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Employee ownership leading the way: BL Companies collaborative culture

September 19, 2013 - Connecticut

This year has been a great one for BL Companies (BL) having received recognition as a Business Champion by the Hartford Business Journal, a Hot Firm by ZweigWhite and winning multiple honors for great projects like Storrs Center and Meeting House Hill Elementary School. Such accomplishments are exciting yet humbling and cannot be accomplished without a driven, talented, and dedicated staff.

BL Companies is a leader in delivering an integrated slate of high-quality architecture, engineering, environmental, and land surveying services to a wide range of public and private sector clients. But the company hasn't maintained its status in the highly competitive world of consulting engineering by taking a back seat to change and innovation.

Back in 2006 BL made a bold decision when it became an employee-owned company through the establishment of an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) - a decision that has had a major positive impact on BL employees and clients. And in 2011, BL Companies became one of the few 100% employee-owned consulting architecture and engineering firms in the country.

"ESOP is a culture for us," explains Derek Kohl, BL's director of engineering for the Northeast Region. "We provide numerous opportunities for employees to be engaged in everything we are doing and planning to do, including company committees and initiatives and quarterly employee-owner meetings. The more our people have a vested stake and interest in the company, the more successful we are providing our clients with creative and quality solutions."

When BL Companies was chosen from among sixty-six nominees as a Hartford Business Journal 2013 Business Champion in the Workforce category - the success of the ESOP collaboration hit home. BL was recognized for its workforce practices that include a three-pronged professional development program in the areas of leadership development, project management and technical skills, a year-long Orientation Program and its transparent communications with employees.

"The Workforce award was especially meaningful to us," said Carolyn Stanworth, president and CEO. "It is so important to have workforce practices that are consistent with being a 100% employee-owned company and fostering engaged employees."

While transitioning to an employee-owned firm was a major milestone for BL Companies, efforts also were made to reshape and define BL's strategic vision. "We have always had a pretty strong focus in the retail/commercial land development world," recalls Kohl, whose experience includes extensive involvement in numerous transportation planning and design projects. BL has made it a priority to really diversify and ramp up our efforts in the public infrastructure and energy markets, where we work on some very large highway and bridge projects as well as electric and gas transmission line projects. On the public sector side, there has been a significant increase in the volume of work we do with the Connecticut Department of Transportation, the Department of

Construction Services, UConn, and other related state agencies, as well as on the municipal side where we work with most of Connecticut's major cities and many of the state's small towns. We pride ourselves on being able to provide a full range of in-house architecture, engineering, land surveying and environmental services."

"With our multi-disciplined workforce and full range of services, I think we have found the BL niche. We have the capability to deliver the breadth and depth of services in the region that we serve that you might expect to find in some of the global or national firms, but with the personal service of a small firm," said Kohl. "As a result, we are able to handle small but important projects, like an initial survey, bridge inspections or phase one environmental studies for a local municipality, or multi-year, multi-million dollar infrastructure projects like the state bridge program. And, on the architecture and building side we are designing new buildings and schools, public facilities, facade improvements, renovation projects, and much more."

Today, that full range of services is the responsibility of approximately 200 employee-owners working from BL Companies' 38,000 s/f headquarters in Meriden, as well as at a network of ten other multi-discipline offices, including ones in Hartford, Bridgeport and Worcester, Mass. all collaborating as employee-owners and leading the way to a bright BL future.

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