



Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion
Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion

Success stories

Corus Entertainment Inc.

A Canadian case study in diversity and inclusion

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Corus Entertainment Inc.: A Canadian success story in diversity and inclusion

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Thanks to Annette Ainsbury, Director, Learning and Development, and Kathleen McNair, Executive Vice President, Special Advisor to the CEO and Chief Integration Officer at Corus.

Using innovation and culture to advance the careers of women in media

Corus Entertainment was founded in 1999, a growing media and content company with assets that include Global Television Network, 45 specialty television channels, 39 radio stations and 15 conventional television stations spread out across Canada, along with a portfolio of digital content. Corus runs leading women's channels HGTV Canada, Food Network Canada, W Network and OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network Canada, along with an extensive line of children's programming that includes Teletoon, Treehouse, YTV and the Canadian franchises for ABC Spark, Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon and Disney channel. Animation studio, Nelvana, and children's book publisher, *Kids Can Press*, round out their media and content properties, positioning Corus as a leader in women's and children's programming.

The company has had a history of women in leadership from its lifestyle specialty channels and its female representation in leadership is arguably the strongest in Canadian media. So we were interested in the Corus Women's Leadership Network, its employee group which began in the early 2000's as the Women in Leadership Conference, an annual two-day event with speakers and workshops for high potential managers. At the time, the media industry was already going through upheaval as digital technology was disrupting traditional advertising, distribution and revenue streams. It wasn't just the women who had been identified with leadership potential who were looking for guidance to navigate the changing landscape and evolve in their work, women at every stage of their careers were interested. The conference grew into the Corus Women's Leadership Network with speaking events and training throughout the year, for all women at Corus.

We spoke with Annette Ainsbury and Kathleen McNair to get their perspectives on managing leadership development for women. Annette runs the Corus Women's Leadership Network with two others on the Learning and Development team, and Kathleen is in the executive group that drives the steering committee.

From culture to personal empowerment

When describing the company's mindset around women's success, both Annette Ainsbury and Kathleen McNair talked about how the Corus Women's Leadership Network fits into a strong corporate culture, which is seen as essential to employee development and continual growth for the company. Cultivating that culture is shaped by five core values at Corus – accountability, initiative, knowledge, innovation and teamwork.

The Corus Women's Leadership Network has leveraged its corporate values in its strategy and programming in support of a culture where personal initiative is encouraged and innovation is valued. This network was designed to lift the kinds of barriers to advancement that female executives at Corus noticed women imposing on themselves, with attention to developing the skills they might use to empower themselves and move their careers forward.

The team saw that women were networking differently than men, so shaped the group's networking events to women's interests and behaviours. Conventional wisdom that men and women approach networking differently was mirrored in post-event feedback, as men who had attended some of the events expressed disappointment with them, while at the same time, the team was hearing positive reviews from women, especially about the popular speed mentoring and personal branding events. Much of this group's success has come from breaking the barriers for women with an audience-centric lens.

In an industry where change is constant, there is a belief at Corus that being able to innovate isn't just up to the executive or management, it's a personal challenge for everyone, so innovation as one of the brand's values speaks to engaging everyone at Corus. As Annette put it, the belief is, "When employees are empowered, great things will happen."

An industry with many women, though few in leadership

While women have traditionally prevailed in entertainment and media businesses, they have tended to hold supporting roles and not be as well represented in leadership and on boards. But at Corus, three of the nine people on the Executive Leadership Team are women, four of its 13 board positions are held by women and four of the company's nine officers are women, many of whom have risen through the ranks of broadcast programming and operations at the specialty channels.

Kathleen explained that Corus believes that successful businesses need qualified, caring, skilled leadership – and is quite clear about increased representation of women in leadership having a positive impact on the business. It's perhaps not a coincidence that lifestyle channels HGTV Canada, Food Network Canada and Showcase have always been profitable – and have also had a history of women in management and leadership. Yet Corus is aware that while they have outperformed other media companies for female representation, women rise less frequently in the radio division, a power balance that sadly reflects an industry norm. Corus wants to change that with the women's network and hopes to inspire more women in radio to move into leadership through its events and training.

Inviting local champions to contribute

While half of Corus's operations are centralized in Toronto, the other half includes radio and local television stations that are spread out in other cities and smaller municipalities across Canada. To extend reach for the women's network beyond the head office, the Learning and Development team identified local champions, rising stars who show an aptitude for creating community for the company's women in radio and television outside of Toronto.

Most of the Corus Women's Leadership Network events and training sessions are streamed from Toronto, and local champions are encouraged to organize social activities in their offices to bring women together in satellite events that cultivate engagement and get the discussions around a topic going, extending the impact of the events throughout the company.

By working with local champions, the network has been able to connect with more women across the country and help them build their leadership competencies to progress their careers. The program is helping women gain a better understanding of what's involved in moving to the next level. The company credits the local champions for the program's success outside Toronto and Annette noted they have been responsible for the network's growth in other centres.

Tactics that made a difference

The Learning and Development team has seen that the programming of the Corus Women's Leadership Network has been opening up career options for women, helping them make informed decisions about their career paths and changed their mindsets around opportunity, encouraging them to consider if aiming for the C-suite might be for them. When asked about key takeaways that helped Corus's women's network be effective, Annette considered leadership, culture and collaboration to play substantial roles in its success.

