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Initiative Moves Women Up Corporate Ladder

LeasePlan Hires Consultant, Offers Counseling and Revisits Pay Plan to Transform Its Culture and Promote Female Employees

By CARI TUNA

Shortly after joining LeasePlan USA as its head of sales and marketing in 2003, Mike Pitcher met with representatives of the vehicle-leasing company's top customers. To his surprise, most were women.

Women also outnumbered men among LeasePlan's 450 employees. Yet the vast majority of top managers at the company, a subsidiary of Netherlands-based LeasePlan Corp., were men.

Soon after, LeasePlan began an effort to transform its corporate culture -- rooted in the old-boy network of fleet managers -- and promote more women.

Executives hired a consultant to offer women career counseling, revised the company's pay plan to stress performance over longevity, and displaced some longtime managers. Today, three of the eight top executives are women, up from one in seven two years ago.

Women employees say LeasePlan is a more supportive and collaborative employer. Mr. Pitcher, now the company's chief executive, calls the initiative a strategic investment rather than "the politically correct thing to do."

"LeasePlan doesn't build anything," he says. "Our sustainable competitive advantage is our people."

LeasePlan's approach could provide a roadmap for boosting the presence of women in management at other companies in traditionally male-dominated industries, experts say.

Such efforts require sustained commitment at the top, says Sheila Wellington, clinical professor of management at New York University's Stern School of Business. Executives "need to make it very clear that this isn't the flavor of the month," says Ms. Wellington, a former president of Catalyst, a research firm focusing on women's workplace issues.

Ms. Wellington says executives must hold middle managers accountable for supporting and promoting female subordinates, particularly at smaller companies. "If [LeasePlan] can do it in this industry, it goes to show that it can be done anywhere," she says.

Fleet managers emerged in the 1940s to oversee the leasing and maintenance of corporate car and truck fleets. Most employees were men, many of them mechanics, says Cindy Brauer, managing editor for *Automotive Fleet Magazine*. LeasePlan was founded in 1963.

Today, many companies that use fleet managers assign the relationship to human-resources departments, staffed primarily by women. But most executives at fleet-management firms are still men.

LeasePlan executives launched their initiative in 2006. They hired Pathbuilders Inc., an Atlanta human-resources consultancy that focuses on women, to craft a program that includes a skills assessment, career guidance, and tips on communicating and building a "brand." The program, which taps about 30 women each year, also features networking events and a panel discussion with female executives from other firms.

The broader effort to transform the corporate culture distinguishes LeasePlan from other companies trying to promote women, says Maria Goldsholl, chief operating officer of Mom Corps, a staffing company specializing in flexible employment for women.

"I deal with companies every day who say that they want to promote women ... but they don't make sure that there is a change in the culture," says Ms. Goldsholl, who, at a previous employer, had hired Pathbuilders for a project.

Ava Turner, 49 years old, started at LeasePlan in 2006 as an accounts-payable supervisor. She had worked in similar jobs for several companies since the early 1980s and had never considered doing anything else. Later that year, she was selected for the Pathbuilders course.

The program prompted her to think that her knack for managing people wasn't limited to accounts payable. When a top post in LeasePlan's license and title department opened up this year, she successfully sought the promotion. She now supervises eight people, up from three, and is considered a salaried, rather than hourly, worker. "I realized maybe there is something else out there for me, maybe I do want to go a little bit higher," she says.

One in five women participants in the first class has since been promoted, Mr. Pitcher says. Six of the company's top 14 managers are now women, up from four two years ago.

The program also appears to be boosting job satisfaction and engagement among LeasePlan's women employees. In a 2006 survey, 35% of women agreed that "management supports my efforts to manage my career." The following year, 47% of all female employees and 71% of program participants agreed. The percentage of women who said they think positions at LeasePlan are awarded fairly increased to 30% from 22%.

Gerri Patton, director of client activation, says the program helped her become more confident and outspoken. The 23-year LeasePlan veteran encourages her female subordinates to apply. "I wish I would have done that program 10 or 15

years ago," she says. "There's no telling where I would be ... The sky would have been the limit."

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