The Business Peer Exchange Changes the Story

by Susan Z. Ritz

For almost three years, some of Vermont’s most progressive, socially responsible employers have been putting their heads together to root out gender bias and make our state one of the best places for women (and men) to work. As members of Change the Story’s Business Peer Exchange, they gather monthly for workshops to learn how to recruit, fairly compensate, and retain a workforce that represents full gender equity, essential elements to attracting skilled employees in a tight labor market. With unemployment hovering around 2.8 percent, gender equity becomes not just a progressive ideal but a way to improve productivity and the bottom line.

Remedying Gender Bias

The Business Peer Exchange (BPE) began in 2015 as the brainstorm of Sachs, founder and director emeritus of Vermont Energy Investment Corporation (VEIC) and longtime board member of Vermont Works for Women (VWW). After serving on VWW’s Enough Said Task Force, which uncovered several ways young women are disadvantaged in our education and economic systems, she asked herself, “What is it we’re doing (or not doing) to advance women’s advancement in or workplaces? How can I move things forward in my own organization?”

“With the group that got started, we talked about gender. What is it we’re doing (or not doing) to advance women’s advancement in or workplaces? How can I move things forward in my own organization?”

In a way, we can work with other businesses and explore with them what their issues are, find out what’s working for them. We told them we don’t know how this is going to work out, but let’s get together once a month for a year and see if this is worthwhile.”

To help the group get started, Sachs partnered with business coach Lindsey Lathrop-Ryan, who was then working with Change the Story’s VVI CTS, a collaborative initiative to align policy, programs, and philanthropy to significantly improve women’s economic success in Vermont. Together they enlisted a cohort of 11 other mission-driven, socially responsible businesses like VEIC.

Most of the companies who approached about the project had already signed Vermont’s Equal Pay Compact, a voluntary online pledge that enables employees to learn about and indicate their commitment to closing the gender gap.

In principle and practice, these businesses were dedicated to maintaining equitable, diverse, and inclusive workplaces. And yet, when they began to dig deeper and test their assumptions, many discovered that unconscious gender bias was still at play in their companies, holding their female employees back. When the companies looked closely at information gained by filling out the Best Places in Vermont to Work survey, they discovered that when results were aggregated by gender, a surprising picture emerged.

At VEIC, for example, though overall employee satisfaction was high, when broken down by gender, women were not as satisfied as men with their prospects for advancement and promotion. Other companies found that though they believed they were paying equal wages, in truth, hidden pay gaps still existed. All discovered that unconscious bias was often at work in the way women were portrayed on websites, in the wording of recruitment ads, and even in cleaning up the office kitchen.

The BPE members wanted to learn more about why this was so. They decided that informal discussions would not be enough to meet this unexpected challenge. “The members were craving a more topical focus every month, so we polled them on what they would be most interested in,” said Lathrop-Ryan. “They voted on issues that would be most pertinent to their work and interest.”

Now, three years later, the model established by the initial cohort continues to guide the BPE. More than 30 organizations have participated, including such well-known, socially responsible businesses as Seventh Generation, Dealer.com/COX Automotive, Logic Supply, Rhino Foods, and SunCommon. The City of Burlington, The Intervale, Champlain College, and Main Street Alliance are among the participating nonprofits. Other members in the cohort have received individualized consulting from Nordhaus and Lathrop-Ryan to meet their company’s particular needs and goals as well as outline workshops like “An Introduction to Gender Bias—a supportive, research-based and solutions-oriented introductory training on how to build an inclusive culture” and “We’re not out to pinpoint the bad guys. We all have bias. It is something we all need to be aware of and vigilant about.”

—Jessica Nordhaus, of Change the Story

At the initial meeting for each cohort, a series of workshop topics are decided upon by the group. “We are the cruise directors,” explains Lathrop-Ryan. “We curate the content based on what each cohort wants to learn about and that varies from year to year.”

In 2017, the second cohort wanted to get a better understanding of how to involve senior leadership so several events were planned at top management, such as a breakfast at Dealer.com attended by over 50 business leaders who discussed how to make gender equity a top priority. BPE cohort members shared with their senior leadership the work they’d done on advancing gender equity in the workplace. The breakfast ended with tangible next steps for their organizations and take-away ideas for action.

