

Business of Diversity

Diversity starts at the top for Baird



Paul Purcell (right, with Angela Pittman Taylor) . . . “It’s an important issue. You have to work at it every single day.”

SCOTT PAULUS

Purcell leads company’s efforts to increase minority hiring

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In an ailing labor market that has led many companies to scale back their diversity programs, Robert W. Baird & Co. Inc. is a standout among major Milwaukee-area corporations that are staying the course, according to local diversity experts.

Baird particularly is considered a leader in the financial service industry, where diversity at the management level remains a struggle, research shows. New data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission shows that white males held 64

percent of senior positions in the financial service industry in 2008, while African-Americans held 2.8 percent, Hispanics 3 percent, and Asians 3.5 percent.

“You can put Baird at the front of the pack,” said Mark Mone, associate dean for executive education and professor of management in the Lubar School of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. “Many companies have not done enough to address diversity and what it means. If it’s diversity through a workshop, that’s not as holistic as when you look at your organizational chart to see that you are

truly diverse.”

Experts like Mone say they are not surprised that Baird would be a leader in managing diversity given that the company is among the top-ranked companies on Fortune magazine’s list of the nation’s “100 Best Companies to Work For.” Baird ranked No. 11 on Fortune’s 2010 list, its seventh consecutive year on the list.

Companies like Baird that manage diversity effectively will remain competitive in the face of changing demographics and rapid globalization, said Mone.

“If we look at the labor market, employ-

ers are shooting themselves in the foot if they're not looking at all the possible talent that's out there," said Mone. "If you have a diverse work force, you will be able to understand diverse market opportunities."

Baird executives said the firm has made diversity a key business objective and takes a two-prong approach — recruit the best talent and create an inclusive environment where women and minorities will feel valued and will be more willing to stay. Baird executives said as of Dec. 31, 2009, about 42 percent of the firm's employees were women and six percent were minorities. According to The Business Journal's list of the largest Milwaukee-area employers, Baird had 1,066 employees as of Dec. 4, 2009.

A key factor in the success of Baird's diversity program is the broad employee engagement and support. Employees ranging from equity analysts to branch managers to operations staff and senior executives all play a role in developing ideas and strategy to help the company meet its diversity goals, executives said.

"We concluded that we couldn't just leave this to our HR area or we couldn't just have a diversity officer and say call us when you need us," said Mary Ellen Stanek, Baird's managing director, who also is president of Baird Funds. "It takes executive-level support and involvement with lots of grassroots ideas and energy."

LEADING FROM THE TOP

There are many big-name Milwaukee-area companies that are continuing to make diversity a priority despite a bad economy.

But what makes Baird stand out is that its chairman and chief executive officer, Paul Purcell, has taken a stand on the issue publicly. In his message in Baird's annual report, Purcell identified diversity as a key initiative for the company for the long term.

"Equally important is our ongoing investment in diversity. We have a comprehensive program in place and while progress never seems fast enough, our diversity efforts now involve associates at all levels of the organization," Purcell wrote. "As we have said before, diversity is an important initiative for Baird to best serve our clients and communities and it will remain a priority."

Among key achievements Purcell highlighted in his message include the establishment of four associate resource groups at Baird, focused on women's issues, the African-American perspective, community involvement and the environment. All of the groups report directly to the company's Business Diversity Council.

"I think there are a lot of good leading companies in Milwaukee focusing on diversity," Purcell said. "It's an important issue. You have to work at it every single day."

Successful diversity programs depend on leadership from the top and "that's why it's critical to have a Paul Purcell," said Mone.

"This is what making a stand and what having a culture of inclusion is all about," Mone said.

Yet, Purcell said he is not satisfied with the company's progress in terms of diversity.

"As for ethnic minorities, we're within industry standards, but we're not satisfied remotely," said Purcell. "Our industry has not been terrific at this. What's become clear is we need to get (minorities) early and we need to be more focused in terms of how we do things."

Baird is making inroads in recruiting minority professionals thanks to its internship program. At a time when many companies are cutting interns, Baird is committing more money and resources to its internship program as a way to build a pipeline to minority talent.

"What we want to do is to hire people early and train them early and bring them along and hopefully they will stay with us for the long term," Purcell said.

One example is Angela Pittman Taylor, a Milwaukee native, who is African-American.

Pittman Taylor, 32, started as an Inroads Wisconsin intern in 1998 and now is a vice president of public relations for Baird. Inroads Wisconsin is a nonprofit organization specializing in developing and placing talented minority youth in sponsored businesses across the country, preparing them for leadership in the corporate world and the community.

"I was looking to go to Boston University for graduate school. Baird was one of the reasons I stayed in the city," said Pittman, who received a master's degree in mass communication from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "I'm doing exactly what I envisioned doing. There was a lot of support, a lot of opportunity to grow."

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