



Progress & Perspectives

WOMEN IN STEEL

Amy Lachman

President, PhyMet Inc./MicroPoly

Amy Lachman's 25+ year career with PhyMet Inc./MicroPoly is impressive — especially starting out as only one of two women in the company: Lachman, a chemist; the other, a secretary.

She originally had no intention of joining the steel/lubrication industry, wanting to give her talents to environmental services companies. But her father, once head of research at Armco Steel, presented her with an offer after her M.B.A. graduation: work for him for five years at his newly acquired company. If she liked it, she could have the company. If not, she could walk away without family guilt.

"My five years were up a long time ago," Lachman chuckled.

When Lachman first started at PhyMet Inc., it was clear that she was not welcomed by all. But her trust in MicroPoly's success, and her admitted stubbornness, kept her there. She had developed a comfort in being one of few women in her math and science classes during her undergraduate studies at Muskingum University and her M.B.A. classes at Bowling Green State University. By embracing her knowledge and self-worth, she cultivated a highly collaborative and welcoming work environment — one of her favorite things about the company.

In its history, MicroPoly has had employees representing all education levels. Lachman believes that all voices are equally important as they all bring new perspectives. One example of this is the regular all-employee staff meetings where the group is encouraged to ask questions or provide suggestions.

Pre-COVID, the company would engage in a monthly program Lachman implemented, called "Food for Thought." The company would pay for lunch and she

presented on a topic based on inquiries she received or a topic of her choosing about PhyMet Inc./MicroPoly. This allowed employees to share a meal together and ask questions — about the product itself, where the product was going, how it was being used in particular industries, health insurance, etc.

Lachman admitted, "To begin with, there wasn't much conversation because they weren't sure about this new 'thing' I was trying. But now, it's one of the things people are looking forward to the most once we're through COVID and can actually all get together in one room and share a meal, and they can ask me anything they want to know again."

Another initiative Lachman implemented, pre-COVID, was meeting with each employee one on one a few times per year in which the employee picks what the two of them talk about.

"We talk about books they're reading, or a movie they saw, or they tell me about their kids. It's not meant to be business oriented. It's meant for us to know each other. I don't hear of many other companies that do that," Lachman stated.

Not only has Lachman fortified a collaborative work environment during her tenure, but her leadership guided PhyMet Inc. to receive the Blue Chip Enterprise Award from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for its superior hiring practices and innovation in manufacturing.

MicroPoly has full-time employees, but it also employs retirees who are simply looking to stay busy.

"It's wonderful for us because when business gets slow; we can just ask them to stay home and they're willing to do it. But when we get a sudden swing, we have trained, experienced, well-qualified people who can come in and



Amy Lachman and her employees celebrated the groundbreaking of PhyMet Inc./MicroPoly's current building in 2001.

give us 40 hours at the drop of a hat. That's one thing I would encourage other small business owners to look into," she expressed.

PhyMet Inc. has been woman-owned since Lachman took over in the mid-1990s, but it wasn't until several years later that a customer asked for their official National Women's Business Enterprise Certification to prove they are a woman-owned business. Lachman initially questioned why this type of certification was necessary but learned that companies could receive credit for purchases they made if PhyMet was certified.

PhyMet's technology is so novel that there are fewer than 10 companies in the world that make microporous polymeric lubricants. This type of certification does not necessarily give PhyMet new business, but it makes them a better supplier because their customers can receive credit for a sale. Buying from a certified woman-owned business can serve as a public display of their commitment to diversity and inclusion.

"No one is going to start buying MicroPoly because it's made by a woman-owned company," Lachman stated. "They buy it because they need it and it solves a problem. But it does make us a better vendor."

These awards and certifications would bring a sense of pride to any business owner, but Lachman's proudest achievements are centered on automation implementations, which have allowed her company to do five times more work than when she started.

Furthermore, there came a time in her career when she realized she did not know enough.

"I had an M.B.A. and a degree in chemistry, but I needed to figure out how to get the company to the next

level, and I realized I didn't have the skills. And so I went looking for them," Lachman acknowledged.

She found Aileron, a non-profit organization whose goal is to help established for-profit companies grow. She took a course and was paired with a business development advisor to guide her through this new venture. "Last year before COVID hit, we were on track for 40% growth, and that was because I knew I needed to know more things. I went out there and I learned them, and we were on fire," Lachman said.

Lachman's self-awareness and desire for continuous knowledge and success is admirable, especially in the eyes of younger women in search of careers in male-dominated fields. She shared important advice for these women:

- » Go for it! Don't let anyone decide where you get to sit at the table.
- » Make sure you show up to every single meeting knowing what you're doing. When you're the only one of your kind in the room, everything you say and do sticks out.
- » Steel is interesting, vibrant and a wonderful place to start a career. It's a great field to be going into — especially if you're interested in math and science. It needs more women.

Amy Lachman's story is not unheard of, but rare in the steel industry. From her experience, the steel industry is "the last bastion of the guys." She's seen gender progression in other manufacturing businesses and believes attracting and retaining more women will only benefit the steel industry, particularly in the United States. ♦