

The Trains Interview: Michele Malski on women in railroading, diversity, and workforce attraction

Chase Gunnoe

Railroading is constantly changing even if those changes appear subtle. Railroad software helps locomotives conserve fuel. Wayside infrastructure provides data to centralized managers. Obsolete, smaller railcars are replaced with shiny, higher capacity cars. But behind every operational decision is a person – and a leader. And those leaders are changing. In January 2021, BNSF Railway welcomed its first woman CEO. And earlier this year, Canadian National named Tracy Robinson as President and CEO.

TRAINS recently interviewed Michele Malski, an industry professional who champions for more diversity in rail by education that attracts, retains, and energizes the next wave of railroaders. Malski is a director at the League of Railway Women and founded Succession Planning for Railroads Investing in the Next Generation, also known as SPRING, a firm that helps recruit the industry's latest talent.

Q: We have Katie Farmer at the helm of BNSF Railway, Tracy Robinson at the head of CN, Lorie Tekorius has just been named the President & CEO of Greenbrier Companies, and Kate Suprenuk has just been named President of Leasing at Union Tank Car. A lot of women are leading our industry. Can you tell us what this means for women choosing a career in rail and what the future holds for young women in railroading?

A: More important than putting truly deserving women behind the big titles, it shows that our industry is ready to recognize change. We are ready to recognize those that have been here the whole time; recognize the credibility of those who did not previously make it to the walls where pictures of Board of Directors were hung; women that have been conductors, have replaced a tie or two, and have truly shown us their perseverance that they want to be here.

We don't have to prove to anyone that [women] belong here, but we do have to believe that we can shatter ceilings, break preconceived notions, and have a voice at all tables. Today, we have great role models to look upon to generate that energy. [Katie Farmer] started her history with BNSF in 1992, hungry to learn from one department to the next, devouring knowledge and experience ... That's the key, being eager and willing to learn. She knows what it is to be a railroader, to wear all the hats, not just the one outlined in a sole job description.

It wasn't that long ago in our nation's history when heavy gender stereotypes influenced or demarcated many women's hopes and dreams for a future, especially when it came to a workplace, let alone one that is as heavy duty as rail. Unless you were someone's family member, you probably never considered rail ... but now we look to the big Class 1s, the short lines, and the rest of our industry with a new light, a new pathway. High school and college women can now say: "Hey, these leaders look like me, I can also achieve that." These women give new hope to candidates about an industry most know nothing about, and that's what we as an industry need, a pathway ... to open the idea of rail as a viable option for the next generation of women railroaders.

There will be a day when women in rail becomes as common in rail as ballast to a track, a horn to a crossing, a mentor to a new hire, so much so that we don't even have to segment a conversation about the startling progress women are making, it just becomes regular – a lifestyle.

Q: Why do you think it took us until 2021 to see a woman lead a Class I railroad? Why not sooner?

A: Women were ready to lead Class Is sooner, but the Class I culture was not ready. Let's highlight some of the industry leadership that existed before Class Is caught up.

Jennifer White, President of the Aberdeen Carolina and Western Railway, runs a progressive and growing short line in North Carolina. **Norma Torres** is the President & COO at Brownsville & Rio Grande International Railroad. She runs a bustling short line in Texas. **Judy Petry**, a legend, dedicated her time to fostering people that will continue their success now and in the future. And, even on the supplier side, there are handfuls of bright women leaders and CEOs helping railroads and others achieve their goals.

So, the question is, why aren't the Class Is learning from the rest of the industry? Look at their nimbler brother and sister interchange partners and neighbors who have been promoting women to these positions for years.

Truth is, there aren't many women that can raise their hand in a boardroom and say: "I threw a switch, I operated a locomotive, I dispatched, I collected those timecards." And so, until we find more women to come on board, thus giving more women the opportunity to seize the experience needed to move up in the Class I world, we may be caught on a hamster wheel, where the candidates for those VP and SVP and President levels are more similar to past practices than not.

Many Class Is have a Women's affinity group which is amazing, and a great place to recognize women within, but what else? Those women are already in your company, what are you doing to excite the next generation or help the ones in your ranks professionally grow to want to take the next advancement in the company? Trainee programs are great ways to merge student life into careers, but other than that, what pathways have [companies] established to fix the diversity question overall?

And diversity isn't just [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] protected classes. Diversity has many forms that can make teams stronger. Strength happens with diversity because your teams all represent a voice from many perspectives ... The question becomes: "What fatal stereotypes are you letting survive in the workplace?" Break these walls down. Create new pathways. Abandon stagnant cyclones and adopt progress. These all sound like great banner terms, right?

Our industry as a whole can do better with bringing new talent, more talent, and diverse talent ... The problem that is not just a women issue, but a new hire dilemma overall.

When you make the commitment to change and showcase that transition to a more open workplace externally, a workplace that has affinity groups and women mentorship programs for example, you open yourself to opportunities.

Author's note: Malski believes industry diversity is two-parted, involving external education and internal retention. Her strategy is paraphrased for our readers below.

External Education:

We need to have the visuals that showcase women at our workplace. We must have recruiters that, as a woman candidate, feel comfortable talking to. We have to be open minded to candidates that are coming to us from all degrees ... We need to offer internships and trainee programs to interest newbies inward and to give them a taste of our world.

We have to educate our communities ... in our local areas. Talk to high schools, community colleges, but do it year after year ... It's the basic sales principle of "KLT" know-like-and-trust.

When a community knows you exist, then it's up to you to share all about your benefits your team offers.

Internal Retention:

Set up candidates for success with structured, hands-on training and mentorship programs. You can't teach a positive attitude, but you can train on skills and industry knowledge and that's what you need to do. And secure more candidates by embedding your brand in those communities so that you emerge as a viable option for a career that locals know, like, and trust.

The more women learning and becoming attracted to our jobs means more women candidates. More women candidates mean more women getting experience in rail, creating more opportunities for women to lead Class I CEOs like our current role models.

We need to better target, educate, and then retain the audiences we want ... It starts with education.

Q: How are organizations like the League of Railway Women attracting more women to the railroad? When the LRW gets together at a conference table, what are you all working towards and how do you go about it?

A. The League of Railway Women has grown dramatically over the last few years. As a current board member, I can attest to the hard work these women put in to making this association one of hope and promise for the future. We are always thinking about how we can get more women involved and offer scholarships to engage with students who are considering a path in transportation or logistics.

From the success of our pilot program, we are formalizing a Mentor Committee that will run a Mentoring program launching this fall. This is a voluntary networking opportunity for our members to connect with other leaders and CEOs, men, and women, that some may not otherwise have the opportunity to know. We are excited to be a part of the growth for women everywhere in our industry and we will continually be that beacon of connectivity and hope for women looking to elevate and develop themselves in our industry.

Lastly, our association also launched a job board this year. Sponsors and members can place their jobs on this network so that more folks see our careers from our association's employers. It's a great time to be a part of the [League of Railway Women], and if you want to learn more, I, as well as any of our board members are ready to talk to you about how it has helped our companies and professional lives excel.

Segments of this interview were paraphrased. Michele Malski is a second-generation railroader who champions for more diversity in the rail industry. She founded SPRING: Succession Planning for Railroads Investing in the next Generation, to help recruit, educate, and retain the industry's next generation of workers. She is also the Director At Large with the League of Railway Women (LRW), the Chair of the Young Professionals Committee within the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association (ASLRRRA), and a Board Member on the Transportation Club of Kansas City. She was named the League of Railway Women's 2021 member of the year. She encourages those interested in industry opportunities to reach out to her at mmalski@railwaywomen.org

