

The Value of Women’s Words and Women’s Work: Feminist Business Case (A)

Introduction

“No,” said Diane, the banker who had tutored these entrepreneurs and also had extended them a line of credit in the past. “We can’t approve your loan request.” She proceeded to go through the spreadsheets and stats and explain the level of profitability and margin that the bank required in order for the business to be considered viable enough to take on the loan.

Diane had served as an advisor to the women on banking principles. She had coached them in what to strive for to make the business both more credit-worthy to the bank and more stable for themselves. This loan request did not meet those standards. Diane was bound by the bank’s guidelines, and the bank was bound by the regulatory guidelines of the banking industry. Even so, Diane did not understand why the women chose to operate the way they did, continually striving to increase the salaries of their staff instead of trying to keep those expenses down. In her mind their gainsharing plan, similar to profit sharing, amounted to “giving away” half of their profits to the staff. This seemed crazy to her. The bank and the company had differing definitions of “success” and “profit.”

Diane worked at the community, small-business-oriented bank that had extended Minnesota Women’s Press (MWP) a line of credit when the larger chain bank across the street

Kathy Magnuson wrote this case for the Center on Women and Public Policy as part of its 2000 Case Writing Summer Institute. The Center on Women and Public Policy, the Minnesota Women’s Foundation, and the Minnesota Extension Service provided supporting funds. © Kathy Magnuson 2001.

Author’s note: This case is the story of a feminist business, founded, nurtured and developed by many individuals. In the genre of case writing, I have chosen to write this case in third person even though I am also one of the characters in the case. I have attempted to offer my voice as one of several. The oral history that is quoted was conducted by Kathryn Brewer, summer 1999-spring 2000. She interviewed 49 women – founders, early staff, advisors, shareholders, current staff and customers.

would not. The line of credit had been critical to seeing MWP through the ups and downs of seasonal cash flow and more than occasional tight times. The loan the company was currently seeking would be necessary to upgrade the phone system in order for the business to operate more efficiently and effectively and be able to get to the necessary level of profitability. The current phone system could not have any more phones or phone lines added to it. Certain people, including the ad sales staff, needed to be on the phone to generate income. The editorial staff did telephone interviews for articles. Staff members were used to sharing computers and signing up on the wall for a turn at one of the few the company owned. Sharing phones was not as easy. They needed more phones to enable people to do their work. Mollie Hoben, the publisher and a shareholder, and Kathy Magnuson, the general manager and a shareholder, faced a dilemma at the intersection of business and feminism. Only viewed as a business scenario, Minnesota Women's Press was in a tight spot. In their efforts over the years to develop this business, they had used up the cash reserves from their initial stock offering, had taken twice as long as the business plan had predicted to be close to turning a profit, had made an additional stock offering to raise capital, and had gone to the readers of their biweekly newspaper for contributions to stay in business. They felt they were at the brink of healthy viability, but needed more dollars to get there.

A way out of the business dilemma, the one Diane and the bank required, was to not pay staff the portion of the company's profits at the end of the year that they had been promised as part of their compensation. In order to get this loan, the bank required the company to retain those earnings as profit for the company instead of paying them out to the staff. By not paying those dollars out to staff, but keeping them inside the company as profit, it would mean more money in the company's bank account and would give the bank a higher level of confidence in them. On paper, it would show that this company was profitable.

The gainsharing concept had been introduced to staff and promoted. Similar to profit sharing, it was a method of dividing a portion of each year's profits, if any, with all staff. For this year, Mollie and Kathy had promised the staff half of the profits. This was very consistent with the company's and the employees' recognition of the importance and value of the staff. They operated by a collaborative/cooperative model. For example, everyone had a role in selling the ads that generated most of the income. Carol, the front desk receptionist who greeted customers in

her special welcoming way; Casey, the graphic designer who created the eye-catching look of the ads; Sarah, who handled the invoicing and payments so smoothly and helped to make it easy for the client to work with the company; and so on throughout the staff. Likewise, when the company did well overall, it was in large part because of the hard work of the staff. The staff saw the gainsharing as something very special and also as part of the compensation they had all earned together. The staff anticipated the gainsharing and counted on it.

