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Heartland's women #ChooseToChallenge gender stereotypes

E koekoe te tūi, e ketekete te kākā, e kūkū te kereru – Appreciate the many voices of the forest

Heartland considers diversity, in all its forms, a strength. We're committed to supporting initiatives at all levels of the organisation to foster diversity, including our promotion of te reo and tikanga Māori in the workplace, our support of Heartland's Rainbow community, and our work towards gender balance and inclusivity.

International Women's Day is fast approaching (8 March), and we're incredibly proud to celebrate the hundreds of talented, driven and inspiring female Heartlanders. Not only do women comprise over half of our workforce, they also make up 50% of our Strategic Management Group.

In line with the theme of International Women's Day, #ChooseToChallenge, we wanted to hear from a few of our female leaders about the challenges they've faced and successes they've achieved as women in business.

Sharon Yardley (Head of Ops, Risk and Compliance, Reverse Mortgages Australia)

One of our Heartlanders in Australia, Sharon heads up the Australian Heartland Reverse Mortgages team in Melbourne and has worked in the business for over 16 years. She's found the biggest struggle has been bringing her full, vulnerable and genuine self into work.

"I've noticed, particularly early in my career, that being a loud, sports-loving woman with an opinion was not always appreciated, and so I did overthink and self-edit quite a bit," Sharon explained. "In the past few years, though, I've had some great people leaders who have helped me learn to be honestly authentic, and also to allow the others, who I now look after, the same opportunity."

Sharon has achieved a great deal since beginning at Heartland, including completing her MBA while having a young child and working full-time as a manager.

"I had never done any academic studies before starting my Masters, and I graduated in the Golden Key group of my class," she said. "It reminds me of how much anyone can achieve if they put their mind to it, and that we shouldn't underestimate ourselves or the people around us."

Sharon's advice for others is to not be scared – have a go, put your hand up, take risks and try things.

"You can always change roles or jobs if something doesn't work, but if you never give it a go, you will never know. Find people who will be absolutely honest with you and provide genuine feedback. And lastly, be kind to yourself and don't be afraid to make a mistake – that's how you learn."

Jo McNaughton (Diversity – Pou Ārahi Kaupapa Māori)

For the last three years, Jo has been focusing primarily on running Heartland's kaupapa Māori

initiatives in the People and Culture team. While being a woman in business is challenging as is, Jo has found that the challenges for Māori women are on a bigger scale.

“Firstly, as women in a male-dominated industry, we already have to work harder to be heard and seen, to get paid the same and to get into positions of influence,” she explained. “On top of that, there are extra difficulties for Māori women, as we tend to get paid less than our white female counterparts and are even less likely to be in senior management.”

When asked about her greatest achievements, Jo believes her answer is better explained through a certain whakataukī, or proverb.

“Ehara taku toa I te toa takitahi, he takitini kē – nothing is ever achieved alone, there are always many people involved in success,” she said.

“With that said, some projects I’m proud to have been involved in include the development of Heartland’s mātāpono (values), the Manawa Ako internship programme, our Manawa Whenua committee, and other kaupapa in the workplace. My hope is that the introduction of these initiatives will provide a broader perspective of the workplace, the business, and its potential.”

Jo’s advice to other women is to seek wider perspectives, as there are so many variations to the gender spectrum, the way we identify, and how this forms our world view.

“Even within International Women’s Day, we need to be including and uplifting Māori voices,” she explained. “For example, the group that spearheaded the suffrage movement – the group we’re celebrating on IWD – required Māori women to declare that they would never take on their ancestral sacred markings if they joined the group. It’s important for us to consider a broader view as part of this rhetoric.”

Cynthia Lee (Manager of Consumer Credit)

As the Manager of Consumer Credit for our motor team, Cynthia has led a fantastic team of credit managers for the past year and a half. In her early days, she found the biggest challenge was trying to prove herself.

“The motor industry is still quite male-dominated, so it took some time for me to prove that I knew what I was doing – especially to those who had been in the industry for many years,” she explained. “That’s definitely improved with time, but building credibility as a woman in the motor sphere can still be a longer journey.”

Like many of us, Cynthia has struggled with self-confidence and fear of failure, which have held her back in the past.

“I’m grateful to have supportive leaders who gave me the nudge I needed to push past my comfort zone. Now I’m proud to say that I’ve taken the next step in my career and get to lead an amazing, high-performing team.”

Cynthia’s advice for other women in finance? Don’t sell yourself short.

“As women we may try to find reasons we aren’t good enough instead of reasons we are, or that

someone else is more qualified,” she said. “Take a leap and back yourself.”

Jill Armitage (Retail Regional Manager, Christchurch)

Jill, the Retail Regional Manager for our Christchurch office, has been with Heartland for an incredible 21 years, and in this particular role for six. Like many female full-time employees, she’s juggled work and family over the course of her career.

“The biggest struggle for me would have been balancing motherhood and working full-time, as I know a lot of our Heartland people are still doing,” she explained. “When our family was growing up, we didn’t have the same access to day care facilities or paid maternity leave that they do today, so finding that balance was a challenge.”

One of Jill’s proudest achievements is having helped build a strong team in the Christchurch office.

“It’s been a real pleasure to work with such a great team over the years,” she said. “As a leader, I feel proud to have helped foster a positive and welcoming environment and culture.”

When asked about her advice for other women in the financial sphere, Jill emphasised the importance of having a good work ethic.

“When opportunities are presented to you, believe in yourself, work hard and just go for it!”

Thanks to Cynthia, Jo, Sharon and Jill for sharing with us – and thanks to all the inspiring women from across Heartland who are adding immense value, both to their teams and to Heartland as a whole.

– ENDS –