

MY CAREER

Tap turns for female plumbing apprenticeships

Emily Chantiri

At 21 years old, Lara Smyth already has her career trajectory all laid out. The third-year apprentice plumber loves the challenge of solving problems.

“Plumbing is a huge puzzle where I’m able to manoeuvre and find how everything fits,” Smyth says. And as far as career growth, she sees many opportunities to advance.

“After completing my plumbing Certificate III, I can become a master plumber, which leads to higher pay and leadership opportunities. I want to prove to others that women make great plumbers, too,” she says.

Smyth is part of a recent influx of women taking up roles in the traditionally male-dominated plumbing field, with more young workers looking for solid, well-paying careers that don’t require an expensive university degree.

With a focus on maintenance plumbing, especially in women’s housing, her goal is to eventually follow in her mother Kimberley’s footsteps, who runs Hey Sista Plumbing.

“I want to help grow my mum’s

business; to expand with more employees. And a factory and a daycare either attached, so other working mums could begin a plumbing apprenticeship and have a chance to thrive in the industry,” she says.

Smyth adds that plumbing is an essential service that involves hands-on labour and believes it’s something that will always be required. No matter the gender or race, she encourages everyone to consider a trade-oriented role.

“I’m proof of the ripple effect that happens when a woman is not only given the opportunity to thrive in the construction sector but is also shown support by the industry.”

John Collignon, marketing director of Rheem Australia, said the company was thrilled with the increase in the number of female plumbers applying – reflecting a change in this sector and in many others.

Applications for Rheem apprentice plumber grants from women surged by 200 per cent compared to the previous year. In 2024, women made up 30 per cent of grant beneficiaries. “This marked a 50 per cent increase in



Third-year apprentice plumber Lara Smyth loves solving problems the trade offers.

‘Female participation is still not high enough and more needs to be done by employers.’

Denita Wawn, Master Builders chief executive

female grant recipients from 2023,” he adds.

Breaking down gender barriers within a traditionally male-dominated sector, facing their own personal challenges of physical and mental strength, and paving the way for future female plumbers were common reasons women cited for considering a career in plumbing.

Recipients of the grant will receive \$2000 to assist with their tuition fees and textbooks, plus \$1000 to help build their essential trade toolbox.

According to a Master Builders Australia report, in 2023, women made up 15 per cent of the building and construction workforce, but only three per cent of them were on the tools.

Master Builders Australia chief executive Denita Wawn said the organisation found that many women tend to enter the industry later in life, particularly after bringing up children.

More support is needed to make the industry more attractive for them.

“Female participation is still not high enough, and more needs to be done by employers, industry

groups, educational institutions, and all levels of government.”

Working in mining and construction for much of her career, Wendy Pinch saw very few women in trade roles. Pinch, whose father was a builder, understood the industry and how it operated.

“I’m from a family of builders; as a kid, I spent more time in Dad’s shed than Mum’s kitchen,” she says. While renovating her home some years back, Pinch became increasingly frustrated with builders who would constantly let her down.

“I was getting fed-up with tradies not turning up and being talked down to. I thought a female electrician wouldn’t talk to me like that. I asked the tradies if they had female tradies, they said they knew a few through TAFE, one even topped the class!”

The comment hit a nerve, and Pinch decided to reach out to female tradies and create a business where people could access them. In 2011, she founded The Lady Tradies Australia.

The business has grown nationally and offers female tradies, apprenticeships, full-time and part-time roles for women.

Face feedback head-on, positively

Michelle Gibbings

Feedback. Just one word, and most of us instinctively brace ourselves. Yet, while it might feel uncomfortable, dodging it could be the very thing holding your career back.

Imagine this. You receive two pieces of feedback on the same day. One was glowing. The other, less so. Where does your energy go? Immediately to the negative feedback. This is negativity bias at play.

Studies indicate that negative stimuli activate our brains more powerfully than positive stimuli, and we remember adverse feedback more vividly.

This hard-wiring is an evolutionary trait that once helped us detect danger but now leaves us over-indexing on what went wrong rather than what went right.

Don’t dodge it

Many professionals assume that they must be doing well if they’re not receiving feedback. Unfortunately, that’s a dangerous assumption.

Silence is not synonymous with success. The absence of feedback can indicate that colleagues or leaders have stopped investing in your development.

Avoiding feedback starves you of the input needed to close any gap between your intention and impact. Without it, you risk repeating the same mistakes or stagnating.

Additionally, people who bristle at feedback, become defensive or ignore developmental suggestions are often perceived as less open and coachable, eroding relationships and promotion opportunities.



Listen and learn: It pays to seek and welcome feedback, and act on it with intention. Photo: iStock

The mirror you need

Psychologist Daniel Goleman defined self-awareness as knowing one’s internal states, preferences, and intuitions. However, we’re often not the best judges of ourselves. We can overestimate our abilities in areas like communication, leadership and teamwork.

According to psychologist Adam Grant, co-workers are often more accurate in predicting how your personality impacts performance than you are. Without feedback, you base your performance on assumptions, not evidence. When you’re open to seeing yourself through the eyes of others, you gain access to insights that can unlock a new level of growth.

Some feedback comments are grounded in genuine insight and delivered with good intent. Others are unhelpful, misinformed, or even malicious.

To assess the value of feedback, consider the intent of the person offering it (helpful versus unhelpful) and their skill or expertise in the area they’re commenting on (high versus low skill).

When someone has helpful intent and high skill, be open to learning and reflecting. In contrast, when someone’s intent is questionable and skill is low, don’t immediately discount the feedback; instead, be curious about the insights into them, you, and your relationship. Adopting

this approach helps differentiate noise from insight.

If you find yourself stuck in a feedback spiral – replaying a negative comment over and over – allow yourself to feel. Your emotions are valid. The key is choosing your response. Refocus on what you can control and redirect energy to purposeful action.

Building the muscle

The more you practise receiving feedback, the easier it becomes. To help grow your feedback muscle, here are five tips to consider:

Identify areas for growth

When you receive helpful feedback, acknowledge where you can do

better. This signals maturity and ownership of your development.

Manage your emotions

It’s normal to feel a jolt of defensiveness when receiving feedback, especially if it’s unexpected. Take a breath. Resist the urge to explain, justify or argue. Instead, listen. Ask clarifying questions.

Make asking a habit

Questions like “What’s one thing I could have done better in that meeting?” or “How did my approach land with the team?” invite constructive input.

Clarify and reflect

Sometimes feedback is vague (“You need to be more strategic”) or confusing. Ask questions: “Can you give me an example?” or “What would ‘more strategic’ look like in my role?” Then, reflect on what you’ve heard and consider what’s within your control to change.

Show appreciation

If someone gives you feedback thank them. It takes courage to offer honest observations. Show that you’ve taken the input seriously by acting on it. Even small behavioural shifts signal your commitment to growth.

It takes courage to seek feedback – even more to use it wisely. Start by being open to the voices that can shape you for the better. As Leo Tolstoy said: “If you care too much about being praised, in the end you will not accomplish anything serious.” Listen. Learn. And then grow with intention.

Dr Michelle Gibbings is a workplace expert and the author of three books, including *Bad Boss: What to do if you work for one, manage one or are one*.