This was a feminist business dilemma because MWP was a business that not only published a feminist newspaper, but also based its existence on a commitment to doing business according to feminist values and alternative business methods. The process of doing the business was as important as the end products. The company promised “opportunity to share in the success of the company.” The corporation’s goals included:

- to apply and articulate our transforming feminist worldview in all undertakings,
- to create a respectful, personally rewarding work environment,
- to be a financially sound, long-lived business that is capable of maintaining current endeavors and undertaking new ones.

This was not just a business dilemma of how to get underpaid, overworked staff to produce more, or how to belt-tighten by perhaps cutting already low compensation. It was how to conduct a viable business in the context of honoring feminist values.

Mollie and Kathy needed to make difficult decisions about what to do.

Background

Minnesota Women’s Press, Inc., a for-profit subchapter S corporation based in St. Paul, Minnesota, was founded in 1984. The mission of Minnesota Women’s Press is “to promote communication by, about and among women, in ways that create community, guided by a transforming feminist worldview.” The means to the goals are “operating in harmony with our transforming feminist values” and “being profitable.”

Two of the founding mothers and the two majority shareholders are Mollie Hoben and Glenda Martin. Mollie had experience as the part-time editor of an award-winning community newspaper in St. Paul. Her education and the rest of her professional experience were in special education; she taught visually impaired students for 15 years and junior high English for 5 years.

She was an active person both physically and mentally. She had played in a racquetball league for years and enjoyed softball in the summers. One of her favorite vacations was a horseback camping trip. Mollie was driven by a passion for making women's words, ideas and values more visible. The business part of the operation was not her favorite. She would prefer that the business part took care of itself, but knew it took diligent attention. Mollie was an insightful business thinker and planner.

Glenda had been an administrator in a large school district for years. The red tape and hierarchy along with the difficulty of working in a rigid structure while having a free spirit inside led her to quit. Glenda was not ambivalent about much. She was outspoken and let you know her opinions. She loved women's literature and was often seen with an armful of books, enthusiastically promoting her latest favorite. To her, the financial piece was a necessary evil for the company's existence, but she usually did not want to hear about it or be involved with decision making around it. Mollie and Glenda shared a passion for women's issues, perspectives and ideas and wondered what news would look like from a feminist perspective. Thus the idea for the newspaper was launched.

The general manager, a shareholder and one of the founders, is Kathy Magnuson. Her educational background is in psychology and human resource development, while her experience is in sales and management. She was one of the few who enjoyed sales. She pursued sales from a relationship building and mutually benefiting model rather than the stereotypical slick, used-car-salesperson model. From the early developmental stages of the business Kathy was the advertising and sales planner. She had a passion for the business process, rather than just tolerating it. She is a type-A personality, the single mother of three and for several years balanced a few jobs while attending graduate school. She recruited, trained and mentored the sales staff, and later other staff, to do business in a savvy, values-driven context. One of the challenges to her was to see if this operation could actually fly and still do it with a feminist orientation. Having not come out of a social service background, she was the first among staff to embrace the "P" word (profit) and believe that it could and must become a reality.

Originally, the only product of the company was the newspaper. It was published every other week at 40,000 circulation and was distributed free in about 450 locations: libraries, offices,

clinics, day care centers, etc. The ads generated nearly all of the revenue. Subscriptions were also available, but were a minor part of the circulation and revenue. A decision was made to send about 2000 of the papers each issue to rural areas in the state. The staff felt a special need for more isolated women to have access to this strong voice for women. The expense of the rural distribution was not offset by income from ad sales in those areas, but not all of the company's decisions were profit-driven.

As the newspaper developed, it was obvious that a great need was being filled in Minnesota. The paper reported important stories that did not reach the mainstream media, but that mattered to women. It brought a women's lens to other mainstream news items. This newspaper was the only Minnesota publication to cover the Conference for the U.N. Decade for Women in Nairobi, Kenya, with its own reporter. In the face of several local high visibility sex crimes in 1991, the newspaper shifted the discussion from what women should do to protect themselves, to what Twin Cities male leaders were going to do to help solve the problem. When Ann Bancroft was trying to raise money for her historic expedition across Antarctica, the Minnesota Women's Press reported on the difficulty this all-woman effort faced in being taken seriously. When Bancroft was actually on the expedition, this publication was the only medium providing regular coverage from the ice.

