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Social Enterprise Leadership Strikes a Chord for Canadian Women

Image



Social enterprise leadership more attractive, possible now for women

Heidi Lambe just wants to make the world a better place and she loves how she's able to contribute to this through managing two social enterprises in southern Alberta.

The social enterprises sell a range of new and used building supplies and other home items donated by corporations or citizens. Their profits are directed to parent non-profit, [Habitat for Humanity Southern Alberta](#), to support the building of more homes for families who are struggling.

Last year Heidi's Calgary store hit \$1.7 million in sales, the highest of all Canadian Habitat for Humanity social enterprises for 2012.

"Combining my passion to help people while generating profits for the charity I work for is a win-win situation," Heidi says.

When it comes to taking the reins of an organization, social enterprise leadership is striking an unprecedented chord for Canadian women, a news inquiry by the [Enterprising Non-profits Canada \(ENP-CA\)](#) service reveals.

This is corroborated by other recent media reports, including an [Oct. 17 Forbes article](#) which suggests women could be poised to lead what it calls the social enterprise revolution. The article notes women are "almost twice as likely to reach the top ranks in social enterprises as they are in mainstream businesses."

What's Drawing Women to Social Enterprise?

Women are being drawn to social enterprise by both their passion to make the world a better place and, for some, a newly heightened sense that the world of business can be a powerful field of action for realizing this aspiration.

Women also seem to have a keen sense for how new types of connection — between facets of themselves, the business world or their community — can be a tremendous spark for new possibilities.

"Social enterprise has been a constant thread throughout my career, before the label existed," says Joanne Norris, who hails from Vancouver where she provides management consulting services to social enterprises and mission-driven businesses.

Joanne says she's always been driven to understand how the "social" (people) and the "economic" (business) cannot just coexist but rather strategically connect in mutually beneficial ways.

"As a market-based society, I believe we need to continually learn how business principles and practices can be harnessed for social good. This is what social

enterprise is all about; aligning the discipline of market-based thinking to the vision of a social mission strategy.”

Béatrice Alain lives in Quebec where she co-ordinates a virtual international reference and networking centre on public policies for the social and solidarity economy created by the [Chantier de l'économie sociale](#). The Chantier seeks to promote and develop the social economy as an integral part of Quebec's socioeconomic fabric.

“I believe in the importance of bringing to bear a diversity of viewpoints and stakeholders on questions of development, and in thinking about this question in broader terms that take into account economic impact, but also social, environmental, cultural impact of activities,” says Beatrice.

She's also fascinated by how a rich mix of experiences and expertise can come to light when local communities rally to meet their particular needs.

What Unique Gifts Do Women Bring?

Michelle Baldwin suggests women don't necessarily bring a unique set of gender-related gifts to the social enterprise table.

“There are both exceptional women and men in leadership of social enterprises,” says Michelle, executive director of [Pillar Nonprofit Network](#), based in London, Ontario. Pillar recently committed to supporting the development of social enterprises operated by non-profits in the area.

“It is about the unique gifts each individual brings and social enterprise attracts those who combine an entrepreneurial spirit, thirst for innovation and a desire for giving back.”

Others, however, propose women offer a broader, relationally-focused perspective.

“Men and women are wired differently,” says Heidi. “What women bring naturally is their focus on relationships and their ability to look beyond the bottom line without losing sight of it. They typically see the people aspect of the equation more.”

Beatrice says women naturally view the world from a broader lens.

“On the one hand, women have traditionally been brought to think in broader terms about development: balancing our individual needs with those of our families and of our communities, and thinking in terms of well-being, which goes beyond purchasing power,” she says.

“On the other hand women are still disadvantaged economically in many contexts, and working collectively can be a source of empowerment and protection.”

Joanne says women’s unique gifts to the social enterprise field really stem from understanding what their starting points are and how they see themselves and their ventures contributing to this world.

“I have engaged with many female social entrepreneurs who are motivated to turn a profit and establish a financially successful business,” says Joanne. “How they define success however, is not purely in financial terms. More often than not, financial success is a means to an end of meeting a broader social and/or environmental goal.”

Related to this, women tend to have a broader vision and goal for wealth creation, aspiring to funnel wealth in ways that generate broader community benefits.

“I think women bring a strong capacity to integrate additional missions into business models, which have traditionally been perceived as having only one primary purpose,” Joanne adds, though she’s quick to note there are a growing number of men demonstrating this capacity as well.

“Today, the silos of private, public and charitable sectors are breaking down to a certain extent,” she says.

