

HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES

Women in leadership: From backcountry to boardroom

Camber Outdoors' "CEO Pledge" is helping companies improve outcomes for women in the outdoor industry. Learn more in our interviews with the current or former CEOs of Brooks Running Company, Burton Snowboards, CamelBak, and REI.



The lack of women in leadership positions is top of mind across all industries. That's particularly the case in the outdoor industry, an \$800-billion-a-year sector where, for decades, men have dominated the employee ranks. In recent years, however, the outdoor industry has begun to understand its future depends on reversing this trend. Spurred initially by the potential growth of the women's market, industry leaders now recognize that attracting, developing, and promoting women is essential to long-term business sustainability.

A major force behind accelerating women's leadership in the industry is Camber Outdoors, a nonprofit organization dedicated to achieving equality for women in the outdoor sector. Camber Outdoors¹ was founded in 1996 as the Outdoor Industries Women's Coalition (OIWC), and today it has more than 170 corporate members. The organization works to accelerate gender diversity among leadership teams through various programs, including cross-company mentoring. One of Camber Outdoors' most visible programs was the creation in January 2015 of the CEO Pledge, a first-of-its-kind initiative that commits the signatories to attracting, retaining, and advancing women in their workplaces.

¹ The word "camber" is itself a subtle nod to the group's mission and aspiration to change the status quo. The term refers to a curve that creates a deviation in a straight line. Without camber, the direction of a line will continue without change.

To date, more than 75 member companies have signed the pledge (see sidebar, "About Camber Outdoors").

To take stock of the progress the outdoor industry has made with respect to women in leadership, and to learn about the impact of the CEO Pledge, Heidrick & Struggles' Jeremy Hanson and Amanda Worthington interviewed some of the sector's leading figures: Deanne Buck, executive director of Camber Outdoors; Donna Carpenter, CEO and cofounder of Burton Snowboards; Sally McCoy, former CEO of CamelBak; Jerry Stritzke, CEO of REI; and Jim Weber, CEO of Brooks Running Company. The following roundtable is an edited version of these conversations.

Heidrick & Struggles: How have attitudes toward women professionals evolved in the outdoor industry during your career?

Sally McCoy: Thirty years ago, when I first entered the outdoor industry, I don't recall many other women in leadership roles. There's now more awareness and conversation, but candidly, if you look at the outdoor industry specifically, we still have too few women in leadership positions—at least at the CEO level. We need to do better. And we know we need to do better.

Jim Weber: In recent years, sporting goods and the outdoor industry have been on an interesting journey as it relates to diversity, gender, company cultures, and leadership. Diversity has become a necessity—you can't just "shrink it and pink it."² All of us in the industry have seen that happen. The growth on the women's side of the business has forced this topic in a good way, and the industry has made significant progress in taming what had predominantly been a "bro culture."

² See Jessica Contrera, "The end of 'shrink it and pink it': A history of advertisers missing the mark with women," *Washington Post*, June 8, 2016, washingtonpost.com.

Donna Carpenter: There's a new awareness about women in leadership. When I was starting Burton's Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) 14 years ago, it wasn't an issue anyone talked about. Now companies trying to enter the women's market realize they can't necessarily do it unless they have women in strategic decision-making roles. That was always my biggest thing—that we couldn't look at the women's market as separate from the women in our company. Not that you don't want diversity everywhere. But if you're really going to go after the women's market, you've got to have women in leadership positions. It can't be a token woman; it can't be 10% of the leadership. I've heard the tipping point is a third—once one-third of leadership roles are held by women, the dynamic changes.

I get calls from companies and CEOs who say, "I have a problem. I've got an all-male team and one woman." These executives recognize that their enterprises have taken on a male-dominated culture without them even realizing it. For example, I've seen that at ski areas the management tends to be all men. However, it's women who are deciding how vacation money gets spent, whether you're going to Disney World or Vail or wherever. So there was a recognition that if they wanted to attract and retain female customers, they'd better be attracting and retaining female leaders.

Jerry Stritzke: When I got into the industry four years ago, I found it filled with men and women with a passion and love for the outdoors. Unlike my previous experience in luxury retailing, where there were many powerful women leaders, I saw that outdoors was an industry where there weren't as many women in key leadership roles. Still, there was an emerging dialogue, with a few people trying to push the conversation to the center of the industry. There's been some dramatic strides over the past four years in that way, and I would say some profound steps forward.

