Women in Water & Young Professionals– Dealing with Diversity and How to Overcome Challenges
Creating a culture of support for leaders and professional confidence for everyone
By Tammy Faber and Tessa Nge
HOH Water Technology, Inc.

The water treatment industry is changing each year. In fact, the typical water treater today looks quite different than the average water treater even 5, 10 or 20 years ago. The industry is growing and with that growth comes change and diversity. Increasingly large number of women, young professionals, and various other diverse individuals' makeup a larger portion of the overall population of in the water treatment industry. While the community's population is now more variable, the reality is that individuals still commonly feel alienated because often tend to be the youngest person in the room or the only woman, minority, or however they identify. This alienation of an individual's capabilities can cause a lack of confidence in their work and imposter syndrome which can prevent them from living up to their fullest potential.

Diversity is valuable to your business. This paper seeks to remove the distraction it can cause. This is not about a culture war or some political words. The reality is the more we show these employees they are supported and seen, the better they will be at their job. In turn, engaged employees excel and that contributes to the growth of the business they work for. Not only that but having a more diverse workforce has shown to have a direct positive impact on business results as well. Case in point, a study conducted by LinkedIn/Forrester concluded that sales organizations with robust diversity and inclusion practices have 6% higher customer satisfaction improvements, 12% higher sales attainment, 28% higher conversion rates, and 3% higher sales forecasts compared to their peers. As leaders and peers in our industry, it is up to us to support and encourage all team members, especially those who are diverse. It is up to us to recognize and support our employees when they are feeling overlooked or at times harassed. We need to create safe communication pathways so that employees can share struggles and work to overcome any hurdles they are facing. It is imperative to face these things head on while working towards a solution to resolve any prejudices that our team members face. This is true not only for our diverse team members, but any team members who are facing an issue they cannot overcome.

Diversity and inclusion are an important part of our society and is not going away. Setting an example for our employees that diversity and inclusion matters is important for Millennials and Genz's alike. They value companies who make this a part of their culture. They value companies that make this a part of their culture. It also is important to our customers. Many of you in this room deal with 3rd Party Compliance Sites such as ISNet and Avetta. These sites send surveys out on behalf of our customers. In the last year, there has been a 70% increase in the number of customers who now require us to complete diversity and inclusion information on these sites. Encouraging diversity helps grow your business. With these programs you are able to appeal and interact with a larger group of people and interact with different types of markets. The bottom line is that diversity matters to our customers, and it should matter to us.

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The purpose of this discussion is to bring attention to the lack of diversity in the field so that we can improve this moving forward and use this time to discuss shared experiences. There is no one that doesn't want to help their employees. But how do we talk about these things without politics or buzz words. By sharing skills and resources to feel empowered working in the field, water treaters and the industry as a whole will succeed in their businesses. Being able to create community is key. As Jason Jaggard said in "Beyond High Performance "It's so important for every human being to learn how to create community. It's not like riding a bicycle. Creating a community is like speaking a language. If you don't use it, you lose it." While lack of diversity and inclusion cannot be fixed in a day, we can give you professional confidence skills that anyone with any background can take with them to elevate performance. There are also tangible skills that we can use to lend support to any of our peers or employees.

We surveyed women, young professionals, people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and members of the LGBTQ+ community in the industry. The responses are eye opening. 63% of respondents had an issue with a client being unprofessional due to their gender, race, and/or age. Of these people 66% didn't know how to handle the situation. Further, it was reported only 17% of these situations were resolved.   We took away a few key stories from the survey and our discussions. One respondent even said "I ignored the situation, and I later regretted that decision. I should have handled it properly and went through the proper channels instead of ignoring the issue."

At some point everyone has faced an issue with someone doubting their abilities. It often starts when you first enter the industry as a young professional but does not exclude an older professional who is new in the industry. The reality is there will be hurdles to overcome related to diversity. The industry is evolving, but there are and will continue to be growing pains in the process.

