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Lessons Learned: NWT WIM President Gaeleen MacPherson



Gaeleen MacPherson's career has included a stop at every producing diamond mining company

in the NWT. Her work has allowed her to travel the country and has been the source of nonstop learning opportunities. 2022 was an impressive year of accomplishments and accolades for MacPherson. But how did she get here?

It began with a realization, early on, that she needed to be her own biggest advocate and she shouldn't hesitate from learning and growing in the workplace. It's advice she now passes on to other northerners, and Indigenous and female colleagues in the industry.

MacPherson got her start in mining as a summer student with Diavik, while attending the University of Lethbridge. After completing her Bachelor of Management Degree in human resources and labour relations, with honours, she was hired as an HR Administrator for the Snap Lake diamond mine.

Eventually, MacPherson learned of an HR Coordinator opening. "It would have been a step up for me," she said. "I knew that I could do the job, so I spoke with my boss and she gave me the opportunity to take on this new role."

Clearly, MacPherson was the right fit for the position, later becoming Superintendent of Human Resources and Training for De Beers Canada. Soon after, she moved on to Dominion Diamond Mines, the former owner and operator of Ekati, where she climbed the ladder to VP of Corporate Affairs—the highest position held by an Indigenous woman in the NWT mining industry.

Today, MacPherson's career has come full circle. In 2019, she returned to Diavik as the Human Resources Business Partner and now holds the role of Senior Manager of Human Resources and Corporate Social Performance. Her contribution to the NWT's mining has been recognized by her peers: she became the first president of the NWT's Women in Mining chapter and she also won the inaugural Women in Mining Award at the Max Awards in 2022.

None of this was by accident. From the start, MacPherson knew she didn't want to limit herself to human resources and training initiatives at work. "We all have specialities," she said, "but I've always made it a point of learning about the broader business and what the issues, pain points, and opportunities are." This type of learning can help people make informed decisions as they get into leadership roles.

During her time at Snap Lake, MacPherson remembers the site services superintendent jokingly asking if she wanted to go to the sewage treatment plant. She surprised him by saying, "Absolutely!" That choice to learn about water and sewage management later proved instrumental to understanding the water issues that the mine, and MacPherson as a leader, would deal with.

Now, as President of the NWT's Women in Mining chapter, MacPherson is keen to help create connections between professionals with different backgrounds, through a mentorship network for women in the NWT mining sector. She also wants to build relationships with other Women in Mining chapters to link program offerings for members. That could include a baseline of professional training and development opportunities available at the three diamond mines to support women in their professional growth in the industry. "I think we can also look at unique partnerships with organizations that have gender equity as part of their programming, such as the Mining Industry Human Resource Council, to look at how we can move the dial together on diversity in mining here in the North," she said.

Part of that work is improving the views of mining among young people, who, MacPherson said, don't seem very interested in mining careers today, believing it could be due to misconceptions that mining is "dirty" or doesn't meet the current focus on green energy.

Born and raised in Edzo, roughly 100 kilometres northwest of the NWT capital, MacPherson pondered her own career prospects in a Yellowknife high school classroom not so long ago. She thinks it's important that young people know about green energy and greenhouse gas reduction efforts underway by NWT mines.

She also advises young people—and young professionals—to look for coaches and mentors they trust. "Coaches and mentors play important roles in growth and development," she said. "They are people who know the business you're in, know your profession, or just know you and can give you great feedback and advice when you're looking for it."

"Trusted people who are willing to tell you the good, the bad, and the ugly are important to have in your corner." And they're important to have leading the charge to make the mining workforce more representative of the NWT's population.