WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Diane Freeman, P.Eng., FEC President

From left to right: Maud Cohen, ing., president, Ordre des ingénieurs du Québec; Kim Farwell, P.Eng., president, Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta; Margaret Li, PhD, P.Eng., FEC, past president, Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of British Columbia; Chantal Guay, MEnv, ing., P.Eng., CEO, Engineers Canada; Diane Freeman, P.Eng., FEC, president, PEO; Shawna Argue, P.Eng., FEC, president, Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Saskatchewan; and Catherine Karakatsanis, MESc, P.Eng., FEC, past president, PEO.

AT A TIME when women represent only 10 per cent of all professional engineers in Canada, there is a ray of light in the effort to become a more inclusive profession. At PEO's recent annual business meeting, it was the first time in the regulator's history that a woman succeeded another woman as president. In fact, licence holders have elected five women to lead the association in its 88 years, beginning with Claudette MacKay-Lassonde, P.Eng., in 1986.

During the term of Past President Catherine Karakatsanis, MESc, P.Eng., FEC, engineers in two other provinces were also led by female presidents–in Quebec by Maud Cohen, ing., and in British Columbia by Margaret Li, PhD, P.Eng., FEC. And, at the annual general meeting of Engineers Canada in May, I was proud to stand beside Kim Farwell, P.Eng. (Alberta), Shauna Argue, P.Eng., FEC (Saskatchewan), and Maud Cohen, ing. (Quebec)–all elected presidents of their respective province's licensing and regulating bodies for 2010-2011. When Ontario is added to the mix, you may be surprised to learn that over 90 per cent of Canada's licensed engineers are this year represented by female leadership. This is quite an achievement.

While these accomplishments speak to the confidence that Canadian engineers have in women as leaders of our profession, it by no means indicates our work is complete.

Despite the often negative and overwhelming statistics about women in the profession, including a decline in the percentage of women pursuing engineering in relation to men–currently less than 20 per cent of undergraduate engineering students in Canada are women–research shows that women who do enter the engineering workforce are often very successful.

In fact, young women are excelling in school and outperforming men in the early years of their careers.

The problem, according to a survey published in *Harvard Business Review*, is that more than half of these women quit their private-sector jobs in science, engineering and technology. But the dropouts aren't disillusioned young women. These women are mostly between the ages of 35 and 40 and drop out because of such factors as a hostile work environment and extreme job pressure. And, while a significant number of men (40 per cent) also leave private-sector jobs in science, technology and engineering, the majority who quit stay in the field, either starting up their own companies or going into government work, while half of female dropouts leave the field altogether. At the same time, the study says, women disproportionately shoulder family responsibilities. At 35, many women are either having their first child or adding a second child to the family.

So while women seem to have the confidence of their professional colleagues to lead, I believe more work needs to be done to hold onto qualified women so the profession may benefit further from their unique skills.

As noted by Chantal Guay, ing., P.Eng., CEO, Engineers Canada, "Research has shown that the tipping point–the point at which different ways of thinking or doing something becomes commonplace–is 30 per cent." I, too, believe we need to make it a common goal for all engineering institutions to bring the number of female professional engineers up to 30 per cent and to show these women that engineering can be a life-long career choice.

Based on the recommendations of its Women in Engineering Task Force, Engineers Canada is now doing just that–working with its constituent members, including PEO's Equity and Diversity Committee and OSPE's Women in Engineering Committee, on ways to attract and retain women in engineering and improve the retention of female engineers in the workforce. Men and women can have quite different points of view about issues, so a balance between the number of men and women in engineering will lead to more balanced and socially conscious solutions to real-world problems.

Our profession and society will prosper as a result. Σ