If you are feeling alienated or minimized, what do you do? How can you feel empowered to speak to your manager and company about these issues, you have a community to help you and you are empowered to present yourself professionally and confidently despite challenges with lack of respect and/or contempt. You may be only 1% of the industry but you are not alone. Another survey respondent stated "The industry is making great strides and much more work is needed. Behind the scenes there's a lot of barriers in the industry, and those need to be removed to allow everyone an equal chance to succeed."

Often people suffer from imposter syndrome in the workplace. Symptoms of imposter syndrome can include people pleasing, risk taking avoidance, mistake dwelling, crumbling over negative feedback, perfectionism, and identity/self-worth tied to accomplishments. This can be damaging to your professional confidence and can weaken your ability to complete a job, sell a service, or build trust with a customer. This can also affect your ability to present your best self

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to your own employer for future job opportunities. The consequences may look like anxiety, burnout, depression, wasted energy, missed opportunities and sales.

However, you are not alone in suffering from this as 60% of executives report that imposter syndrome has negatively impacted their ability to lead confidently. For example, the former Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr. Margaret Chan, had stated, "There are an awful lot of people out there who think I'm an expert. How do these people believe all this about me? I'm so much aware of all the things I don't know." With conscious practice and skill set, you can learn to present yourself confidently and feel certain you are the correct person for the job. Sonia Sotomayor, Supreme Court Justice said, "I'm not a classic imposter syndrome person because I have that initial insecurity, but I'm capable of stepping outside of it and proving to myself it's wrong."

First and foremost, you need to take care of yourself. Negative feelings about yourself or your work inevitably come up and it is important to validate those but avoid getting stuck in negative feedback loops in their heads. Although this does take practice, you should work to ban damaging thought processes and only focus on what is useful and within your control. Your words and thoughts matter, so try to ask yourself "is this thought process helping me? Is there anything I can do in this moment to change the situation?" Reframing your intrusive thoughts and language will take time and conscious effort.

Once you are taking care of yourself and have a supportive team behind you, practice signing up for things that you know will push you outside of your comfort level such as raising your hand to present something in a meeting. It may help to get perspective and remember that many people are nervous about big presentations, and you are not alone. Then take up space and be proud and confident of your work. You are the expert of your own presentation! Let go of the things you can't change about how your presentation went and ask for feedback afterwards. Additionally, seek out a mentorship to give you objective feedback and help you work through any self-doubt.

One way to project your confidence is in the way you speak to your audience. Simple switches in word choice can help you elevate your professionalism such as not over apologizing (thank you for waiting instead of sorry I'm late) and avoiding words that project into the past or future (could, should, have to, always). When speaking with a customer or your employer about a project, it is important to shift the focus on the value you create with the process instead of just stating what the outcome was. For example, don't focus on the fact that you don't have an MBA or PHD, but all the experience you've gained being in the workforce instead. With these switches in word choices and thought patterns, you will feel surer of yourself and able to get your point across to someone more effectively. Practice bragging about yourself and accomplishments, work on accepting compliments, and be able to speak to the value and superpowers you have. When speaking to your manager about raises, promotions, and reviews

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you should get comfortable advocating for yourself. Whether it is a job interview, performance reviews, or when you are networking to "tell me about yourself" when networking, get comfortable advocating for yourself. You can do this by articulating your wins, any obstacles you overcame, when you went above and beyond, or a time you took initiative. You can even keep a record of your wins/positive feedback to reference or when you feel self-doubt. This could be as simple as a folder in your inbox of any positive feedback you received.