Deanne Buck: Attitudes about women or toward women have changed from the perspective of both men and women. In the past, many women were reluctant to be seen as role models or champions. The industry has pivoted, so it is less about the individual and more about who we are as an industry and who we are as companies. Are we attracting the best talent, knowing that women are part of that talent pool? Are we creating places where everyone thrives, including women? That is one place where I see the industry evolving in a really healthy way: all people—men and women—becoming part of the solution.

Heidrick & Struggles: How has Camber Outdoors, and its CEO Pledge, helped elevate opportunities for women leaders—either in your company or in the industry as a whole?

Jerry Stritzke: I can't say enough about Camber Outdoors' role in creating an empowering environment where leaders in the industry can have conversations about the subject, collaborate, and take steps to advance the issue.

Camber Outdoors has done another really good, practical thing: identifying great talent in our industry, creating mentoring and networking opportunities for women, and giving visibility to open jobs in the industry. They're facilitating a network effect in a powerful way. In the past, the power of networking probably wasn't as available to women in the outdoor industry as it needed to be.

I think CEOs, regardless of whether you're a man or a woman, have an obligation to publicly put a stake in the ground that women's leadership is important, and to create an environment supportive of this type of dialogue. The CEO Pledge was an important milestone for us. Our employees were proud we did

About Camber Outdoors

In its earliest stages some two decades ago, the Outdoor Industries Women's Coalition (OIWC) served as a supportive and informal mentoring network for like-minded women professionals in the outdoor industry. Its founders, Ann Krcik and Carolyn Cooke, sought to foster a sense of connection and belonging among their female colleagues.

OIWC's initial efforts consisted of attending trade shows to raise awareness about opportunities for women in the outdoor industry. While this networking-focused approach was well received, the group recognized that the need and potential impact of promoting the interests of women in the industry extended beyond what was currently offered. In response, the organization added advocacy to its mission in 2011. In July 2012, Deanne Buck was named executive director, and the organization shifted to providing women with leadership development opportunities, as well as cultivating expertise in workplace equality and inclusion to accelerate women's leadership.

In 2016, the OIWC rebranded as Camber Outdoors. Since then, the nonprofit has continued its core focus on the individual woman while embracing an even more visible role as an advocate for equitable and inclusive workplaces for all women. To make its vision of "Everyone's Outdoors" a reality, the organization provides a framework of support to help its partner companies cast a wider net for talent and ensure that everyone—regardless of gender or race—feels welcome in the outdoor community.

Foundational to its efforts to increase the number of women leaders, Camber Outdoors developed its CEO Pledge in 2015—an effort supported through a \$1.5 million Mary Anderson Legacy Grant from REI.¹ The CEO Pledge was a first-of-its-kind approach that has since been applied in other industries.² To date, more than 75 companies have signed the pledge, and several have modeled their organization's leadership initiatives after it.

Beyond partnering with executives to pursue measures that would expand the number of women in leadership roles within their organization, the CEO Pledge seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable workplace, spur innovation, and above all offer companies a practical set of actions for achieving these goals. Camber Outdoors augments the pledge through a variety of programs that includes executive gatherings, mentorship programs, and "Pitchfest," its annual competition to promote creativity, entrepreneurship, and innovation among women in business.

¹ See Deanne Buck, "REI helps #WomenLead in the outdoor industry with OIWC grant," REI, rei.com.

² To learn more, visit camberoutdoors.org/ceo-pledge.

that—and the dialogue it created, not only in the industry but inside our company, was powerful.

Sally McCoy: For the outdoor industry, I think the most important thing we can do is influence our senior executives through education and learning. Most CEOs in the industry are men. Camber Outdoors is helping show them how they can make change in

their organizations (amid all their other pressures), why it's an important legacy, and why it will help their company. I think Camber Outdoors is moving in that direction.

As for the CEO Pledge, I think it was a good first step. My advice would be to go further: what can we do to support those CEOs and those heads of HR who

are supporting the pledge, and what can we do to make it meaningful? The pledge can't become just a "one-off." And if companies are fulfilling the pledge's requirements, what can we do to celebrate and support them? It's a real challenge, and I think it's one that Camber Outdoors will step up to as it continues to mature as an organization.

Donna Carpenter: We have been working with Camber Outdoors for a long time, and they have supported us in our journey. They have a mentoring program and also sponsor regional networking events.

Camber Outdoors' recognition of inspiring women in the industry has also been very helpful—for example, the recognition it gave to the woman in our company who started our mentoring program. That effort paired experienced women employees with women who were new to the company, on either a project basis or a long-term basis. It was so successful that after two years, something like 50% of the women who had participated were promoted. We ran the program for years, and then the men asked, "Hey, what about us? We want mentoring." So we've made it a co-ed program; we have 150 people participating out of 500.

