

Change is Good: Eight Ways to Create Positive Change for Women in Your Industry

By Roxanne Rivera

When I first started my business, I flew by the seat of my pants. I really had no plan. I just kept my head down, worked as hard as I could, and handled situations as they came up. I focused on making *my* business a success and neglected the opportunity I had to really effect change for women in my industry and to create positive changes in my industry itself. Over the years I have realized that you have to have a hand in controlling the destiny of your industry, or the industry and the people running it will never change for the better—and that will end up impacting you in a negative way.

As women in MDIs, we need to take responsibility for ourselves, our sisters, and our industries. Change is not going to “just happen.” We have to *make* it happen. And it will if we stand up for our principles and our values and make sure we have a voice in our committees, our states, and our country.

Here are eight ways that you can be an instigator of change:

Get involved in politics. For eight years I served on the Governor’s Advisory Board for Worker’s Compensation. When I started, the only thing I knew about worker’s compensation was that I paid outrageous premiums. I went on an eight year journey that made me somewhat of an expert on worker’s compensation. For four of those eight years I served as chair of the committee, the first woman to ever serve as chair. During those eight years, male contractors who had previously never given me the time of day would approach me and ask me questions about worker’s compensation. I became a staunch advocate for business people, and I helped write and pass important legislation in my state that not only reduced premiums but helped make the work environment safer for both the worker and the employer. I like to think that as a woman contractor I caused a few people to sit up and take notice because I was smart, articulate, impassioned, and cared about my industry. It was great being a part of a change for the good.

Join boards and groups that have a purpose you believe in. By taking part in boards and groups that are working towards a change in your industry, you become an active piece of the puzzle. I sat on the Board of Directors for the Associated Builders and Contractors. I was the only woman on the board and knew the only reason I was on the board was because a token woman was needed. But frankly, I didn’t care why I was there. I was just glad that I could be there to help change the mind set about being a woman in construction. I worked hard on that board and earned the respect of my fellow male board members. Being a part of a board or organization is a great opportunity not only to effect

change but also to further gain respect from your colleagues and create a great name for women in your industry.

Become an advocate for a new law. On a daily basis, in male-dominated industries, and quite frankly, in everyday life, we encounter instances where we see injustice, unfairness, and sometimes just stupidity. A great way to counteract such problems is to become an advocate for a law that creates the change you would like to see. Many people don't know that everyday citizens can present ideas for new laws. Well, you can! All you need to do is research a precedent for the law you want to get passed, and then search out a lawmaker that can sponsor your bill. Go to this person with a draft of the bill in hand and back up documentation to support your case. Poll fellow constituents and document their responses whether negative or positive. Be prepared to testify at a committee meeting. Most of all, be open to doing whatever it takes to help get your bill passed.

Be a regular at town or city council meetings. This is all about getting to know your local politicians. By attending these meetings, not only do you keep a finger on the pulse of what is going on with businesses and new laws in your area, but you have a chance to build relationships with people who could be pivotal in helping you create the change that you think is necessary. If you really want to get involved don't just attend the meetings, run for election to the town or city council in your area. Doing so will allow you to directly affect what regulations or concessions are made for businesses in your area and in your industry.

Be informed. To be an instigator of change, you need to know what is going on in all areas of your business. You need to have an educated outlook when you speak up about a particular change. Know how the change will affect your business in all areas. The more you know, the better you will be able to convince detractors why the change is a good thing. The media is your best friend. Read newspapers and watch the news everyday. To be successful, you'll need a well-rounded knowledge of what is going on in the world.

Become a mentor. As I became more self-confident being a woman in a male-dominated industry, I began to reach out to other women who were trying to break into the construction industry. I helped several women write business plans so that they could approach their bankers. I teamed with smaller women-owned construction companies on bidding larger construction projects that they could not bid for on their own. I felt that if I helped them to succeed, they would do what I had done and help another woman in their position when they became successful in the industry. Mentoring is a great way to help re-shape our industries.

Educate the men in your industry. Men are often not aware that they are gender-biased. The beliefs that women aren't suited for certain areas of business are ingrained in them through our society and culture. By being a successful, respectable businesswoman, teach them that women are more than capable of doing anything they put their minds to by being a successful. Prove their biases wrong and you will help end stereotypes that have been plaguing women in business for centuries.

Publicize your successes. When I was running my construction company, I consistently used the media. It is a great way to get the word out about what you are doing or are trying to do in your industry. Work with your local radio, television, and print media in publishing as much about yourself as you can. Highlight the different boards you are on and what they are trying to accomplish. Offer to submit an article to your local business publications. Make sure that you send a press release to your local business publications whenever any woman within your organization is promoted or has an accomplishment.

It is through creating change that we will shake up this male-dominated world and begin to make a place for ourselves. We are all in this together, and if we work together to create change we can make our industries better places for women *and* men. It's all about changing minds and changing the way things are done in our industries. If you can create a positive change in your industry, your work will be appreciated and respected and your accomplishments will reflect well on every woman in your industry.