

EQUITY

EXPANDING



C-store leaders, diversity experts share stories and tools for strengthening female representation in the workforce

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Only 26% of C-suite leaders in the United States and Canada are women, according to a Women in the Workplace report from Palo Alto, California-based Lean In. That could be changing, though, as top companies, including convenience stores, place more of an emphasis on diversity in leadership.

For example, for the first time in its 68-year history, the Fortune 500 list's share of companies led by female CEOs reached 10%, the magazine reported in January. While the list spans many

industries, several c-store chains are included: Murphy USA, Casey's General Stores and Global Partners among them.

Men visit c-stores more frequently than women, according to data from CSP's sister research firm Technomic, Chicago, but about 53% of women visit c-stores once a week and 80% visit once a month, Technomic found. However, the people running c-store chains are primarily men.

The industry has started to make efforts to shift. For example, Casey's, Ankeny, Iowa, has been recognized for having a gender-balanced board by 50/50 Women on Boards. And Women

in Governance awarded Canada's Alimentation Couche-Tard Inc./Circle K with a bronze-level Parity Certification for its progress toward gender parity in the workplace.

CSP spoke to some of the women in the c-store industry who are making changes.

Natalie Morhous of RaceTrac Inc. and Mary McPherson of TravelCenters of America are two women who have made it to the C-suite and executive levels. They shared with CSP highlights of their careers and advice for other female leaders. Experts from Meta and Leading Now also gave tips on where companies can start.



NATALIE MORHOUS

RaceTrac's Morhous Emphasizes Importance of Mentorship

Natalie Morhous is a third-generation leader of RaceTrac Inc. With more than 550 c-stores, the Atlanta-based chain ranks No. 15 on CSP's 2022 Top 202 list of top c-store chains by U.S. store count. She worked her way up to the position, beginning her career as a consultant with SRA Touchstone Consulting Group and Acquisition Solutions Inc., obtaining her MBA from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and working with RaceTrac's trucking company, Energy Dispatch, before taking on her current role as president.

Yet, she's often the only female and the youngest person at the table—two facts that regularly lead to imposter syndrome, or feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success, and an overwhelming desire to prove herself, Morhous says.

These challenges are typical for any wom-

an, she says. There are more male than female leaders in the c-store industry for the same reason there are more males than females in most industries—history and culture, Morhous says.

“Historically, more women opt out of the workforce than men, which is a trend that has only been exacerbated since COVID,” she says. “Additionally, one subtle reason could be related to the importance of relationships in business. Whether it's intentional or not, oftentimes people feel more comfortable building relationships with others they perceive to be like them. So if a company starts with more men to begin with, those men tend to build relationships with other men.”

This doesn't only impede gender diversity, but racial, ethnic, religious and socioeconomic diversity, among others, as well, she says.

One antidote that Morhous suggests for insular or “like me” relationships: mentorship.

Mentorship is critical to the future of women in business, Morhous says, including women mentoring women and men mentoring women. “As women advance in their careers, it is critical that we recognize the importance of owning our own development by seeking out mentors and building relationships ourselves,” she says.

“Why would you want to miss out on 50% of the population when accounting for executive talent?”

Having female leadership is important because women are smart: “Why would you want to miss out on 50% of the population when accounting for executive talent?” she says. And diversity helps organizations gain perspective and make better decisions, and with perspective comes value. “Organizations will undoubtedly benefit from the female perspective as it relates to programs that affect both employees and guests,” Morhous says.

RaceTrac puts this into practice. One-third of its executive leadership team members are women, Morhous says. The company also has a business resource group focused on women in the workforce, started in 2014, called LEAD: Link, Empower, Achieve and Develop. Finally, Morhous says RaceTrac sends women to empowering events where they can be lifted up and meet other driven women like themselves.

At the end of the day, Morhous says she doesn't overcome her imposter syndrome; she pushes through it, reframing what she calls her kryptonite into a secret weapon.

“Imposter syndrome drives me to be prepared, encourages me to trust the experience and opinions of others and allows me to relate to so many others who may feel different or experience self-doubt as they navigate their careers. These tendencies have helped mold me into the leader I am today, and, for that, I am grateful,” she says.

C-STORE WOMEN'S EVENT

CSP will host its inaugural C-Store Women's Event (CSW) from Nov. 8 to 10 in Napa Valley, California. The Winsight-powered conference is designed with the intent to empower women and teach the convenience-store industry action steps in shifting the gender gap in c-store leadership. It will include career-development education, problem-solving strategies and networking. The three-day event is the kickoff for a program of continuous support, with eight-person

teams that meet for discussions throughout the year.

Education sessions include presentations on moving from middle to senior level positions, how to identify differences in tactical and strategic relationships and more. Special guests include experts from Leading Now, a research and consulting firm that helps reach inclusive talent and culture goals.