The Minnesota Women's Press profiled women who were extraordinary in wisdom, risks taken and contributions made – but not necessarily in the mainstream news. The range of profiles included a retired social worker turned comedian, a housewife and mayor, the first woman rabbi in Minnesota, a woman whose dwarfism taught her about difference, a young feminist preparing for college and a Catholic nun who was an activist for peace and justice.

Calls and letters to the office underlined the importance of the existence of the paper. Rural women wrote to express their gratitude for this voice of encouragement in isolated areas. Urban women learned how to connect with other like-minded women to grow their women-affirming ideas. Upon the death of a reader, her family requested that the memorials go to Minnesota Women's Press.

The staff members were driven to make this endeavor survive and succeed. Their commitment went beyond their jobs and their responsibility to shareholders. They felt a

responsibility to the entire community of women.

As it became apparent that cash flow and profits needed help in order for MWP to stay in business, book discussion groups were started. Glenda took this on because of her love for women's literature. Book group members paid by the session for the unique facilitation and insights she brought.

As book groups took off, a retail bookstore was opened, primarily to serve women in the book groups. It was also open to the public and was planned as an additional source of revenue. Over time, the Center for Feminist Reading, as it came to be called, also included local weekend book retreats, week-long Book Groups on the Road to national and international sites and *BookWomen*, a subscription based bimonthly booklet.

The Minnesota Women's Directory also evolved in the early years as a publication with resources for women and women-owned businesses. Originally a couple of pages in the newspaper, it grew each year to become a separate 128-page publication and an important profit center and cash-flow generator.

In 1998 a web site was created to extend the reach of the company's message and to generate income. Ads sold to the newspaper and directory were also sold to the web site so that the expenses were covered and some profit was generated.

As the company grew over time, the income also grew. The problem came in the fact the expenses seemed to grow just as fast, or faster, than the income. Equipment, staff and products were added, but the struggle for profitability continued.

The first "office" was the living room and dining room of Mollie's home in an older, tree-filled, residential neighborhood. The usual furniture was moved out to make way for a desk, copier and file cabinets. The dining room table became a combination work table and lunch table. Mollie, Glenda, Kathy and others worked here for about a year before the first issue was published, planning content and design, raising capital, organizing a distribution system, recruiting staff and doing market research and promotion.

About a month before the first issue was published, they moved into a "real" office above the local liquor store in an old, dark office building with dirty hallway floors and a bathroom shared with the other workers on the floor and the usual drifters passing through. The staff was

thrilled with the one large room and desks and shelves that had been acquired from people's attics, garage sales and the Goodwill store. Eventually, when private space was needed, extra bundles of newspapers were stacked up as dividers. After a few years, an additional room was rented down the hall, and later, one across the hall.

In 1990, another move was made down the block to a street level location to allow space for a growing staff and street-level exposure for the bookstore. A former machine shop was transformed into usable retail and office space. It was a big step and a big commitment for the growing company.

There was discussion in the first year of planning and development about whether the endeavor should be a nonprofit or a for-profit business. Most people assumed it would be nonprofit because it was by, for and about women. There were some attractive aspects to that direction including the ability to accept donations and apply for grants. There was also the negative aspect of becoming dependent on funders' whims and desires. "We talked about what's the difference? You're beholden to advertisers, or you're beholden to funders. You've got to sell ads or write grants. But it did seem that we wanted to make the statement that we could make it on our own—independence and the value of what we were doing. We had big dreams of changing the business climate."¹

The decision to become a for-profit was made, in large part, as a statement that women's words, ideas and values had value in many ways, and one of those ways could be in the marketplace. A financial model around women's activities was needed that did not continue the model of women as poor, needy and dependent. This women's organization planned to be self-sufficient. With no models of other feminist businesses, the founders made it up as they went along.

