

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES



LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

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GIVING REGIONAL WOMEN A WORKING CHANCE TO CLOSE THE GENDER PAY GAP

POLA Inc., a major Japanese cosmetics company, has around 4,000 stores and more than 40,000 sales staff all over Japan, with operations in seven Asian countries and regions. POLA has had women at senior management level and on the Board for some time and is unique in its efforts to promote the women's economic empowerment living outside major cities.

What was the motivation behind signing on to the Women's Empowerment Principles?

We value increasing the potential of people. For example, a single lipstick may add confidence to a woman and encourage her to be more active. POLA Beauty Directors (BDs) are self-employed salespeople who have a business consignment contract with us, and successful BDs who rise to become shop owners can then become Grand Owners (GO) of multiple shops. We have a BD who is 100 years old and who is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records for being the oldest beauty adviser. Another BD, who is 80 years old, has 100 shops with monthly sales of more than 200 million yen.

A small opportunity can let a flower blossom. I would like to make this world full of opportunities. Gender equality is a foundation for such movement. Signing the WEPs has made me want to advocate more.

How do the WEPs contribute to your company's efforts in promoting gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

POLA has a long history of women's active participation. In 1937, when salespeople were predominantly male, one woman looked at the recruitment poster and asked the manager whether she would be eligible for the post. The manager hired her. I am amazed by her courage, and respect the manager who gave her that chance.

POLA has a history of believing in the potential of women and investing in training in order to build the capacities of the BDs. We have a corporate culture where our male employees recognize the abilities of their female counterparts, as they see how the BDs continue to work successfully from their early 20s into their 60s and 70s. I see this corporate culture aligns to the Principle 5, Enterprise Development, Supply Chain, Marketing Practices.

When I joined POLA about 30 years ago, there was already a female senior manager who was a working mother, and female university graduates were working on a par with their male colleagues. We owe this culture to the decisions of previous senior managers and executives to believe in women and extend them opportunities.

I have taken this corporate culture for granted, but I would like to tackle awareness gaps that still may exist between senior managers and employees, as specified in the Principle 4, Education and Training for Career Advancement.

Given the current situation in Japan where there are few women senior managers, executives and CEOs, what do you think would be your contribution as the first female President at POLA?

To tell the truth, I do not think people in POLA thought “our next President is a woman” but simply “our next President is Ms. Oikawa,” because we already have female presidents in our group companies.

After becoming President, however, I noticed that I am asked quite often by journalists and interviewers whether I have been hired from outside or built my career within POLA. I realized then that a career path, which is very common for men, of working up the corporate ladder in one company to become President, is rare for women.

It was also a realization that what seemed common sense at POLA might actually be uncommon in the general Japanese corporate world. This is why I now see the significance of raising more awareness and communicating about what it means for a woman to advance herself within an organization.

At POLA, women have been eligible to take a promotion exam to become a manager for 30 years now, which is why, when I became manager 15 years ago, I was not a rare case. However, if I hadn't had that path, I would not be here today. In other words, when companies do not promote women to take up managerial positions, they are eliminating the possibilities of bringing up a future female CEO.

How do the WEPs contribute to the broader agenda of advancing gender equality in the Japanese private sector?

WEPs are useful because they provide various ways of measuring progress in advancing gender equality. Despite the fact that we are doing relatively well in the number of women in senior management, now that we have signed the WEPs, I know I will have to think further about their equal opportunities.

I have been committed to eliminating gender gaps even before signing the WEPs. I used to always measure progress by looking at indicators such as the number of women in senior management and/or the number of employees taking parental leave. I believe setting indicators and monitoring falls under Principle 1, High-level Corporate Leadership.

In fact, at POLA, 40 per cent of executives are women and 30 per cent of senior managers are women; the number is steadily rising. However, thanks to the WEPs, I now try to look beyond these numbers and see if we are really providing equal opportunities. Senior managers tend to make assumptions about their female subordinates, for example, “she is excellent, but she said she wanted another child so I can't recommend her for a higher position.” We need a senior manager who would question such assumptions by asking, “Have you checked with her? She might think otherwise, she has seven months before her maternity leave.” Then we might be able to change our unconscious bias.

If there are no women on the list of candidates for senior managers, we should ask ourselves why. We should let go of our unconscious bias like “she is excellent but is newly married (and might be expecting to have children)” or ‘she is unable to move to a busier section because she has to look after her child.’ We should, instead, ask them directly what their plans are. Small but steady steps like this are essential in building diversity and

inclusion where individuals can thrive. These actions fall under Principle 2, Treat all women and men fairly at work without discrimination. I believe it is important to look into each individual's needs as much as possible when addressing gender gaps, and WEPs is a useful framework to do so.

Please tell us about your future aspirations.

I would like to advance women's economic empowerment in the local communities and contribute to regional revitalization.

Through the WEPs, I have come to realize that POLA's business model of "cultivating female leaders at the local community level" contributes significantly to advancing gender equality. There are more than 40,000 BDs across Japan, even in small villages. Providing employment opportunities for women helps close the economic gap between women and men.

A BD in a small village who manages several shops is already a community leader. Their daily practices are often very much in line with the values of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. We also developed a booklet that clarifies POLA's commitments to promoting gender equality and distributed it to more than 40,000 BDs across Japan as part of our work under Principle 6, Community initiatives and Advocacy.

I would like our BDs to be a source of inspiration to other women in the communities, to give them light and realize their own potential. I believe this is POLA's original approach in advancing gender equality.

Women's Empowerment Principles



High-level corporate
leadership



Workplace HR



Employee well-being
and safety



Education and training
for women



Supplier diversity
& marketing practices



Community
engagement



Measurement and
reporting

