The Corporate Challenge: A Public Private Partnership to Improve Gender Balance in the Workplace

The Center for Women and Business – Moving from Conversation to Action

Imagine a world where women no longer make up a small fraction of corporate leadership, where workplaces provide true flexibility and family-friendly policies that enable women at all levels to succeed, and where male co-workers routinely and comfortably serve as mentors and allies to their female co-workers.

Bentley University’s Center for Women and Business (CWB) envisions this and more, and works to make it a reality through extensive collaboration with employers, students and faculty. We engage preeminent thought-leaders and business executives to help them address the challenges of the ever-changing, global market for talent, and develop best practices to support, retain and advance women in the business world. In addition, we provide a women’s leadership program for students, we work with faculty to incorporate women’s issues into their courses, and we work with student affairs in relevant extra-curricular activities.

The need to retain and advance women in the workplace is no longer disputed, but the question of how to get there and frustration with why, collectively, we still aren’t there, remains.¹ When the center was founded in 2011, we established the tagline, Moving from Conversation to Action. It reflected a critical employer need to make substantive gender equity improvements in their workplaces – improvement that would move the needle, resulting in genuine, sustainable progress.

In 2014, our Center had the good fortune of partnering with then Governor Deval Patrick (D) to launch an initiative called The Corporate Challenge – Getting to More. The ground-breaking public/private partnership engaged employers throughout the Commonwealth of MA to commit to making progress on women’s workplace issues. Importantly, from the outset the Governor’s administration and the CWB acknowledged that 1) all employers – regardless of where they are on the continuum – need to make more progress and 2) the initiative should be collaborative, positive and not punitive, and respect

¹ See Attachment A for relevant statistics.
individual employers’ unique work environments and business priorities, particularly around measurement and the reporting of metrics.

Since its inception in fall 2014, the Corporate Challenge has become the cornerstone for much of the CWB’s work. The Challenge community of more than 115 organizations has provided a substantial platform from which and for which to launch our programming, conduct research, and share information. This paper discusses how the Corporate Challenge got started and how, less than a year since its formation, it has evolved.

**The Governor’s Women in the Workplace Initiative**

The Corporate Challenge grew out of the *Women in the Workplace Initiative*, a program which Governor Patrick had announced earlier in 2014. It had a broad goal to improve the workplace situation for women in Massachusetts and to specifically advance women working in both the public and private sectors. The initiative included a *Women’s Leadership Fellowship* program that placed qualified women in leadership positions throughout state government and included a formal mentoring program. Another component was the *Successful Women, Successful Families Task Force*, which provided comprehensive recommendations to help state government and private sector employers advance and support all women in the Massachusetts workforce. In December 2014, the Task Force issued its *Action Agenda for the Commonwealth*, which included a recommendation to launch a statewide Corporate Challenge. Employers from every sector of the Massachusetts economy would be invited to join an effort to strengthen their gender-inclusion practices and better harness the talents of their women employees.

The Governor asked Bentley’s CWB to spearhead the Corporate Challenge in partnership with the administration and particularly Secretary of Labor Rachel Kaprielian. Together, we planned the initial phase, which involved developing criteria for membership in the Challenge, identifying and securing signatories, and sponsoring a kick-off event. After the Governor left office in January 2015, the CWB assumed all responsibility for the initiative.²

**Phase 1: Establishing the Corporate Challenge Initiative**

Phase 1 is time-intensive, requiring extensive collaboration among sponsoring organizations – in our case, the Governor’s office, the CWB, and a few prominent CEOs who expressed early interest in the initiative. Components of this early phase are outlined below.

- **Agreement**: The CWB developed an agreement that any organization wishing to join the Challenge must sign. The agreement identifies a senior executive who is responsible for the organization’s commitment to the Challenge. This is critical to success: the program can only succeed with significant support and engagement from top leadership.

