

Corporate culture key to workplace gender equality, diversity: Speakers

NEW YORK — As companies formulate strategies for promoting gender equality and diversity in the workplace, it is critical that the programs they put in place to achieve that end match their overall corporate culture, a panel of experts said on Tuesday.

At the Cleveland, Ohio-based brokerage Oswald Cos., CEO Robert Klontk has taken a top-down, hands-on approach to providing female professionals at his firm with a clearer path to advancement within the company.

“We had a lot of talented and ambitious women in our organization who really didn’t have a channel that they could go to and map out a path to a leadership role,” Mr. Klontk said Tuesday during a panel discussion at Business Insurance’s 2014 Women to Watch Leadership Conference and Awards in New York. “With many of their help, we formed what we call the Women’s Leadership Council in 2013.”

Mr. Klontk said the council offers women within the Oswald organization “an outlet to work together and find ways to become leaders both within the organization and among their peer groups.”

“It’s been great to watch and see internally how a lot of their leadership skills have improved,” he said.

Alongside the council’s formation, Mr. Klontk said the company also named Janice Tomlinson, a former executive vice president and international field operations manager at Chubb Corp., as its first female board member in the company’s 121-year history.

“What I’ve seen at Oswald, and the reason I’m so committed to this is that every member of their leadership teams

walks the walk,” Ms. Tomlinson said. “That support from senior leadership is crucially important.”

Establishing a dedicated networking, discussion and educational group for female professionals has also proven successful at Philadelphia-based Ace Ltd., according to the company’s deputy general counsel, Deborah Giss Stalker.

“For me, it’s been fascinating to watch the evolution,” Ms. Stalker said during the discussion. “We started with chapters in nine different regions in the U.S., and today it’s grown to more than 20.

“It’s a safe place for women to talk and network with women inside and out of organization that they’d ordinarily never meet, and it’s been a phenomenal platform for bringing them into the view of senior leadership,” she added.

Expanding the effort

Some firms, such as New York-based Willis North America, have expanded their efforts to emphasize and promote diversity beyond the four walls of their own organizations by making a concerted effort to build vendor relationships with women-owned and minority-owned businesses.

“From my perspective, it drives both the value proposition and the business case for building diverse teams across the industry,” said Kim Waller, Chicago-based executive vice president at Willis. “Ideally, what we’re doing is partnering with firms that complement us, either by doing something that we don’t do or just doing it differently, which means we’re able to touch the client in a way that may be more hands-on.”

Another benefit to partnering with a more diverse range of vendor companies,

Ms. Waller said, is that “people begin to learn how to respect each other and hear each other’s voices and ideas.”

“The only way to do that is to experience it,” she added.

In rarer cases, some firms have found their corporate philosophy and culture to be naturally conducive to women’s advancement through the company’s upper ranks.

“Nineteen of our 25 offices are run and managed by female managing partners,” said Steven Testan, founder and senior managing partner at the Westlake Village, California-based Law Offices of Adelson, Testan, Brundo, Novell, and Jimenez. “We haven’t had to create an initiative to make up for a deficiency, because we’ve never had one. We hired the best of the best, and it turned out that women would make up 76% of our managing partners, and 52% of our total lawyer staff.”

“It’s been interesting to watch, especially where we’re trying to get men to come in and work under women, because I think it takes a special kind of man to be led by women,” said Karen Stankevitz, director of consulting services at the law firm. “Our organization does look very different, but it’s a very supportive organization.”

—Matt Dunning