To further articulate your worth to a customer or your employer, you should know what your professional superpower is. That thing that makes you unique from any other competitors. What is a distinctive value you add to the team? A hiring manager can have one hundred resumes with similar educational and experience, but what do you offer to a job beyond that? A professional superpower is typically a "soft skill" or non-technical skill that you bring to a project or team and are an example of your workplace emotional intelligence. Your superpower can often be tied to what motivates you or gets you excited about your job? If your purpose is aligned with what you are doing, you will be more invested in it. It is possible that your motivations or superpowers can change over time as you continue to grow in your career. You can leverage this passion/superpower in your current role at a pay conversation or pitching a project to a customer and this will help you stand out in future interviews.   An example of a superpower would be, "I'm enthusiastic which keeps morale up, morale being high makes them more motivated, when they are more motivated, they are more productive, and higher productivity is time saved". If you start with what motivates you, it is then easier to identify your superpower, and then what value that brings. Another example would be, "My motivation is solving complex challenges and the recognition that goes with it. Keeping that in mind, my superpower is my high bandwidth for managing many projects at once. The unique value this brings to a team is that I leverage information and subject matter experts from multiple resources to find solutions to difficult problems.

These skills will help you be confident. However, even when you exude confidence, you can still face doubters, alienation, and people who do not respect you because of your gender, age or other diverse characteristics. Our research shows that 70% of respondents who come from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds have faced difficult or inappropriate situations with customers in the field. Additionally, 88% of respondents shared that the problems they faced were not resolved and they just learned to work around them. This statistic is reflective of the fact that 66% of our respondents didn't know how to even handle these situations. Think about it, you can have all the professional confidence in the world, but if a key client is harassing you or dismissing your qualifications and it seems you are on your own, what would you do?

It is important to have a safe space for employees to discuss these issues. If you ever feel unsafe or disrespected, speak with your manager or HR about these issues. Trust is key and then and only then can you address sensitive issues. As a good measure, follow up with a

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written note. Lastly, mention how and what you have both decided to put in place if this type of situation should happen again. One survey respondent had excellent advice stating, "Find a place where you are appreciated for the value you bring to the team and are heard. This doesn't mean you will be agreed with 100% of the time, however there is a way to express to someone you hear what they are saying but have a differing opinion." If you do not feel supported by your company, you can take these professional confidence skills to speak your value to a company that will support you. If you don't feel you can handle a difficult situation, ask for help. Seek out someone you trust or your Human Resource Manager for help. We call this "raising our red flag".

Businesses can take an active role in creating community and a sense of belonging. Working in the field can be lonely already. Connectedness matters and mutual support helps all employees feel valued and engaged. Companies should consider creating opportunities within your organization for your diverse field team to come together to share their experiences. HOH Water Technology has created a "Women in the Field" group that meets each quarter. This group shares their experiences, their struggles, and insights into daily life in the field. We have been able to share stories about customers who challenge us because of our gender and age. We have been able to validate and coach each other through various issues. This also helps us realize when we need to elevate the situation, if necessary. Having a group like this makes us feel more supported and empowered to handle these situations. Additionally, AWT has groups like Women of Water and Young Professional that support these diverse populations in our industry. Encourage your employees to get involved with these groups.

To those of us that feel like an isolated minority of this industry, know that you are not alone. You can use the tools to step into your professional confidence and win over the people who doubt you. We placed a red towel on each chair, you may be wondering why. The concept is simple but a great reminder. There was a buffet restaurant in Texas 20 years ago that had a tiny flagpole on the table. When you needed some help from the waitress, like a refill or another taco, you simply raised the flag, and they would come to assist you. The towels are to remind you that you have a team of people behind you in your company and in this organization. If you feel like you are uncomfortable or feel stuck, raise your red flag and someone will come running. To give you advice, to help you with that problem customer, or just to lend an ear. You are not alone, and you are empowered to walk confidently in this fantastic industry and career you are in.

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Resources:

Research-Backed Benefits of Diversity on Sales Teams

"How to overcome imposter syndrome at work"

"10 ways to boost your confidence in the workplace"

"Ladies Get Paid" book by Claire Wasserman

How to Build Confidence-HBR

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