

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

"Diversity and inclusion is everyone's job. We own it as employees, but we also need to seek it out from our organizations and from our networks."

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How have you seen the industry change for women as you established yourself as a leader?

There has been progress, but I'd like to see it accelerate. I started my career in an administrative role, predominantly surrounded by women. As I looked to advance my career through roles I aspired to, there were few women in leadership and in executive roles. When I finally got my dream job and moved from a small town to Toronto, I was the youngest and one of just two women on the team. I was fortunate to find a mentor within that group who taught me to be my authentic self, to use my voice in ways that made an impact, and to keep advocating for what I believed in even if I didn't see results right away. I've also established a trusted network of dynamic women in leadership across different companies. Together, over a period of 20 years, we've supported one another in our careers.

As a Desjardins employee, what does it mean to you to work for a company that embraces diversity and inclusion?

Diversity and inclusion is everyone's job. We own it as employees, but we also need to seek it out from our organizations and from our networks. When I joined Desjardins, I was inspired by who they are. Dorimène Desjardins co-founded the Desjardins Group with her husband more than 100 years ago.

Monique Leroux, president and CEO from 2008 to 2016, was the first woman to lead a major financial services organization in Canada. And our current CEO, Guy Cormier, has committed to a target of 50% female senior executives by 2024. We're already at 44% in my division, supported by our Empowering Women network, which is creating a path forward toward gender equality. There's no longer a single narrative for diversity, so it's important to see and embrace change, both of which lead to being more empathetic and achieving real outcomes.

This is at the heart of being a co-operative. Everything we do supports the economic and social well-being of all individuals and all communities. And it's facilitated through our Desjardins Behaviours, which inform how our 52,000 employees across Canada work together and interact with our clients and partners. Our values also come into play in the solutions we develop, such as our SocieTerra Diversity Fund, which invests in companies with higher female representation on their boards of directors or executive management committees.

What should the industry be doing better to foster a more diverse and inclusive culture?

Having diverse employees with diverse ideas is the key to unlocking the full value of a business because it sparks creativity and innovation.

Ultimately, it also leads to a healthier workplace and more inclusive and culturally aware employees.

Baseline, all organizations need to set clear objectives around diversity and inclusion, because when you have something that will be measured, it gets done. Holding leaders accountable creates a culture in which employees of all backgrounds feel valued and driven to reach their potential.

It's equally important to empower employees at all levels to have a voice. For employees, I would say, don't wait for someone to give you direction or to change the policy. We can all change how we behave and the impact we have. And we can all make conversations within our organizations constructive, acknowledge challenges like privilege, and use them as an opportunity for development, education, and change.

Lastly, mentorship is good but should evolve into sponsorship, which means being someone's advocate when they're not there, creating visibility and managing other people's perceptions and biases. Sponsorship is about lifting people up and helping them advance by nominating or talking about them in a supportive way.