Jim Weber: I remember when Camber Outdoors (then still called the OIWC) launched the CEO Pledge because of the reaction it generated among my teammates. I was not at the event myself, but Brooks Running had a number of attendees, and almost immediately afterward I had perhaps a dozen or so colleagues approach me separately to ask: "Why didn't you sign this pledge?" And I was intrigued, of course, but it was also kind of funny because I'd never even heard of it.

So it was our team that sparked this—and that's actually how things happen at Brooks Running. We had been focusing on the broader issue of women in leadership already, including looking into unconscious bias, but the pledge was a great opportunity for us to really put a stake in the ground

and focus—as well as to show all our employees that we're serious about gender equality.

Heidrick & Struggles: How do you assess the current situation regarding women and leadership at your company?

Jerry Stritzke: What became obvious to me in the outdoor industry is that the opportunity to network into leadership roles probably didn't exist in the way that it did in the other environments that I had been in.

This leads to some real opportunities for the outdoor industry. There's this tendency to want to hire people who have already done a job. But I believe in the power of finding talent that brings a new perspective on what the job is or could be. I've been fortunate to have hired incredibly talented women who were ready for their next big role but just hadn't had the opportunity to step into that role yet. I've worked with women leaders in their first CFO and CIO [chief information officer] roles, and it's extremely rewarding to watch them step up.

Research shows that men tend to be self-promoting and possess an inflated sense of competence when it comes to assessing their capabilities, while women tend to be a lot more objective about what they have and haven't done. As leaders, we have to be more deliberate about sussing out these dynamics and determining when a talented woman (or man, for that matter) might benefit from an opportunity that allows them to contribute to their full potential. We can enable a leader's vision and path. This is what it will take if companies are going to fully tap into a broader spectrum of talent.

Jim Weber: What's driven us at Brooks Running more than anything else is the need to match our customer base, as well as to match the culture in our sport and the lifestyle that we connect with. There are as many men as women who run, but women are more avid and enthusiastic about the sport, especially in races. When you look at all race participation, there were

17 million people that finished a timed race last year. I think it was upward of 60% women.

When I joined Brooks Running, men's footwear was perhaps 55% of our sales. Now women's is 55%. Our overall employee base is just slightly more women than men. On the individual contributor level, we're even; manager level, we're even; director level, we're even. Our board is 40% women. However, in the executive suite, we're terrible. At the VP level right now, for example, women are only 2 out of 12. That's not going to cut it.

Still, we have a strong culture, which is attracting great people; for the most part we're keeping them. But the development of women leaders and keeping them through their career is something that we're trying to solve.

For example, some women leave to go part-time. Others have left for other companies, but we've lost men, too, as any company does. We've also grown dramatically over the past decade. In outside hires, we've spearfished for certain expertise and experience and the like—and the risk there is that the practice can curtail opportunities for people who were coming up the path internally. We've got work to do in terms of measuring exactly what the impact is on our up-and-coming talent. So if you ask, "Are we getting results yet?" it's too early to tell.

Donna Carpenter: One of my original goals was to change the corporate culture. As I got into it I realized that you couldn't do that until you have a certain number of women in the company. One of the recruitment and retention challenges in the beginning was young women saying to me, "I don't see any role models." It was chicken and egg. How do you create role models if women are hesitant to say, "I'm going to stick out my career here," because they don't see women who have been able to balance a family and their career and have a leadership position?

Roundtable participants



DEANNE BUCK

Executive director of Camber Outdoors



DONNA CARPENTER

CEO and cofounder of Burton Snowboards



SALLY McCOY

Former CEO of CamelBak



JERRY STRITZKE

CEO of REI



JIM WEBER

CEO of Brooks Running Company

At first, we had very young employees. As time passed, they had families. But we weren't very good at talking about and planning for maternity and retaining women. So, we acted. The guys got paternity leave. We offered childcare subsidies, which more men take advantage of than women.

Then we instituted an infant travel policy. If you think about women who are in sales, product, or marketing, they have to travel for these high-level, high-profile positions. After consulting with the staff, we introduced a policy that says that for the first 18 months of a child's life, we will pay for a caregiver at home while you're away or for someone to take on the road with you. We just pay for an extra companion plane ticket.

After we put all these policies together, the women began to appreciate that we were looking at them holistically—as caregivers and professionals. They really saw the advantages. And I always say: when you make a workplace better for women, you’re making it better for everybody.

Deanne Buck: I spoke with someone who pointed out that a lot of the companies in the outdoor industries are maybe only a generation old, some of them do a couple billion dollars in revenue, and they’re technology-based. In those circumstances, it was very much “we’ve got to get employees in here and we’ve got to get them fast, and we need people who have the skills and who understand the culture to drive the growth.”

