

WE THE OWNERS

EMPLOYEES EXPANDING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Film Q&A with Executive Producer, Mary Ann Beyster

WHY DID YOU MAKE *WE THE OWNERS: EMPLOYEES EXPANDING THE AMERICAN DREAM*?

This documentary is truly an experiment in bringing together art, business and education. We know that thriving successfully in the 21st Century and beyond will require new business models and strategies to keep the American Dream of opportunity and economic prosperity alive and well. By exploring the broad-based employee ownership models used by Namaste Solar, DPR Construction and New Belgium Brewing Company, our goal is to educate and motivate the next generation of business leaders, technologists and educators on the “art of the possible” in ownership structures, corporate culture, incentives, rewards and innovation models.

The best way to understand and feel how different an employee-owned company operates is to work at one. But short of that, we know that story telling is a powerful way to learn. We hope that capturing the true stories of employee-owners will help bring to light their unique passion, commitment, challenge, and success. This film captures a timely insider’s view of each company’s distinct form of broad-based ownership, and shares “out-of-the-box” thinking by leaders who dared to be different when they sought out and implemented new ownership models for their companies.

WHAT ARE THE KEY MESSAGES OF THE FILM?

Few would dispute the challenges business leaders face in motivating employees, being entrepreneurial, creating a culture of innovation, furthering social responsibility, and leading expansion of decentralized organizations in local and global markets. By exploring employee ownership as a viable and compelling answer to these challenges, our hope is that viewers come away with a greater understanding of and thirst to learn more about three key points:

- Ownership matters to all types of employees and companies.
- Employee ownership comes in many forms.
- Participation and responsibility are an essential and integral part of ownership.

WHAT RESEARCH WENT INTO MAKING THE FILM? WHAT INVOLVEMENT DID ACADEMICS HAVE IN ITS CREATION?

Practitioners and researcher provided their input on the types of companies and ownership styles for us to consider featuring in the film, and gave us their support and consensus on the questions to be explored. We also showed them rough versions of the trailer and gained their meaningful feedback which was invaluable throughout the film development process. From a research perspective, colleagues, thought leaders in the field, and professors provided facts, figures, articles, letters, books on the forms of EO, materials on the ownership history, founding fathers, and key economists etc. --- all of which helped us clarify the presence of employee ownership and confirm the key educational materials to be included in the resource kit that is easily accessible from our website (www.WetheOwners.com).

WHO DO YOU THINK WILL GAIN THE MOST FROM VIEWING THIS FILM?

Company owners, employees, students, professors, and business advisors will all learn very valuable principles, approaches and lessons from the film.

By hearing the employees' stories and seeing the participative cultures of employee-owned companies in action, we hope that company owners and employees will learn by example and recognize not to take broad-based ownership and participation for granted.

Students will learn first-hand about the power that's unearthed when employees are engaged as owners, and can draw from this insight as they start their own ventures or select a company to join. Importantly, they will be able to test assumptions and not take core work principles such as freedom, responsibility, and fair reward for granted.

Professors will also become better informed about the value of broad-based employee ownership and will have an important educational tool for creating interest and debate with their students and colleagues. We would like to see how more professors will integrate the principles and practices of broad employee ownership, participation, and governance into their course curricula.

Lastly, business advisors and trade association representatives will have a high-quality film as another means of communicating about employee ownership and increase their membership and customer base.

HOW DID YOU SELECT THE 3 COMPANIES FEATURED IN THE FILM?

We wanted to show a broad swath of the workforce including blue-collar and white-collar workers, illustrate a mix of ownership forms, and bring forward at least one company with a union to show that innovative owners are beyond “us” and “them.” We also felt it was important to include a mix of newer (less than 10 years) and more mature companies with a track record with employee ownership. All of these companies have been recognized by third party organizations for their top performance and innovation.

ASIDE FROM EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP PRINCIPLES, IS THERE SOMETHING ELSE THAT THESE THREE COMPANIES HAVE IN COMMON?

In addition to each being recognized as a “Top” or “Best” place to work, all three companies have corporate missions built around support to their communities and the environment. As Blake Jones, co-founder of Namaste Solar, says in the film, “The community, the economy, the environment --- everything is interconnected. That’s the approach we bring to our business.” Like Namaste Solar, broad-based employee ownership plays a key role in the triple-bottom line of People, Planet, and Profit. At DPR Construction, the environmental connection is very evident in constructed energy efficient and green buildings. It is a key part of their drive for top quality and innovation in the industry. Both New Belgium Brewery and Namaste Solar have become B Corporations to acknowledge the importance of meeting high standards of social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency.

IS THERE A “ONE SIZE FITS ALL” APPROACH TO EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP OR DOES IT COMES IN MANY SHAPES AND SIZES?

As the stories in the film show, employee ownership comes in a variety of shapes and sizes – in fact, even more than is presented in the film. There are actually many different ways of providing employees with a financial stake in the outcome, just as there are many ways that employees can “act” as owners through participative work practices on a daily and regular basis. One of the reasons it is important to have employee ownership taught at universities is that it can be simple in principle --- such as “people care about things they own” ---- but complicated in practice. How and when to apply those ownership principles is where the skills and judgement come in.

It’s important to understand, however, that employee ownership is an enabler, not a cure-all. Employee ownership alone cannot and will not save a company from a bad market, an inferior product, or unethical people.

And remember, just because one approach doesn't work, doesn't mean that the entire concept should be called into question. Just because some companies have abused employee ownership, doesn't mean it doesn't work. On the contrary, it means that there is more to learn from those mistakes.

IS THE CURRENT STATE OF OUR ECONOMY DRIVING THE NEED FOR EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP? OR IS THIS A BUSINESS MODEL THAT CAN/SHOULD BE USED IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AS WELL?

This film highlights thriving companies whose stories show ---- even in times of economic hardship --- the long-term, sustainable growth that can be achieved through the voice, vote, commitment and shared ownership of employees.

Research suggests that companies with more broad-based employee ownership and participation lay off fewer employees than their peers during economic downturns. And while they also hire fewer employees during periods of prosperity, these companies continue to outperform their peers in sales growth, productivity, and a number of other measures.