“Social-enterprise thinking is a key driver in the blending of these sectors. There is growing evidence that mission-driven businesses — or social enterprises — of all shapes and sizes can make money and do good at the same time. A legitimacy is occurring and this is exciting; social enterprise is starting to become more mainstream.”

Women Social Enterprise Leadership is More Attractive, Possible Now

A combination of enhanced support, resources and strong pioneers has “opened the gates” like never before for women to move into social enterprise leadership. Opportunities in this space are both more attractive and more plentiful than ever.

Heidi says she’s observed women consistently actively engaged in social enterprise, but they now seem more able and enticed to take lead roles in the field.

“In the previous decades it was about women becoming recognized in the corporate world and working to become leaders,” she says.

“Now society recognizes women are just as capable as men to make the hard decisions and run multi-million dollar companies.”

The new opportunity of the day is transferring women’s success in traditional business to social enterprise, where they’re likely to “relate more to the cause they’re contributing to,” says Heidi.

Compared to 15 years ago or so, there appears to be a greater awareness of how to “do” social enterprise, Joanne observes.

Business cases, research studies and educational content are freely and massively available now. This is relatively new and enables more women to connect to and learn about social enterprise. They can better see how to integrate social values into business models, as well as how to leverage personal social values to be the foundation from which to build new business ventures.

“I believe that this growing awareness of social enterprise as a legitimate way to do business is a real pull factor for many women to found and lead these kinds of ventures,” says Joanne. “There is a more comfortable fit with this kind of business model. You don’t have to check your values at the door.”

In addition, a strong body of research is growing around women and leadership and specifically how organizations benefit from having a healthy number of women in

leadership positions. This factor influences how women see themselves and how traditional business leaders view women's leadership capabilities and contributions.

"I am hopeful that as we go forward, more organizations of all types will recognize that leadership functions are only strengthened through deeper gender balance and diversity in general because it is only through this process that more and different lenses on how to do business will be legitimized," says Joanne.

Role Models

In closing, the ENP-CA news service invited interviewees to share who their role models in the field are, and why.

Models they cited ranged from their own children — Heidi mentioned her 16-year-old daughter who inspires with her humanitarian way of life and has introduced her to the Kielburger brothers' social enterprise — to women supporting the evolution of the social enterprise ecology such as Allyson Hewitt, director of social entrepreneurship at MaRS Centre for Impact Investing.

Joanne found the question hard to answer, noting she doesn't have specific role models so much as many different women leaders from whom she gleans inspiration. She did mention a number of local social entrepreneurs she knows and admires, including [Nicole Bridger](#) of Nicole Bridger Designs and [Donna Morton](#) of First Power.

Joanne says she's just hopeful that as more and more women lead in the social enterprise space — as entrepreneurs, non-profit and corporate leaders — "it will continue inspire younger women to do the same."

"As with any seismic shift in society, often people need to see (versions of) themselves in positions before they take that leap to do it themselves," says Joanne in conclusion.

Here are the questions we asked interviewees for this article:

1. What's the commitment you hold that's brought you to become involved in the social enterprise field?
2. What unique gifts do you see women bringing to the social enterprise field?
3. What trends are you seeing in terms of women leadership in social enterprise? What's possible now that wasn't possible before?
4. In a recent Forbes article, the writer notes there's a very real danger in characterizing social entrepreneurship as a kind of lesser women's work — not quite a business and not quite philanthropy either. What would you suggest could be a better way to characterize the work and women's relationship to it?
5. Who's a role model for you in the field and why?

To share a comment on this article, please e-mail [michelle\(at\)axiomnews.ca](mailto:michelle(at)axiomnews.ca), or tweet using the hashtag #womenledsocents.

Editor's Note: The ENP-CA newsroom has launched an exploration into women social enterprise leadership in Canada and will be publishing a number of additional brief news articles based on interviews with individual Canadian women social enterprise leaders in the coming weeks. The intent is to host a broad conversation for the purpose of gathering information and building understanding as a community. The conversation is intended to dig deep and be generative. If you're interested in also participating and sharing your responses, please e-mail [assignment\(at\)axiomnews.ca](mailto:assignment(at)axiomnews.ca).

A version of this article was originally written for the [Enterprising Non-profits Canada news service](#). This repost, for which we received permission, follows the style guidelines of the original post. To learn more about generative newsroom options for your organization or community, please contact [peter\(at\)axiomnews.ca](mailto:peter(at)axiomnews.ca).