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² Current Governor Charlie Baker (R) and Boston Mayor Marty Walsh (D) have endorsed the Corporate Challenge.
The agreement requires the signatory to focus on and set measurable goals in at least one of the following five areas:

1. Actively recruit women to fill open positions at all levels of the organization
2. Increase the retention rate of women at all levels of the organization
3. Increase the percentage of women among the top 10 percent of the organization’s senior positions
4. Increase the number of women on the board of directors
5. Monitor pay by gender and address any gaps when discovered

- **Resource Partners**: We identified and partnered with a range of leading organizations on women’s employment issues to make their expertise available to Corporate Challenge participants. These Resource Partners come from consultancies, academic environments, and non-profits, and their expertise ranges from workplace flexibility, to understanding gender intelligence, to how to implement employee resource groups (ERGs). Some of our Resource Partners include Catalyst, the Gender Intelligence Group, Harvard Kennedy School’s Office of Women and Public Policy, Germanos Leadership, and Greatheart Consulting. (Attachment B contains a complete list of Resource Partners, and details on utilizing Resource Partners are included in the discussion of Phase 2.)

- **Recruiting membership**: Members of the Governor’s office and the CWB personally contacted key leaders throughout the Massachusetts business community to garner interest in joining the Challenge. This phase of the initiative requires an intensive time-commitment. Staffs from both offices engaged their personal contacts in meetings, and also reached out with “cold calls” as well as emails containing fact sheets and other background information prepared by the CWB.

- **Special events**: To mark success in reaching milestones during the development of the Challenge (announcing the founding members of the Challenge and, later, celebrating the 100-member mark), we hosted events featuring Governor Patrick, Massachusetts Secretary of Labor Rachel Kaprielian, other prominent women in the public sector, senior executives from the business community, Bentley’s president, and the CWB’s Founding Director. The events were attended by employees of signatories as well as leaders and academics engaged in women’s leadership and workplace issues. Bentley’s campus served as the venue for the program launch and subsequent events. Our well-respected and telegenic Governor – so visibly committed to the cause – was a major asset during the kick-off phase, helping attract media coverage and large audiences to our events.

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3 Metrics do not need to be publicly reported.
- **Media coverage:** Our center and the Governor engaged with media about the Challenge throughout the start-up period. The events with the Governor’s office provided natural opportunities, and we established new relationships with key local reporters who now routinely contact us on timely women’s workplace issues.

**Phase 2: Implementing and Refining the Initiative**

After its launch, the Corporate Challenge quickly grew to over 115 employers\(^4\) committed to enhancing the role of women in the workplace. Most were anxious to immediately begin a collaborative effort of networking, information sharing, and programming. Our center’s work during this phase has included organizational efforts, conducting member surveys to determine needs, advisory group formation, program development, and initial planning for long-term sustainability.

- **Advisory group:** We invited senior executives among our Challenge members to join an advisory board. The group consists of 10 individuals who rotate on and off in a staggered fashion. These dedicated members provide feedback – primarily via routine conference calls – on how the initiative can best serve all participants, and helps ensure that our center provides substantive, impactful programming, resources and strategic input.

- **Surveys:** Immediately after businesses or other employers join the Challenge, we send them short email surveys to verify their focus areas around women’s advancement and to determine their needs. Likewise, we send follow-up surveys after workshops to seek feedback that we use to refine our programming.

- **Programming:** During the initiative’s first year, we have introduced three types of programming:

  1. **Workshops:** Approximately once a month, we host a workshop for Challenge participants on a topic that is crucial to promoting women in public and private organizations. Resource Partners generally offer their services at no cost to speak at and facilitate these workshops. The benefit to the Resource Partners is exposure to major corporations and other employers who might retain their services (in the case of consultancies) or purchase membership (Catalyst).

  2. **Peer Exchanges:** On a quarterly basis, one of the participating employers hosts a peer exchange where participants can share challenges, struggles, and successes. These forums provide an opportunity for attendees to immerse themselves deeply in one facet of the gender balance landscape and, importantly, provide an opportunity for Challenge members to network. Peer exchanges normally include a panel discussion and are ideally hosted by the CEO or another high-profile senior executive. CWB Resource Partners sometimes

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\(^4\) See Attachment C for a list of CWB Corporate Challenge members.
participate and can serve as moderators. Sample topics include, “How to advance high-potential women,” “Men as allies” and “How to measure success.”

3. Thought Leadership Series: Annually, we host a speaker series that brings in experts in gender inclusion, workplace diversity, or leadership to speak to Challenge members. These events are ticketed while the workshops and peer exchanges are free of charge to Corporate Challenge participants.