To attend CSW, two people from an organization must commit to attend—one

leader and one upcoming manager star—and one person must be a woman.

Request an invitation on the CSW website, cstorewomen.com.



**C-STORE
WOMEN**



MARY MCPHERSON

TA's McPherson on Producing Results in a Male-Dominated Field

Mary McPherson has spent her entire career with TravelCenters of America, starting 35 years ago as a teenager working in the deli serving ice cream and selling merchandise. Today, she is vice president of special amenities. McPherson's strong will and passion to always do the right thing helped her advance in her career, she says, along with her sacrifices to become a leader in the industry (she's moved 13 times during her TA tenure).

"I have had excellent mentors—both

men and women—who helped me navigate through a variety of experiences and even some hurdles, but I refused to let the fact that I was working in an industry that historically had been heavily male-oriented stop me from success," McPherson says. "I always had the mindset that women also can lead people and provide positive influence, while producing results."

Westlake, Ohio-based TravelCenters of America has 276 locations under the TA and TA Express brands. The sites are more than c-stores, she says: The travel centers have truck maintenance and repair, full-service restaurants and a variety of amenities and services. The trucking profession in general has more males than females—women make up only about 14% of truck drivers, according to the Women in Trucking Index, McPherson says. That doesn't stop her confidence, though.

"As a female leader in this space, I have to always believe my viewpoint and opinion matters," she says. "Even though I may not have the same skills as the techs who are fixing trucks every day or the heroic professional drivers who deliver goods across the country, I have the experience, knowledge, confidence and business acumen to be a leader in this industry."

Women can bring a variety of skills to any company, especially empathy and influence, McPherson says. It's important for young women to see themselves at the C-suite level and know there is opportunity. Businesses should invest in female leadership for diversity of thought and for the future success of America's youth, she says.

TA is hyper-focused and deliberate in its efforts to recruit more women and diverse talent and to develop its emerging female leaders within the organization, McPherson says. The company is led in this area by its diversity statement, which reads:

"Our travel centers serve thousands every day; not one traveler is the same, and our team must reflect that. We can 'return every traveler to the road better than they came' only by understanding and celebrating individualism. We commit ourselves to equality and inclusion across: race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, age, disability, handicap or veteran status."

To future leaders, McPherson says: "Don't give up on your career development; own your mistakes and failures and learn from them. I believe that asking for guidance is not a weakness, it's a strength. Stand up tall and be proud of the talent you bring to your team."

LEARNING FROM THE EXPERTS: HOW MIDDLE MANAGEMENT CAN MOVE UP

Historical systemic barriers, including the lack of voting and banking rights for women, as well as cultural narratives, such as women holding responsibility as the primary caregiver, are at the root of inequity when it comes to women in leadership roles, says Sandra Medrano, social impact program manager for Meta, Menlo Park, California. Racial inequity added on top of these issues puts women of color even further behind, she says.

Medrano previously worked at FSG, a nonprofit consulting firm that partners with foundations and corporations to create equitable change. Medrano continues to do social impact work at Meta, the parent company of Facebook.

Through the years, there have been small but consistent gains in women representation in the work-

force across industries, Medrano says. But the pandemic has thrown a wrench in this progress because women left the workforce at a much higher rate than men, and it "highlighted all of the ways in which our broader system doesn't support working women or families with two parents who are also working professionals," she says.

"I think as a woman myself, as a woman of color, it's very hard to make that decision and leave the workforce," Medrano says. "But women who were younger and working mothers had other responsibilities to care give because of these old narratives and stereotypes about how we see the role of women in society."

Another factor that prevents the 33% of women in entry-level roles from moving up is they are not given the same tools to get there as men,

says Kelly Primus, CEO of Leading Now, a diversity and inclusion consulting firm based in Millis, Massachusetts. Men are chosen more often than women due to difference in skill sets.

Women and men are mentored differently, says Primus. Women are taught to show up, and men are educated on how to make business-based decisions.

"When [executives] look for future talent, people to move up in the organization, the most important thing is business knowledge, capabilities and demonstrating those skill sets," says Primus. "But if women aren't being mentored on those things, they don't even know they're important."

Leading Now encourages managers to break that pattern and mentor women and men the same way, give

women opportunities to shadow the manager in business meetings and help them recognize how decisions are made.

Formalizing mentorship is an action companies can take that "incentivizes people to change behavior when there's real tangible accountabilitys behind it," Medrano says.

"I would suggest companies should tie commitments around inclusivity, promoting women and broader equity initiatives to our performance evaluation of managers," she says.

Putting those goals in writing is just as important, Medrano adds. When a company publicly reports its commitments through DEI or ESG reporting, it presents opportunity, she says. Dedication to social change is a large influencer when consumers decide where to spend their money. 