Dealer.com later reported that “following the breakfast, leadership decided to address the bathroom signage at DIC which were graphic illustrations of Dudes (male urinal in board shorts) and Bettie (woman in a hamock wearing a bikini). The signs were changed on a Thursday afternoon to Ms. and WSs, plus at least two bathrooms, continue to be designated as all gender. The internal employee FB group was full of posts about the change and how it represented a threat to original Dealer culture. Leadership responded swiftly with remarks at an all-employee Town Hall Meeting, the following Tuesday to reiterate that our culture is not our signage. Our culture is our people.”

Changing Work Culture

Dealer.com’s sign changes are a good example of what a company can do to encourage not just gender diversity but, more importantly, inclusivity. “Inclusivity actually comes first,” explains Lathrop-Ryan. “To attract more female applicants for jobs, companies can write job descriptions that emphasize more ‘female’ language, with words like collaborative, community building, team work, rather than more ‘male’ language, such as drivers, in succeed, warrior, or leadership potential.”

But more than female-friendly language in a job description is needed; the work culture needs to change to both attract and retain women. Lathrop-Ryan notes that though “you can write a perfect job description,” it will get more women applying for a typically male job, “if they leave within a month that means you did not create a culture or environment where they felt welcome.”

She says BPE has learned that having several female employees at a company improves retention. “We find that it takes bringing on three women, not just one, to get them to stay because then they can work together to create change.”

Last fall, in the wake of the #MeToo revelations, the focus on a welcoming, supportive culture became an important topic for the BPE. “We had shied away from the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace because we wanted to talk about equity more broadly,” Nordhaus explains. “But last November we opened up a conversation, and it was really intense. People voiced a lot of different fears. We were hearing different things from women and men. Most of the women were pretty quiet, most of the women were pretty vocal about their experiences and wanted ready responses. There was a lot on people’s faces. As facilitators, we had to figure out how to approach this topic so that we offered advice within the overall gender equity conversation.”

For further discussion, the cohort was invited to a breakfast hosted by Logic Supply with Jodi Kantor, one of the Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times reporters who broke the Harvey Weinstein story. “Jodi said she feels the sexual harassment conversation has acted like a solvent in many ways for other gender equity issues. Which is what I think BPE is doing,” says Nordhaus.

Achieving Pay Equity

In March, BPE’s third cohort got into full swing, and in May, BPE held a workshop for the new group titled “Are you Irresistible?,” which looked at pay continued on page 19
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equity, why it's important in a competitive job market, and how to achieve it. Sarah Lord from Seventh Generation presented a case study from her company demonstrating how tricky it can be to keep pay for men and women equal, especially for companies experiencing rapid growth. Frank and Krysta Sadowski of Gallagher Flynn followed up with practical ways to create pay bands that are based on performance rather than experience or past salary, two measures that disadvantage women who take time off to care for family or enter the job market at a lower pay scale than their male colleagues due to a lack of negotiating acumen. In fact, new legislation in Vermont has banned asking job applicants for their salary history as a way to address the state's current 16 cent wage gap. By the end of the far-ranging discussion among the participants, it was clear that maintaining pay equity is not a one-time activity but an ongoing process that demands communication, transparency, and constant attention as companies expand. It was also clear that companies that work to achieve it are companies that are irresistible to the best job applicants.

The success of the Business Peer Exchange is evident not just in the number and breadth of organizations signing up each year. "What's really fascinating to me," says Nordhaus, "is what's happening with individual companies taking a stand, changing practices with their clients, their sub-contractors, and their vendors. The ripple effect is at work here."

That ripple effect may soon be felt beyond Chittenden County, where the majority of BPE member organizations are based. Lathrop-Ryan and Nordhaus have already been contacted by consultants who want to start a cohort in Central Vermont. Others are being considered for the Upper Valley, Franklin County, and Southern Vermont. Change the Story presentations at the Women's Funding Network have even generated interest in BPE, creating the possibility of licensing the model in other states sometime in the future. In the post-#MeToo world, more companies are paying attention to studies that prove that gender equity from the shop floor to the boardroom increases the bottom line. In fact, a recent McKinsey study showed that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity are 21 percent more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians.

As a measure of success here in Vermont, Lathrop-Ryan and Nordhaus would like to see every employer in the state conversant on the topic of gender equity. They also look forward to the day when companies will no longer have to actively recruit women—because women will already be employed.

Susan Z. Ritz lives, works and writes in Montpelier. Her first novel will be published in 2017 by She Writes Press.