- Website and Social Media: Challenge members vary in how they use social media and prefer to receive information, so we are utilizing email, our website, Twitter and LinkedIn to communicate news and programming information. With LinkedIn, we have created a private space that allows the CWB and members to post notices and also to share and discuss ideas, best practices, obstacles, successes and progress toward their common goals. We are exploring the possibility of a Challenge iPhone app.

- Relationship Managers: Members of the CWB staff serve as relationship managers for each Corporate Challenge organization. Participants have committed to collaborating with our center and with other employers to achieve common goals. It is imperative to foster those relationships to ensure the sustainability of the Corporate Challenge initiative, each employer’s long-term commitment to the overall initiative and individual member success in the advancement of women. We do so via routine conference calls and one-on-one meetings that enable us to stay up to date on each member’s unique workplace issues, organizational and staffing changes, and desired level of engagement with the Challenge initiative.

- Measuring Success: We are working with our advisory group and with Catalyst to develop a concrete measurement plan that protects privacy and respects legal constraints, yet creates a roadmap to measure success toward goals. Key to addressing the participants’ diverse needs around measurement is establishing both qualitative and quantitative measurement methods. Surveys, interviews, focus groups and informal feedback constitute qualitative or “soft” quantitative measurement techniques. The gathering and reporting of extensive hard data (precise numbers of women hired, promoted, percentages of women at each level of an organization, etc.) is the technique used by those organizations that want quantitative data. Scorecards can be utilized to attain both qualitative and quantitative measurement goals.
What They’re Saying: Feedback from Participating Companies

Feedback from Corporate Challenge participants demonstrates the positive short-term impact of the initiative and the prospects for long-term success. Here’s what a few of the companies have to say:

“In the crush of competing priorities and day-to-day responsibilities, it can be easy to lose sight of the big picture and take your eye off the ball. Being part of the Corporate Challenge helps ensure that we maintain a laser focus on our efforts to develop and advance women in our organization. The Challenge affords us the opportunity to problem-solve with other companies who have similar challenges and to celebrate our successes as a collaborative business community... Companies that are gender-diverse and gender-intelligent are more sustainable, have higher market share and have happier, more productive, more engaged employees. For us, the reasons to focus on this issue are many and clear.”

- Kendra R. Thomas, JD, SPHR, Director, Diversity & Inclusion, Americas, Pearson

“We chose to join the Corporate Challenge because of the unique opportunities it provides to network and knowledge-share with a wide range of organizations jointly committed to furthering the development and advancement of women. This network will be invaluable to us as we continue in this work. A second reason is the variety and depth of sessions offered to corporations. Over the past few months we have attended many of these sessions and have brought back many key points that have helped inform the work we are doing.”

- Karen Price, Director of Global Leadership Development. Nuance Communications

“Diversity, teamwork and a performance-based culture that’s non-hierarchical are all tenets of Eliassen Group. We need women to help us focus on the possibilities, moving forward as an organization and not relying on the way we’ve ‘always done it.’ Men and women at times view the world differently and having diverse thoughts and ideas are important in business.”

- David MacKeen, CEO, Eliassen Group

“We have a Corporate Challenge task force and we are working on defining our goals and priorities for the Challenge and how we are going to measure our progress. We are actively engaging women in our Early Career Program, Mentoring Program and various leadership programs to ensure that all employees have an opportunity to develop and grow professionally.”

- Martha T. Higgins, Executive Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer, Boston Private Financial Holdings, Inc.
Take-Aways: Final Thoughts about Starting a Corporate Challenge Program

From the outset, the Governor and Bentley believed that a public-private partnership was key to success. There is no single blueprint for reaching the goal, but readers interested in launching a similar initiative may find these thoughts useful:

- **Recruit star power.** Every state has influential people who know how to get things done – the Governor or another public official, a key CEO, or a respected non-profit leader. Once you get that influential catalyst on board, others will follow. In Massachusetts, success resulted from active, visible and ongoing commitment from the Governor, the secretary of labor, several well-known and highly regarded CEOs, and early endorsements from respected third parties such as Catalyst.

