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Kristen Reid: Equity in the workplace begins at home

By

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As a recruiter at the highest level, Kristen Reid interacts with top executives in the produce industry — both candidates and CEOs — on a daily basis, which gives her a well-informed take on the progress of women in this industry that she loves.

“When I started in the produce industry 17 years ago, I was often the only women in the room — and certainly the youngest,” said Reid, who is executive vice president of the MIXTEC Group, based in La Crescenta, CA. “The industry has shifted significantly since then. We all owe a debt of gratitude to some very strong women who paved the way.”



After graduating from Southern California’s Pepperdine University with an undergraduate degree in industrial/organizational psychology and a masters in communications, Reid joined Netzel Associates, a for-profit consulting firm for non-profit organizations. “While I was there, Netzel started a recruiting division for non-profits. I spent half my time fundraising and half the time recruiting,” she said. “I discovered I hated

fundraising but loved recruiting.”

That led her on a search to find the right recruiting firm to join. Her strategy was to call companies in that space and ask if she could come talk to them to find out what they were about and if she could be a good fit. “I talked to about 30 companies, one of which was MIXTEC (an executive search company focusing on the produce sector). Eighteen months later, Chris Nelson (MIXTEC president at the time) offered me a job.”

In between, she worked as an adjunct professor at her alma mater in the communications department.

Once she joined MIXTEC, she employed a similar strategy to that which landed her the job in the first place. “I grew up in Fallbrook, CA, so I did know people in the avocado business, but I really didn’t know much about agriculture,” she admitted.

So, Reid asked everyone she met if she could come visit their produce operation, whether the company was a grower, packer, wholesaler or retailer. “The industry was so inviting. Everyone gave me a tour and usually bought me lunch. Everyone was so passionate about what they did. I fell in love with the industry. It is so fast paced.”

However, Reid does admit that initially she took the position with MIXTEC without knowing if she had found a good fit. “I was at a crossroads,” she said. “I could move in this direction or I could stay in academia.”



Kristen Reid with some of the FPFC board members.

In fact, Reid continued teaching while she figured it out. “If I was going to stay in academia, I knew I would have to get a Ph.D.”

Almost two decades later, Reid knows she chose the right path.

Besides the steep learning curve concerning the workings of the produce industry itself, Reid said there were also significant cultural differences from her two previous experiences: academia and the non-profit world. Both of those sectors draw heavily from the ranks of women professionals. In fact, Reid said the Communications Department at Pepperdine was split evenly between men and women and most of the non-profits that she was dealing with featured more women than men in executive positions.

“When I started in produce, I was called sweetheart or honey or darling on many occasions,” she said, noting that it is an unprofessional greeting that she doesn’t hear anymore. “It has probably been 10 years since I was addressed in that manner.”

Reid is not certain what caused the shift, but she believes the rise of women in the industry played a major role in changing attitudes and professionalism. “We saw women such as Lori Koster at Mann Packing and Mayda Sotomayor at Seald Sweet take on high profile rolls with their companies and in the industry.”



Emily Fragoso and Kristen Reid flank Jan DeLyser at a 2023 FPFC Luncheon.

In her own career, Reid said Lisa McNeese with Grimmway Farms and Jin Ju Wilder (now with Vesta

Foodservice) were important female role models and mentors. She also noted that she has a thick skin and comes from a family without strong social filters, which has allowed her to hear the comments without attaching intentional disrespect as the motive. "I'm a glass-is-half-full kind of person," she quipped.

That does not mean that Reid, who served as the 2024 chair of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council, is ambivalent to those comments or to some of the mistreatment of women in the produce industry that she has observed or been told about. "It's much better than it was, but things still happen," she said. "I do not think that is unique to the produce industry."

She added that the produce industry seems to have a lot of events in which alcohol is involved, which Reid believes is a factor in people behaving inappropriately, if you will. "I do think women have to be mindful of the situations that they find themselves in."

In her work, Reid believes that overt bias against women executives has largely disappeared. In fact, she said many companies that employ MIXTEC for their executive searches specifically ask that women candidates be part of the mix. She also added that MIXTEC has had clients tell them that they do have board members that would struggle to hire a woman as a CEO. In either event, Reid said MIXTEC conducts its searches blind to the candidate's ethnicity and gender. She did say that it has only happened one time in her career that a client expressly asked that no women candidates be offered. "We ended that search immediately," she said.

Reid believes that mindset is dissipating. "My soapbox issue is that men need to be more helpful at home. We've seen big changes but not enough," she said. "We can't have equity in the workplace until we have it at home."

She noted that more than 50 percent of the male CEOs that she comes in contact with have stay-at-home wives. That's usually not true for top female executives. They are carrying the load at home as well as at work. "That limits their opportunity to accept jobs that require relocation, and it also cuts into the amount of time they can spend in the office."

In the workplace, she believes men can play another important role in the rise of women executives. "Men need to hold other men accountable," Reid said. "We've all seen situations where men behave badly and they are not held accountable by others in the company or the industry."

It is for all these reasons that Reid believes there is still much value to women-focused events in the produce industry. She believes these events help shed a light on and reduce the built-in biases against diversity that still exist. "When we are talking about increasing diversity in this industry, we are almost always only talking about women. There is more to diversity than just women. I would like the industry to look at more diversity at the executive level."

Currently, the U.S. political leaders mostly in charge see diversity as a bad thing and something that should be avoided and, in fact, made illegal. Reid does not believe it's going away. "Companies aren't talking about it, but they are still doing it," she said. "Companies that have adopted diversity policies have seen the benefits DEI has brought to their operations. They aren't going back. You

can't change the tide."

She added that the produce industry continues to have a recruitment issue trying to convince young college graduates to give the sector a good look. With some inherent factors making the industry less attractive, Reid indicated it makes sense to cast a wide net and embrace diversity.

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About Tim Linden |

Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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