The decision to incorporate as a business meant seeking out investors. "The basis of their investment was supporting something they thought was of value. We had really gone to a lot of work to examine what it would mean to start this business. We had a well-done and impressive business plan, so they knew we were serious. It's not just 'we've got this good, ideological

¹ M. Hoben, Oral interview 1, p. 6, 6/4/99.

idea...give us some money.’ But it wasn’t that they expected it would be a high return on investment.”²

The original intent as a business was to have many “owners,” perhaps hundreds, with a very small minimum investment. The feminist concept, consistent with the founders’ inclination toward inclusive, consensus-oriented “power with” rather than “power over,” was to have a large, shared ownership, with the financial ownership being one of many ownership or investment forms. A broad-based, shared business ownership was consistent with the editorial stance that “every woman has a story” and this would be a newspaper where “many women could see themselves.” The external, legal reality was that an organization of this size would be a subchapter S corporation, which was limited to 35 shareholders. From the beginning, give and take was needed between feminist principles and business principles.

In spite of substantial investments by Mollie and Glenda, a minimum investment of \$3000 was required of shareholders, because of the limited number of possible shareholders. The initial sale of stock raised capital through 28 shareholders. In later years, when additional funding was needed to pay off debt and update equipment, necessary for long-term operations, an additional \$20,000 was raised from two new shareholders who invested \$10,000 each.

There were a number of reasons why huge profitability was not a goal and not an end in itself. Profitability for the shareholders was a goal, but was low on their list. The goals of the corporation included, not coincidentally last on the list, “to provide return to all who invest in the company.” Shareholders, for the most part, invested because they believed in the mission and the concept of the newspaper and wanted to be a part of making that happen. Shareholders were told to expect a number of years of losses. A plus to shareholders in the beginning would be the fact that as a subchapter S corporation, losses would pass to shareholders and give them a reduction of their own taxable income.

The shareholders elected a board of directors at each annual meeting. Each year Mollie and Glenda were elected to be that board. Shareholders were happy to have them make both the philosophical and financial decisions. For several years Mollie and Glenda recruited an advisory

² M. Hoben, Oral interview 1, p. 8, 6/4/99.

board. The advisors were a sounding board, offering their responses, ideas, perspectives and particular expertise.

There was a vestige of women's guilt about earning money for doing good and the whole concept of "worth" as women and a women's organization. In spite of their stated goals, there was emotional baggage around business and corporate profits. The two directors, Mollie and Glenda, came out of a social service background where profits were a foreign concept. It also turned out that turning a profit was much harder than they had expected.

The first few years the company lost money, as had been predicted in the business plan. But the losses continued much longer than expected. "We lost about \$50,000 the first year—which was right on what we projected, so that wasn't so bad. But then we continued to lose more than we projected the next couple of years. The growth of income just wasn't there. We were pretty much running out of the capital that we'd amassed....We cut back so that all staff people were earning \$600 per month—it was hardly anything. There were times when we were way behind on our printing bill, and we had tried to keep up with all of those things. It was very clear this couldn't go on too much longer. We didn't feel in a good enough place to try to get more capital, because that would be a real leap of faith."³

Expenses ran according to plan, but it took considerably longer than expected to approach the level of income projected. The focus was not so much on profitability, but on how to lose less money, and ultimately, how to break even. The company was behind on paying the printer and at risk of being cut off from that necessary service. Initial cash reserves had been used up. Compensation had been cut back. The company was still on the brink of going out of business. "They were struggling with this issue of being a for-profit company. They had deliberately determined they wanted to be a for-profit company. Once they got going, and the for-profit company wasn't making any money, then they were really struggling with; 'How do we do that? What happens? What does that mean in terms of both our income side and our expenses? What are the changes and compromises we have to make in order to make it be profitable?'"⁴

³ M. Hoben, Oral interview 1, p. 14-15, 6/4/99.

⁴ A. Rutledge, Oral interview, p. 9, 6/17/99.

The staff members felt like vultures, waiting for the mail each day to see which, if any, checks came. Then they would decide which checks they could issue. A payroll was never missed, but sometimes staff members who could offered to hold their checks until more money could be deposited in the checking account. “People were calling us to collect what we owed – our vendors – and we’d see how much money we got in the mail that day. Then we knew who we would pay and who we wouldn’t pay.”⁵

Desperate actions to save the company were considered. “The biggest thing that we did was to make the decision to go public about it. That was a big decision—whether to say in the paper, ‘We’re in trouble; we need your help’....[w]e felt it would be really awful to just go out of business without having told people what was happening, and giving them a chance to say whether that should happen or not.”⁶ The staff knew the paper had a very loyal readership. Readers expressed it in their letters to the editor and phone calls to the office in response to articles. Advertisers generally reported they got great response from this loyal audience. Even some who did not get great response continued to advertise, because it was a way to support this endeavor they believed in.