As a result, they were pulling from a known pool of people. I think that is why many companies have ended up with the gender imbalance that we see. So now it seems like a lot of our member companies and people partnering with us are realizing that in the future—especially in the market for technical talent—they’re not going to be able to continue to attract the best, and most diverse, employees unless they make some deliberate decisions about what their workplace culture is going to look like.

Heidrick & Struggles: What approaches have you tried to bring more women into leadership?

Donna Carpenter: We created a system where every year the senior team reviews each female director. Let’s say the marketing director needs financial help to round out her skills; the CFO will agree to mentor her for six months on specific issues such as helping her understand the P&L better. We intentionally looked at all our female leaders and then said to every senior manager, “You are responsible for developing this group of women.” There was some backlash from men who wondered whether this was special treatment. But attitudes shifted over time.

Part of the challenge is that we are a hard goods-driven company, and it’s very hard to find women engineers. For the last 12 years, we’ve had a women’s engineering internship, and we’ve hired four of them. We now have a few female engineers, but we’re still underrepresented.

Another step we took was to split the groups working on men’s and women’s marketing and product development because we had been pinking and shrinking. We were taking the men’s line and modifying it a little. I said, “OK, we’re going to have two different groups working on women’s products and men’s products,” and what happens now is the men get ideas from the women. For example, women came up with an idea for a heated boot because women get colder feet than men. We had the engineers working on a system for women’s boots, and the men said, “Wait, what about us? Our feet get cold, too.”

Jim Weber: Five years ago, we started a leadership development program. We take our top 50 people, director level and others with high potential, and we create development plans for them. Three years ago, we were starting to think about male-female balance and unconscious bias. For example, men were asking for the job even though they had 40% less than they needed to actually hit the spec. And women *weren’t* asking for the job, because they didn’t have the last 20% that they needed to do the job. So what to do?

We decided to focus on individual women during our executive team evaluation conversations, specifically: What is her development plan? What opportunities is she interested in? What do we think she could possibly be interested in? The assumption was that we were just going to have to be more proactive for them because they’re not going to raise their hand or ask for the job as often as the men will.

We’ve seen it play out over and over again where we’ll have two directors or two high-potential individuals,

and an opportunity comes up. The guy will ask for the job, and we have to slow it down: let's have a broader conversation here; let's look at all of our talent and make sure we're looking and balancing all these pros and cons or opportunities against all the talent we have. That's actually felt really good because I think we're having balanced conversations about all of our talent when it matters.

Jerry Stritzke: When we get down to making decisions about promotions or filling positions, we're just very deliberate. We make sure that we are looking at a diverse pool of candidates. Just being intentional about doing this can have an impact. For example, when we started a search for the CFO position, the first 20 candidates we saw were all men. We called a time-out and said we wanted to see a more diverse selection of candidates. We didn't believe there were no qualified women. We quickly ended up seeing new candidates, and the unanimous view inside the organization was that the top two candidates were women, and we went on to hire a woman CFO who's leading in the role today.

The other unique thing about REI is that we challenge ourselves to look at leadership as something that many people could step up and do. After signing the CEO Pledge, we had a team lead an initiative that we called The Mary Trail, named after one of our founders, Mary Anderson. The goal of the effort was to assess all aspects of our business through the lens of gender, asking questions like: How many store managers do we have who are women? How many people do we have in technical roles who are women? Are there gaps in our marketing or product offerings? So, they literally looked at every aspect of the organization and said, "How are we doing? Is there a chance for us to do more?" That team did an amazing job creating, I think, the right conversation for us as a leadership team across the entire organization.

The Mary Trail effort made us more comfortable leaning into the question of where we'd like to make progress; if you don't make your goals explicit, then you don't make the kind of progress you want to. One area we've been working on for some time is gender equity in our store manager mix. We were at about 36% women in 2014. We're up in the low 40s now.

We had a really concrete example recently. Bike technicians in our bike shops—and in the world generally—skew heavily male. We identified this gap and felt really motivated to start closing it so that our women customers could come in and have the experience of talking with another woman about their specific cycling needs. We opened up an opportunity for women employees to get certified as advanced bike technicians. We didn't anticipate the demand. We had 14 or 15 positions to offer in the class—and we got more than 300 applications from women employees. It was just stunning. We hit a nerve. I know that they've recently finished that training, and there were great stories coming out of it. We've seen similar examples over and over as we've expanded our gender equity work externally and launched an effort we call Force of Nature,³ which sets out to create the largest level playing field on earth—the outdoors—for women.