- **Utilize personal relationships.** In the early stages, it can be challenging and time-consuming to rally participants to join the effort. Like a good political campaign, it’s all about the person-to-person connections. Be prepared to tap your personal and professional network!

- **The public/private partnership is key.** The combination of public and private sectors lends credibility to the cause. The success of the Corporate Challenge in Massachusetts is due in large part to the extensive collaboration and cooperation among state administrators, several major Massachusetts employers, and the academic contributions of a higher education institution (Bentley University).

- **House the initiative in a university or a Chamber of Commerce.** If an initiative is launched in partnership with government, it must have a permanent home-base to support sustainability when administrations change. A university or Chamber of Commerce is ideal.

- **Create a group of Resource Partners.** Employers have told us that it is challenging to identify credible experts in the gender balance space. In response, we identified leaders in the field and our center serves as the “convener” of these resource partners in order to help our Corporate Challenge members.

- **Establish an advisory group.** As the initiative takes form, a group of signatories will emerge as the most engaged and active, and they will likely know what it takes to get others to commit to the initiative and remain invested for the long term. Importantly, this advisory group will provide candid feedback on what works and what doesn’t. The group should be representative of the regional or state employment landscape; i.e., a combination of both large and small employers, established entities and start-ups, high-tech firms, consumer companies, not-for-profits and foundations.
● **Establish a relationship manager structure.** The inherent nature of the employment landscape is one of constant change. Within two months of signing on to the Corporate Challenge, several participating companies went through major reorganizations, buyouts and other restructurings, all resulting in changes of primary contacts. For such reasons, it is critical to match each company with a “relationship manager” – a staff member who will become an expert on an individual member, maintain a personal relationship with them and contact them regularly.

● **Invite participants to commit to measurable change** (but don’t require them to share it publicly). Bentley’s Corporate Challenge members cover the spectrum in their need for and desire to create metrics to measure success. Several major corporations deem measurement essential to their women’s advancement initiatives. At the opposite end of the spectrum, some employers have only recently introduced formal efforts and are daunted by the notion of measurement. Still others communicate valid legal concerns related to data collection and metrics. As noted previously, we are working with our advisory group to develop qualitative and quantitative measurement techniques that work in a variety of environments.

● **Create relevant programs.** Establish well-planned, substantive programs that are accessible to members including workshops, peer exchanges and thought leadership events. It is essential that presentation topics cover all of the relevant issues employers must address to make progress on women’s advancement – workplace flexibility, family-friendly policies, measurement, women in the boardroom, engaging men as allies, mentoring and sponsorship, unconscious bias and more. Varying their format, locations and time of day will ensure you meet the needs of as many members as possible.

● **Encourage sharing.** By creating a private LinkedIn group, hosting peer exchanges, requesting feedback via short online surveys after events, or organizing other vehicles for participants to share tips, concerns and best practices, you will encourage networking and a more tightly connected group in which valuable lessons are shared and learned.

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*Bentley University’s Center for Women and Business (CWB) is focused on helping women reach their full potential in the workplace and helping corporations engage the full potential of talented women leaders. The CWB is dedicated to helping businesses recruit, engage, advance, and retain women in their workplaces. We assist employers in creating inclusive work environments where women can succeed and advance into leadership. We prepare students for successful business careers through academic and experiential leadership programming. We conduct research to gain deeper understanding of the issues and to develop solutions to benefit our partners and the business community.*
Attachment A: Women in the Workplace: The Current Landscape

A report released in March 2015 by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research projected that a girl born in Massachusetts today will be 43 years old when the gender wage gap in the state is closed. Today, women in Massachusetts earn about 79 cents for every dollar paid to men, which happens to be above the national average of 77 cents. Further, Massachusetts has the highest women’s to men’s earnings ratio of any state, with full-time women earning $900 per week or 81.2 percent of the $1,109 median weekly earnings of men, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

While these numbers rank Massachusetts at the top of the nation for closing the gender gap, we still have a long way to go to achieve gender equality in the workplace.

Research shows that diversity and gender balance is better for the bottom line. As reported in a recent paper, “Diversity, Social Goods Provision, and Performance in the Firm,” published in the Journal of Economics and Management Strategy, shifting from an all-male or all-female office to one split evenly along gender lines could increase company revenue by roughly 41 percent.