The public plea for help did not work magic, but seemed to mark a slow turn in fortune. “We struggled still for years and years. We went to our printer and worked out a deal with them....They carried us for a while and were willing to work with us, and that made a big difference. Our advisors helped us think about how to do that kind of thing—how to stretch stuff. It was painful from the business side of it, for quite a while. But we didn’t go under, and that was the key.”⁷

From the beginning, there had been a deliberate attempt not to be a hierarchical organization. Over the years, when requests were made for organizational charts, they were vehemently denied. Originally, there was a consensus-oriented style. The staff met each week to discuss and make decisions about a wide range of operational items. That did not last long, as it

⁵ K. Magnuson, Oral interview 1, p. 23, 1/13/00.

⁶ M. Hoben, Oral interview 1, p. 15, 6/4/99.

⁷ Ibid. 16.

became clear that more division of labor was needed. There was much work to do and few people to do it. What evolved were different areas of responsibilities that were more like concentric circles on a common plane than a hierarchy.

Initially everyone on staff was paid equally on a per-hour basis and many general tasks were shared. As division of responsibilities developed and the company became aware of the need to compete for employees in the open market, different kinds of compensation plans evolved. Different roles required differing levels of education, experience and degrees of responsibility. Systems of hourly, salaried and commissioned compensation plans developed.

There was a continuing level of frustration for Mollie and Kathy around having a talented, hard-working staff that was so underpaid. While attempting to set a new example and be an organization with strength and independence from funders, there was an awareness that many of the women who worked there could not do so unless they had a second and larger income in the household, or worked additional jobs themselves, as they each did. Kathy and Mollie valued a commitment to pay staff a fair return for their work and at the same time looked at dwindling financial resources. “There was so much to do, and so few resources to do them with. I remember meetings with tears around the table because people were just stressed about the amount of stuff that had to get done, and the frustration of the resources we had to do it with.”⁸

“It was still hard, but we were moving in the right direction. Anytime we got ahead a little bit, and if we had any little positive income, it went toward salaries as we could, and toward improving equipment to make us more productive and efficient. So we had a series of years where we basically broke even. We could have shown a little profit if we wanted to but we were investing anything that we thought we could—and this was not a lot extra—back into what we were doing.”⁹

“One of the things we moved towards was the idea of gainsharing. It was a way to say to us all that if we do well, all of us will receive something from that. If we don’t do well, we’re not going to be committed to [a long-term salary increase]. We developed the concept, and have

⁸ K. Magnuson, Oral interview 1, p. 19, 6/7/99.

⁹ M. Hoben, Oral interview 2, p. 5, 1/25/00.

pushed it with the staff for a long time.”¹⁰ Staff came to understand and expect that compensation came both from direct, regular paychecks and also from the end-of-year gainsharing of the profits, if any, that they had all worked so hard to develop.

It was understood that some potential staff never came to work at Minnesota Women’s Press because they could not afford it. Some staff left because they could not afford to work there long term. In general, staff understood that the desire and intention to pay more was there, but the financial resources were not. The company’s intentions were not questioned. “The fairness has to do with, the very beginning, the importance ... placed on paying a decent wage and trying to create an environment that was decent to work in, even though there was so little money.”¹¹ One early staff person put it, “Once you say, ‘These are our principles,’ if you keep looking at what you’re doing in terms of those principles and let everybody keep you honest, then it has to happen that way. The organization would have fallen apart if it had been inconsistent with its goals.”¹²

Even as profitability approached as a possibility, shareholders continued to encourage the directors to raise the level of pay, which increased expenses and decreased profit. “[W]e weren’t looking for so much a financial return on our investment, as we were looking at our financial investment using [having] a multiplier effect in the company, as opposed to paying us dividends.”¹³ “[T]he investors were willing to be patient. They were really financing ‘mission,’ not return on their investments.”¹⁴

“It was very hard to communicate to them [the bank] that our goal in a business – our number one goal as a business – was not to make a lot of money. That would be fine, but that really wasn’t what we were about. We were more interested in – each year as we were able – to raise the level of compensation, which of course, lowered our level of profitability. This drove

¹⁰ Ibid. 7.

