



Women of Woda: Nurturing Natural Talents

Development firm empowers its team to create the best affordable housing solutions for those who need them most

The Woda Group Inc. is developing, constructing and managing high-quality affordable housing across 15 states while simultaneously creating a positive, empowering work environment for its employees and executives.

Jeffrey Woda and David Cooper, Founders and Principals at the Woda Group, foster an engaging atmosphere that allows the company's team to thrive – and that sentiment extends across all segments of the company from design and development, through construction and property management.



The Woda Group

Location :: Columbus, Ohio



“IF I SEE A WOMAN IN CONSTRUCTION, I WANT TO BE ABLE TO GIVE HER AS MUCH MOTIVATION AND AS MUCH HELP AS I CAN.

-Darla Tovar, Vice President of Woda Construction, Inc



Including more women at every level of a large firm's operations can be challenging, especially given historic prejudices in the male-dominated development, finance and construction industries. The Woda Group is actively combatting these stereotypes and helping ensure female representation is strong throughout the organization.

AN EMPOWERING ATMOSPHERE

Darla Tovar, Vice President of Woda Construction, Inc, says that she has observed a growth of female leaders both in the office and on the construction field.

“They're really trying to do a purposeful job of giving women the opportunity to grow in the ranks,” she says.

“If I see a woman in construction, I want to be able to give her as much motivation and as much help as I can,” Tovar says. “If they are doing well and they have great promise, we will support them and help them move on to the next step.”

According to Director of Construction Accounting, Donna Ferrell, the company's leadership team consistently encourages autonomy on the part of employees.

“I've been able to implement lots of changes,” she says. “They have always supported me, and I feel like they have always had my back.”

There are a number of examples of female leadership across the firm. The finance area for two of the organization's three divisions are led by women. There are women at all levels of the company's construction division including team leaders, project managers, and project engineers. On the development side, there are also women at all levels.

As Vice President of Development Jennifer Ricci is responsible for closing and processing construction loans, permanent loans, equity investments and other financing needs. Anne Little, a corporate attorney leads the Pre-Construction team and Jill Clifford heads accounting and finance for the development group.

Even across at the company's design affiliate, PCI Design – the architectural wing of the Woda Group – the leadership reflects the strong female presence with Jo Berning and Heather DeKorte acting as co-Managing Directors.

A NEW MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

Woda recently pioneered a new management model, dividing its responsibilities into four “super regions,” led by Regional Vice Presidents, including Jodelle “Jody” Carder, Karen Dowler, Lisa Landis and Terry Earhart. Each region has the autonomy and support needed to successfully operate each portfolio of properties.



A LOT OF TIMES, WHEN PEOPLE HEAR THE TERM ‘AFFORDABLE HOUSING,’ THEY DON’T REALIZE THAT IT MEANS HOUSING FOR POLICE OFFICERS OR SCHOOL TEACHERS WHO ARE JUST STARTING OUT, OR SENIORS LIVING ON FIXED INCOMES.

-Tammy Stansbury, Vice President of Development at the Woda Group



“We broke it into the super regions so that we could really focus on each portfolio and make sure we do not lose any quality of management on our side,” Carder says. “Part of the concept for the super region structure is that each individual is empowered to run their portfolio within a structure of consistent policies and procedures.”

Carder, Landis, Dowler and their male counterpart Earhart, are helping their respective teams navigate the firm’s new structure. The fact that three of the four RVPs are women reflects the profile of the leaders down through the organization. Of the 45 individuals who occupy the next two layers in the management organization, 40 are women.

“When we came up in the industry, most of the leadership was male, so we were always going the extra effort to prove our abilities and to perform at a higher level,” Dowler says. “Today, we are able to set that example ourselves and bring up those that are in our company now.”

Coaching and mentoring less experienced employees is an important piece of the equation. “We want to make sure that they are developing themselves as leaders and that they understand what it takes to be successful and make good teams,” Landis says.

A NURTURING PHILOSOPHY

This nurturing philosophy was evident across the spectrum

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From Left: Karen Dowler, Lisa Landis, Jodelle Carder

“ I’M HOPING TO SEE MORE WOMEN IN THE INDUSTRY. ”
-Tammy Stansbury, Vice President of Development at the Woda Group.

At Fairwood Commons (Under construction senior Passive House design in Columbus, OH)
Donna Ferrell, Director of Accounting, Woda Construction Inc; Maia Boitano, Vice President and Associate General Counsel; Karen Dowler, Regional Vice President; Jodelle Carder, Regional Vice President; Jennifer Ricci, Vice President; Anne Little, Vice President and Associate General Counsel.



of the Woda executive suite and defined multiple thoughts during the course of several interviews undertaken with the team. Ultimately, it is that ethos that underpins the company's commitment to each and every community it builds, considering them all to be long-term investments.

"We don't build something and walk away. We build it and then stay there," Tovar says. "We want to bring something positive to the community."

COMMUNITY-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

The Woda Group's developments have always strategically met the needs of their communities. The firm works extensively with local leaders to ensure it is providing high-quality housing that will work for the community.

"It's the communities that dictate what the needs are," says Tammy Stansbury, Vice President of Development at the Woda Group. "I always meet with the city or county officials because they're the ones that know what their community needs. They are the people on the ground."

Fighting negative perceptions of affordable housing is another key component of the Woda Group's development work.

"A lot of times, when people hear the term 'affordable housing,' they don't realize that it means housing for police officers or school teachers who are just starting out, or seniors living on fixed incomes," Stansbury says.

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Stansbury was at pains to point out this concept of developing the community for the community. One such effort indicative of the Woda Group's dedication to maintaining a positive community impression is Brea's Crossing in Shelbyville, Kentucky. The affordable senior living community, named after Stansbury's daughter, seamlessly blends in with its surrounding neighborhood.

"Brea's Crossing is right at the end of a neighborhood with single-family homes, obviously, we didn't want to go in there with a three-story building that towers over everything else." Stansbury says. "Equally, Pebblecreek Crossing in Richmond, Kentucky, offers 48 units of affordable housing for senior and disabled residents while simultaneously revitalizing the city's downtown core. My goal there was to fulfill the needs of the elected officials and community at that property."

The Woda Group works extensively with local nonprofit operators to deliver dependable services to its affordable housing residents.

"When it comes down to providing services, we always look to the community," Stansbury says. "Our managers work with local nonprofits to bring various services to our residents."

Having established herself in the most male-dominated area of the business, Stansbury knows just how vital it is to create more opportunities for female executives and says that it is vital to incorporate a female perspective into affordable housing development.

"I'm hoping to see more women in the industry," she says. "I think you'll start seeing more and more female developers in the next 10 years." 



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