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Vantage Points

One Hundred-Thirteen Industry Women Speak with One Voice

by Marcy Tieger,
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Solutions offered at women's industry conference offer benefits for all employees, not just women.

Between April 29 and May 1, 2007, 113 women met in Phoenix to discuss, among other things, the most important issues and concerns for women in the collision industry. The meeting, a conference put on by the Women's Industry Network (WIN), was unprecedented in that it represented the largest number of women in the industry to come together at one time.

The goals of the WIN conference were many, among them, to provide a forum where women could find "energy, creativity, inspiration, wisdom and support." Separate and apart from the rich content offered through the conference speakers and activities, WIN's board, which also organized the event, wanted the conference to yield a by-product-- tangible, usable data that reflected the thoughts and views of the entire group--something truly collaborative. To this end, women who registered for the conference were asked to identify what they felt were the "biggest issues and challenges women face in the collision industry." Although not all registrants responded, the majority did. Those responses were then narrowed down to the top three: respect, work-life balance, and recruiting and retaining women in the industry.

At the conference, attendees working in teams of 10 were asked to come up with ideas and/or solutions for the three issues and challenges identified. Those responses were then distilled into a master list, after eliminating duplicate responses. (The complete list of responses can be found at www.womensindustrynetwork.com)

Reading between the lines

For some, the areas of concern voiced by so many were an affirmation of what they had already observed in their own



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workplace. Part of the value was in the realization that they were not alone.

For instance, while many businesses have human resources departments and employee manuals, or just enlightened owners who clearly verbalize company expectations regarding sexual harassment and standards of decency, some do not. For this latter group especially, the hope is that the list will be a springboard for dialogue in the workplace on the issue of respect and standards of conduct.

It is also important to point out that many of the "solutions" offered by the group involved taking personal responsibility for change-- the focus was less about what was happening to the respondent and more about taking charge and creating a better environment for all employees. For instance, regarding the issue of respect, respondents suggested that women learn how to deal with constructive criticism and "don't sweat the small stuff," in addition to recommending that employers implement "zero tolerance" policies regarding sexual harassment.

With respect to the work-life balance issue, the trend was similar. Respondents recommended that women look at their personal attitudes (ex., learn to say no, give up the "martyrdom syndrome") while also suggesting that employers get to know their employees better, cross-train, institute standard operating procedures and offer greater flexibility in work hours.

The "take-away"

There are many reasons why employers should take a close look at the findings from the WIN conference, some more obvious than others.

First, if you have female employees or hope to recruit more into your operation, this data offers honest insights from women already in the industry. Moreover, if you have had difficulty retaining female employees, it may help illuminate problems you were unaware of. (Even employers who are vigilant about exit interviews of employees know that they do not always get candid information from departing employees.)

A further benefit for employers is the understanding that dialing into these critical issues and in some instances, proactively modifying behavior, may stave off potential liability. For example, workplaces that tolerate disrespectful behavior toward women are more likely to be sued for sexual harassment. But then again, these are the same employers that get sued for other forms of discrimination related to race, ethnicity, religion, etc. Conclusion: a workplace that values and fosters respect amongst its employees is good for all employees. Moreover, this standard may serve as a

safeguard against liability for employers.

Similarly, with respect to the work-life balance issue, employers who are proactive about and sensitive to the needs of their employees, may head off employee physical and mental stress-related claims and minimize turnover. They can also cultivate an environment of openness and honesty, where employees who must stay home with a sick child or take an elderly parent to a doctor's appointment, are less inclined to use pretext-including claiming they are sick-to cover for times when they must care for a family member. (British researcher, Robert Reeves, who writes about men who fear that disclosing their expanded role at home to their employers will hurt their careers, refers to this phenomenon as "stealth parenting.")

The WIN conference provided what was frequently described as a "safe" and "comfortable" environment for women in the industry to voice their concerns and offer solutions. Perhaps the most valuable take-away; however, is the realization that the concerns raised and the solutions offered are relevant to all employees, not just women.

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