Leadership rapport

As the Learning and Development team has been conscientiously supporting the goals of leadership at Corus in developing their programming, it has been tying the goals of the Corus Women's Leadership Network to the executive goals, which has helped it become a meaningful component in the executive team's succession planning. Due to the close relationship with the executive team, the network has been able to present interesting speakers who can talk to the different stages of career and the range of challenges women might face. The relationships with internal leaders have also helped the network develop the kind of programming that resonates with the women at Corus.

Kathleen attributes a perceptible shift in morale within the company as the network's programming has been guiding women to take charge of their careers and move ahead. In particular, she's happy to see Corus's junior future leaders learning strategies for how they might want to progress their careers while developing the skills that are looked for in succession planning.

Be a culture that supports women

Cultivating a culture that supports women requires a corporate commitment to diversity and equity. Corus is a federally regulated employer that reports annually on employment equity, and Kathleen described the heightened awareness in the company for advancing the careers of designated groups. As an example, when leadership was concerned that the program directors within the radio division were predominantly male, a professional development program was introduced to develop the skills that might advance women into assistant roles, so they could gain the experience that would help them move up the ladder and become directors.

Female representation in management and leadership is essential to developing a corporate culture that's supportive of women and by starting at the top, Corus has shown that it leads by example. It has been able to authentically infuse the company with a culture that encourages leadership for women. Accountability is part of that culture as well, so measuring engagement and progress is essential. Kathleen explained that it's impossible to evaluate success without measuring, so the team tracks success by looking at participation numbers at events and through their bi-annual employee survey.

A steering committee is stronger than one person

Annette described how her Leadership and Development team has been able to accomplish so much with the women's network because of their relationship with the steering committee – made up of female executives representing Corus's television, radio, digital media and corporate divisions. She acknowledges their contribution for the strength of the network's programming, and for its popularity among the women at Corus. She told us that the input from the steering committee has helped the group's activities resonate with the women, and its effects have been much stronger than if the program had been developed by one person or a single department. It seems to be a complementary relationship. From the point of view of the steering committee, Kathleen suggested that the Learning and Development team knows what they want to address and taps into the steering committee as they proceed to implement it.

While the Learning and Development team is accountable for the network's programming, Annette said the steering committee plays an important role in contributing suggestions that are informed by employee surveys, trends the committee members are seeing in their networks, as well as the unmet needs of women in their divisions. The steering committee has also been valuable for bringing in high-profile speakers who women at Corus find motivating.

The relationship between the Learning and Development team and the steering committee has been responsive and collaborative, which Annette says has created confidence in the program and improved programming with the involvement of the different divisions of the company. By working with the steering committee, Annette's team has been able to address the needs and goals of different parts of the organization while ensuring that what they're doing is relevant for the employee base. A result of the collaboration is that they have been able to represent the interests of specific demographic niches of women, such as millennials and mothers, to include a wider range of women's experiences in its programming.

Connecting innovation and women's advancement

Corus has many trusted media brands that young women have grown up with, and even more brands that have a place in the lives of women of every generation across Canada. This is a company that excels at understanding what women want and how to reach them. It is also a company that has been able to encourage personal initiative and innovation to progress the careers of women by being responsive to two different sets of objectives that can easily diverge: executive goals and what women want to achieve.

Corus has been growing and adapting in a shifting media landscape when so many media companies continue to be shrinking. As Kathleen described the impact that Corus's women's initiatives have had on their business, she mentioned the finding that companies with diverse boards tend to deliver higher returns for shareholders and that research has shown that they tend to be more successful. As she put it, "A number of diverse voices around the table often brings new perspectives and new thinking that results in innovative solutions."

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The Success story initiative

There is astonishingly little published that shines a light on diversity and inclusion successes in Canada, though there are many, across a wide range of organizations. Case studies referenced by trainers and leadership tend to be reporting on different countries, cultures, political and economic settings.

The goal of this initiative is to support diversity and inclusion leadership with stories that are relevant to what's happening now, here in Canada. By sharing their stories, we celebrate the successes of Canadian organizations while contributing to learning for everyone that cares about diversity and inclusion.

The employers who have developed initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion as priorities in the workplace are responding to an increasingly competitive economy that's responsive to the diversity of employees – and the country. We are grateful to those who have participated in interviews.

This series of case studies will be published monthly through 2016. Subscribing to our monthly newsletter at ccdi.ca will keep you updated with the latest case studies, which will all be posted online at ccdi.ca/successstories. For more information, contact mail@ccdi.ca.

The Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion

The CCDI has a mission to help the organizations we work with be inclusive, free of prejudice and discrimination – and to generate the awareness, dialogue and action for people to recognize diversity as an asset and not an obstacle. Through the research, reports and toolkits we develop and our workshops, events and workplace consultations, we're helping Canadian employers understand their diversity, plan for it and create inclusion.

CCDI's leadership has a proven model that's cultivated trust as an impartial third party. Our expertise is focused on the topics of inclusion that are relevant in Canada now and the regional differences that shape diversity.

A charitable organization that thinks like a business, we have created a niche with our innovative research technology and data analysis that brings a deeper understanding of Canadian diversity demographics and mindsets at any given moment.

CCDI is grateful for the support of Employer Partners across Canada. For enquiries, contact Susan Rogers, Chief Client Officer, Susan.Rogers@ccdi.ca or (416) 968-6520, ext 103.

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