Sally McCoy: At CamelBak, our biggest issue was getting women engineers, particularly in some of the industrial design positions, including military products, which was an important segment for us. That took us many, many years of really reaching out and developing relationships with schools and networks. It takes a sincere effort, too. We went from zero women engineers to about 30% of the total, and it took a ton of work to get there. The challenge was

³ See Jerry Stritzke, "Force of nature: Let's level the playing field," REI, rei.com.

that talented women would pick an industry that was more lucrative than ours. That's a perennial challenge in our industry when it comes to technical talent.

Heidrick & Struggles: What does the future of women in leadership look like in your company and the industry?

Donna Carpenter: In terms of female participation, my goals are 51% of leadership, 51% of participation in this sport, and 51% of sales, but I still have some way to go. About 40% of our leaders are women, up from 10%, and my senior team is now 45% female. The hardest part was how long it took or, I should say, is taking.

We never said, "Hey, we've got to have a woman in this job or that job." The way we changed it was on the recruiting side. We told hiring managers that they had to have at least one woman in a final four for a job of director level and above. The problem was if we were putting out an ad for a director, we were getting 99% male applicants. Women didn't perceive us as a great company to work for. That's become our mission, to be a brand of choice and an employer of choice for women.

Jim Weber: I think our industry is different than others in the sense that how we behave, the things we do that create the essence of our cultures, will absolutely manifest itself in the personality of our brands. This is certainly true for Brooks. So for women in leadership, that brand connection amplifies the challenge. We have to get this issue right. If we don't embed it into who we are, we will fail at it.

The culture at Brooks is very much a "do what you say you're going to do" culture. The CEO Pledge was never going to be a situation where I could come back from a meeting and say to the company, "I just signed this pledge; everybody deal with it." We had to take this concept and bring it in, discuss it, and truly make it ours, and then figure out how we were going to do the things we said we'd do—starting with surfacing and openly discussing the challenges women and men face when balancing work, family, passions, and pursuits in their professional life. We are on that journey now at Brooks, and I'm very optimistic. We have a license to change.

Jerry Stritzke: There are things you do because they're the right things to do. And then there are things you do because they're just good business. It's

We have to get this issue right. If we don't embed it into who we are, we will fail at it.

amazing when you find something that sits in the intersection of both. I can tell you as a CEO of this company that this is smart, it's right, and it's good for business. And we benefit from having an amazing team of women leaders who are driving our business.

Deanne Buck: There's a lot that other industries can learn from our industry and the individual companies within it. The number one thing is the willingness to say, "We don't know, but we're going to figure it out." To me, that's probably the biggest indicator that we will continue to move forward.

There are also innovative things that our industry is doing—we're willing to try things. For example, Patagonia's childcare program⁴ or, as Donna mentioned, Burton paying for a caregiver to accompany a leader and her child when they travel during the first 18 months of the child's life. When we look at work-life balance and the opportunities for women to be successful in the workplace, much of this is dependent upon building workplaces that understand there are times in people's lives when we need to flex. We need to allow for people to ramp off and ramp back on, and know that when they're coming back they're returning with an intensity and an intelligence that's going to move the business forward, and not penalize people for taking time off or for shifting priorities.

Sally McCoy: This may sound harsh, but I don't like being asked about women in leadership, and for a while I wouldn't speak to it. Not because it isn't important but because I don't think that leadership is fundamentally driven by gender. One of the best compliments I ever got—and it didn't occur to me at the time—was from one of my VPs, who said, "You know, I think you're the most gender-blind leader I've

ever had." That's ultimately where I'd like us to get to as an industry and a society—a place where we don't even have to ask the question.

What will move the needle in the outdoor industry—whether it's skiing or biking or any other specialty area—is men taking this seriously. What will bring change is men taking an equal interest in the women who work with them, speaking out, and taking action. Hiring practices is one place to start, and I hope and expect it to become the norm that diverse pools of men and women are considered for every job, every time—regardless of whether it's men or women doing the hiring. ■

About the interviewers

Jeremy Hanson (jhanson@heidrick.com) is partner-in-charge of Heidrick & Struggles' Minneapolis office and a member of the CEO & Board Practice with a focus on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) issues.

Amanda Worthington (aworthington@heidrick.com) is a principal in the Chicago office and a member of the Consumer Markets Practice.

⁴ See Rose Marcario, "Patagonia's CEO explains how to make on-site child care pay for itself," *Fast Company*, August 15, 2016, fastcompany.com.

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ONE LEADERSHIP
TEAM AT A TIME®

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