



## FINDING YOUR VOICE: WOMEN IN LAUNDRY MANAGEMENT

Nicole Palmer, a regional manager at Prudential Overall Supply, reflects on issues facing female managers

By Shavon Lindley

**W**e've all heard the phrase "It's a man's world." Fortunately, with the sheer numbers of women on corporate and nonprofit boards and in public office on the rise, that's beginning to feel less true.

It's important for those of us working in women's leadership development, however, to realize that some industries *do* remain very male-dominated. And it's incumbent on us all to address the challenges women face in those sectors—and to look for opportunities to help women rise and thrive.

One example is the linen, uniform and facility services industry. During a

recent TRSA panel discussion in Houston, leading female commercial laundry executives identified a number of challenges to recruiting and growing women executives in the field (see [bit.ly/tswomenpanel](http://bit.ly/tswomenpanel) for details). One issue that these execs noted is the lack of public knowledge about this "hidden industry." Sure, we all go to restaurants with cloth napkins and stay in hotels where every employee wears a neatly pressed uniform. But do we really think about where every welcome mat, chef apron and hospital lab coat come from?

The more I've learned about textile services, the more fervently I believe that women *should* know about it! It's a technologically advanced industry with multiple management and leadership opportunities. And the schedules for many of the plants tend to favor working moms, with days that begin early and end in the early afternoon—providing flexibility for family time.

I look forward to discussing issues facing women in the industry, as well as the

support system awaiting aspiring commercial laundry executives, when I address the Clean Show on June 6 at the Las Vegas Convention Center (click [bit.ly/Clean17](http://bit.ly/Clean17) to learn more). I hope you'll register your rising female leaders to attend our event. For a sneak peak, read on for tips on surviving and thriving in a male-dominated field by one of the execs who served on the aforementioned industry panel: Nicole Palmer, regional manager of Prudential Overall Supply in Fresno, CA. Palmer (noted below as NP) started out in a plumbing-supply business where she quickly learned about the challenges facing women in that area.

### TIP #1

**They call them "red flags" for a reason. Be wary of attempts by anyone, male or female, to take advantage of you.**

*NP: When I first started out at 26, my business partner had been in the contracting industry since before indoor plumbing. He was older and had an ego bigger than Texas. I wanted desperately to own my own business and was determined to do that, despite the numerous red flags I should have heeded prior to signing an asset agreement to an existing plumbing and repair business that put me on the hook for a lot of money.*

Palmer told me that it quickly became apparent in her business relationship with her partner that he would be the money and power; she the "sweat equity." Unfortunately, I have heard some version of this story and dynamic more times than I can count. The first, and often hardest, step in owning your evolution is understanding when someone else is controlling your growth. Palmer says that she watched, seemingly powerless, as her partner purchased trucks, rented buildings and bought advertising they couldn't afford.

Women like Palmer share their experiences, so that women coming up the leadership ladder can learn from them. Ideally, female entrepreneurs should

avoid partnerships and alliances that are imbalanced—whether because of age, experience or financial investment—to the detriment of the woman’s growth, autonomy, or integrity. But if that ship has sailed, it’s never too late to own your voice and speak up for yourself.

## TIP #2

### When words fail, go to the data.

*NP: As time went on during that business partnership, I became anxious about our debt and our risks—but when I shared my “silly” concerns with my partner, he became agitated. Finally, I realized I had been going about it all wrong. I knew the data, the numbers, the facts. So when he said, “It will all work out, honey,” I came back at him with real numbers: payroll, rent, equipment, revenues. Facts can’t be disputed as easily as emotions like fear or concern.*

Palmer decided early in the plumbing partnership to understand and internalize the financial side of her new business. She hired a bookkeeper, her mom, who set up Quickbooks to track costs and revenues. She read every book about business and finance she could get her hands on, learning “scary” terms like cash flow, variable expenses and double-declining depreciation. “When I first began throwing these terms out to my partner,” Palmer says, “I realized he went with his gut.” That gave Palmer an opening to assert her knowledge and gain more equal power in the relationship and in the business.

It’s a lesson Palmer’s made a key part of her own management style. At Prudential she makes sure to spend as much time as possible with all her new managers. She gives them a safe place to ask questions and learn or re-learn how to read a financial statement, look for market trends and read financial tea leaves. “They may have learned it at one point,” Palmer says, “but now they have real skin in the game.”

## TIP #3

### Owning your voice and owning your emotions go hand-in-hand.

*NP: My conflicts with that former partner became one-sided shouting matches. I would go back to the numbers. I quickly realized that when I dug in and stuck to the facts, I could keep my emotions in check. I felt more in control than I ever had.*

Some women recoil from shouting and avoid conflict in the workplace—but if you find yourself in the kinds of situations Palmer describes, finding your voice and owning your emotions are crucial. And the two, of course, are intertwined—how you use and control your voice affects how you exercise and leverage your emotions, and vice versa.

Palmer found, again, that knowing and sticking to the facts helped her separate the work at hand from her emotional response. “It helps you to stop, take a breath, and get some perspective. I’ve even been able to evolve this skill into taking my own emotion out of a situation enough to empathize with where someone else might be coming from.”

## TIP #4

### Owning your evolution means knowing when it’s time to leave.

*NP: I eventually left that situation with my former business partner. It had become toxic for both of us. But what I learned from that experience—everything I told you about learning the facts and finding my voice—was so much more valuable than money.*

When it’s time to leave a job that’s clearly not working, we use phrases like “cut your losses.” But Palmer was able to appreciate the *gains* she’d made in the experience of co-owning and managing a business: learning how to do payroll, expanding into multiple locations, purchasing equipment. Knowing that she’d acquired critical business and leadership


skills gave Palmer the courage to take her talents and experience elsewhere.

At the end of the day, Palmer credits her success in the linen, uniform and facility services industry to these and other lessons she learned in the plumbing business. The predominance of men in both fields, for example, brought similar challenges in recruiting women. “Recruiting women to snake a drain was pretty difficult,” she told the panel of textile services industry executives in February, suggesting that companies look for management trainees within the organization—maybe someone in the office, in human resources or production.

Palmer is continually looking for ways to recruit more women into the textile services industry as part of TRSA’s Women in Textile Services Committee. Having more women in leadership positions will help lift companies across the entire sector. Simply put, equity is good for business—particularly in today’s competitive labor market. Therefore, it behooves the industry to adapt its management practices to take advantage of women’s unique capabilities.

Of course, improving gender diversity will require hiring more women into business units where they’re currently underrepresented, as well as moving existing hires up the leadership ladder through development and mentorship. I’m excited to spearhead what promises to be an exciting conversation about industry trends and potential strategies for developing female textile services executives at the Clean Show. If you haven’t already, go to [bit.ly/Clean17](https://bit.ly/Clean17) to learn more and register your company and your rising female leaders for my event.

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