On top of an increase in company revenue, if the gender wage gap were eliminated, a working woman in Massachusetts would have on average enough money for:

- 94 more weeks of food for her family (1.8 years' worth)
- 3,546 additional gallons of gas

And it’s not all about money. Corporate boards in Massachusetts are made up mostly of men. A report from The Boston Club found that in 2014 women made up 14.9 percent of board directors, an increase of 1.1 percentage points from 2013. Very slow progress.

Nationally, the story is largely the same. Women-led companies around the country perform three times better than the S&P 500, and women-led hedge funds outperform those led by men. However, a recent Bain study shows that while 43% of women aspire to top management when they are in the first two years of their position (compared to 34% of men), over time their aspiration levels drop more than 60% while men’s stay the same. Somewhere along the way, women are being counted out.
Attachment B: Bentley Center for Women and Business Strategic Resource Partners

Boston College Center for Work & Family
Boston Women’s Workforce Council and Simmons College
Catalyst
Gender Intelligence Group (formerly Barbara Annis & Associates)
Germanos Leadership
Greatheart Consulting (Men as Allies)
Harvard Kennedy School’s Office of Women and Public Policy
PwC
reacHIRE (Women Returning to Work after Hiatus)
YWomen
Attachment C: Bentley Center for Women and Business Corporate Challenge Members

Actifio
Acquia
Alexander Aronson Finning CPAs
Arbella Insurance
ARK Global LLC
Associated Industries of Massachusetts (AIM)
Bank of America
Baystate Health
Bentley University
Biogen Idec
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts
Boston Benefit Partners, LLC
The Boston Globe
Boston Medical Center Healthnet
Boston Scientific
Brookline Health Care Center
Brown Brothers Harriman
Bullhorn
Carbonite
Care.com
The Castle Group
Century Bank
Choate, Hall & Stewart, LLP
Citizens Bank
Collette Phillips Communications, Inc.
Collaborative Consulting
- C Space
Conventures
Cubist Pharmaceuticals
Dalton & Finegold LLP
Dassault Systemes
Deloitte LLP, Boston
Denterlein Worldwide
Dimension Therapeutics
Dunkin’ Brands, Inc.
Eastern Bank Corporation
EBS Capstone
Eliassen Group
Emerson Hospital
EMC2
Enterprise Bank
EOS Foundation
Eversource Energy
Gentle Giant Moving Company
Global Smile Foundation
Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce
Greater Media Boston
Harvard Pilgrim Health Care
Hill Holliday
Hollister Staffing, Inc.
Hotel & Home Recovery
Hunter Creative Labs
InkHouse
Interaction Associates
Iron Mountain
John Hancock Financial Services
Keystone Partners
KPMG LLP
Kriss Law/Atlantic Closing & Escrow
Krokidas & Bluestein LLP
LAER Realty Partners
Liberty Mutual
Living Legacy Financial Group, Inc.
Long Term Solutions
Luminoso
Lyve Media, LLC
Marcum LLP
Massachusetts Biotechnology Council
Massachusetts High Technology Council
Massachusetts Medical Device Industry Council
Massachusetts Medical Society
Massachusetts Technology Leadership Council
McGladrey LLP
Middlesex Savings Bank
Middlesex County Sheriff’s Office
Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky and Popeo
National Grid
Newton Health Care Center
Newton-Needham Chamber of Commerce
Nuance Communications
PatientKeeper
Pearson
PwC
Putnam Investments
Radius Financial Group, Inc.
Raytheon Company
Riverside Partners
Rockland Trust
Salem Five Bank
Santander
Seniorlink/Caregiver Homes
Skanska
Small Army Advertising
Sodexo
Staples
Startup Institute
State Street Corporation
Suffolk County Sheriff's Department
Suffolk Construction
The Bulfinch Group
The Parthenon Group
TIAA-CREF
Towers Watson
Tufts Health Plan
Unum
Veracode
Verizon
Vertex Pharmaceuticals
Village Automotive Group
Walgreens
Wayfair
Weber Shandwick
William Gallagher Associates
Windsor Marketing Group (WMG)
Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce
Zyno Medical