender equality gaps in the organization and structure a gender equality roadmap for the company. This roadmap includes small actions, like using gender-inclusive language when posting a job listing, and bigger actions, like increasing training opportunities for women. There is structured work being done with human resources and organizational leaders focused on providing more opportunities to women. We will continue working through this program, continue making progress on our roadmap, and will continue communicating about these issues throughout our organization. This way we are all aligned on the path towards gender equality.

YOU ONCE SAID, "I RUN THE SMALLEST, BUT HAPPIEST DEPARTMENT." HOW DID YOU ACHIEVE THIS?

I'm a very happy person and that helps me get to know people on my team well. They learn from me, but I also learn from them every day. I trust what they are doing, and I give them opportunities. I believe they see my happiness and see me persevere despite challenges. I say, "Today I am alive and have decided to be happy and be the best that I can be." The truth is happiness transfers. I think that everyone I work with has a special gift or a special light and we've got to bring that light out in others. If you smile at them, they smile back at you.

Maria Teresa Menendez de Rodriguez is the Sustainability, Communications and Relationship Manager at Distribuidora de Electricidad Delsur, El Salvador (DELSUR), part of the EPM group, and is responsible for Internal and External Communications, Public Relations, Corporate Image, Sustainability Programs and Social Management. She has a master's degree in Commercial and Marketing Management from the European School of Management and Business, and a bachelor's in Public Relations and Communications from the Universidad Tecnologica of El Salvador. She has been featured as a panelist on national and international forums to discuss her work.