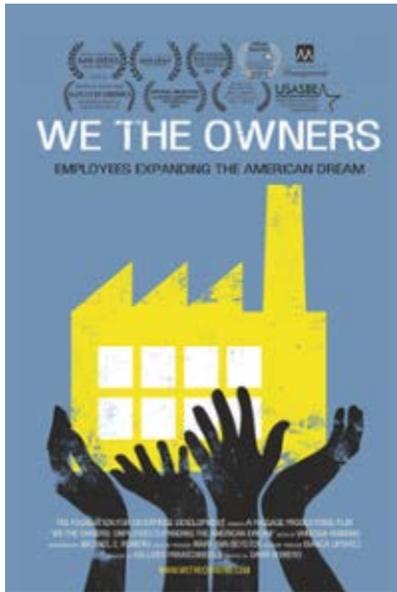


“We The Owners” Film Garners Awards, Attention and National Distribution

By Mary Ann Beyster



The Foundation for Enterprise Development’s first film, “We The Owners” has won the Best Documentary Short award and the Indie Spirit award at recent film festivals. The documentary was selected and screened by seven film festivals and soon will be broadcast on regional public television stations. The film about employee owners making their businesses work and prosper is reaching the general public as well as universities and the wider employee ownership community.

The roll-out of the film has been exciting. After a year of more than 75 business and academic screenings and hundreds of direct DVD/streaming purchases via Films Media Group, “We the Owners” now has crossed over to the general public and will soon be seen by tens of thousands of people. I am always excited to hear from viewers about the inspiration it brings to them. Mostly, it’s the employee owners’ sincerity, passion, and optimism about their workplace with which people are connecting.

Most people know either first-hand or through someone close to them what it feels like to not be valued, to not have a say, to not have control, or to be demotivated at work. A feel-good movie about three companies - New Belgium Brewery, Namasté Solar, and DPR Construction - that strive for the opposite is a welcome relief. These companies aren’t without their challenges but their employee owners express a sense of “being all in,” and having a stake (even though each company has a different way of establishing that stake). You can hear and see the difference when employees describe why they founded the companies, how they prepare for long-term succession, who decides on a major capital expansion, or how they survive or learn from layoffs.

A democracy is special. Bringing democratic ideas of ownership and participation to the workplace is doable. We have the freedom to create and select our workplaces. I have seen how the stories in this film are helping people recognize the empowerment that goes hand-in-hand with that freedom.

In the last year, I have personally screened the film - in final form - more than 35 times and have also received weekly feedback via e-mails and social media from viewers across the U.S. and internationally. With the general public, university professors and students, it is clear there is a strong and broad reaching interest in all facets of equity ownership, ownership culture and democratic governance. Yet significant knowledge gaps exist, with the most common questions about:

- Identifying and selecting the forms of ownership - grants or purchases
- Starting and transitioning the culture as the company evolves
- Defining a fair and transparent compensation system
- Changing people's decision-making to be participative without slowing down day-to-day progress
- Controlling through voting rights or bargaining agreements
- Balancing the personal rewards of being an owner against the potential risk of losing a job and one's retirement nest-egg
- Being aware of where employee ownership doesn't work well

Moreover, a range of misperceptions exist as well:

- Isn't this only for small companies?
- Doesn't this stifle creativity and entrepreneurial spirit?
- Doesn't this work best for service industries and not apply in capital-intensive industries?
- Is this too risky for the worker?

I continue to believe that education is an essential component to closing knowledge gaps and increasing the number of people who will embark on and sustain broad-based employee ownership. This film project, along with our other higher-education initiatives, has only strengthened my resolve about the importance of education and the role of storytelling.

Through partnerships with others, we have already seen thousands of professors add employee ownership to their curricula; hundreds of new scholars focus on employee-ownership research; and a handful of academic leaders defining new educational programs and targeted public policies. There is great momentum.

Higher education can bring together practice, theory and tools, and policy. I believe higher education is ready for employee ownership. We need to engage at various levels and with the intent to bring comprehensive knowledge and research forward in colleges for the establishment of practices and policies that will allow for more creation of wealth through the sharing of wealth and responsibility.

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