¹¹ C. Pine, Oral interview, p. 9, 7/12/99.

¹² M. Anderson, Oral interview, p. 8, 7/26/99.

¹³ A. Rutledge, Oral interview, p. 3, 6/17/99.

¹⁴ C. Pine, Oral interview, p. 6, 7/12/99.

them crazy: that we'd finally get to the point of having some profitability – we were coming to a year end – but we'll be doing this gainsharing so that profit will be cut in half, of course. It was a meeting of two very different worlds.”¹⁵ “We do some things that would both get the out-in-the-world financial resources we need, and play as much of the game, so to speak, as we needed to play to accomplish that, but at the same time really honor our values and our priorities.”¹⁶

Tough decisions continued to be made about compensation, technology, efficiency and outside money. At one point an advertising sales position came open and rather than fill it, the work was divided among the existing sales staff. At another time the commission system for sales people was redesigned to slow the rate of growth of their income in order to more equally share compensation dollars with the whole staff. There was a very deliberate attention to both enhancing income and controlling expenses.

Income, space and staff size grew. Expenses grew as well. Slowly the income started to grow faster than the expenses and total income started to exceed total expenses. But now a new phone system was needed to accommodate the growing staff.

Mollie and Kathy faced dilemmas. Their values included building a solid, long-lived business and also compensating staff fairly and honoring commitments to staff. How did they reconcile those? How did they make responsible, long-term decisions? Would it be more important for staff to be paid higher immediate compensation or forgo that to better insure jobs and higher compensation in the future? Would the ends justify the means in this case, or would the outcomes not matter if they were violating some of their basic principles?

MISSION STATEMENT **Minnesota Women's Press, Inc.**

Mission: Our mission is to promote women's words, ideas and values, in ways that create

¹⁵ K Magnuson, Oral interview 2, p. 11, 1/13/00.

¹⁶ Ibid.

community, guided by a transforming feminist worldview.

A transforming feminist worldview celebrates, honors and supports women's words, experiences and values, in the belief that doing so is the foundation for individual, social and cultural transformation.

We are motivated by our conviction that such transformation is necessary for the good of women and also of men, children and all living things.

Goals we aim for, in our pursuit of the mission:

- To touch many lives;
- To apply and articulate our transforming feminist worldview in all undertakings;
- To be a financially sound, long-lived business that is capable of maintaining current endeavors and undertaking new ones;
- To be on the cutting edge;
- To be visible and have influence;
- To create products and services of superior quality;
- To create a respectful, personally rewarding work environment;
- To provide return to all who invest in the company.

The means, to pursue the mission and achieve the goals:

- Operating in harmony with our transforming feminist values.
- Being profitable.

The people who work for Minnesota Women's Press, Inc. are its most valuable asset.

Employees

The company's vision for employees:

- opportunity to do meaningful work in which they can feel pride
- compensation at least competitive with the marketplace
- opportunity to share in the success of the company
- regular reviews
- as much information, authority and responsibility as possible
- chances to give input to planning
- opportunities for professional development

The company expects that employees will:

- honor the company's mission and values
- work hard
- do work of highest possible quality
- understand the big picture of the company and how they fit in to it
- give thoughtful input
- respect colleagues, assume their good will, be tolerant and accepting of different styles and needs
- employ a cooperative, collaborative approach to work

Free-lancers

We are committed to providing free-lancers with opportunities for meaningful work, professional development and competitive compensation. Free-lancers become the representative of the Minnesota Women's Press while on assignment; in their work for us, we expect them to exhibit the highest degree of professionalism and to further the mission of Minnesota Women's Press, Inc.

OUR TRANSFORMING FEMINIST FOUNDATION
Minnesota Women's Press, Inc.

From personal experience, from literature and from research, we know that

Gender is a critical component of all dimensions of culture.

Women's words, experiences and knowledge have been discounted in every aspect of culture.

Female values and priorities differ in significant ways from the values and priorities that shape and influence the institutions and imperatives of society.

Female emphases include:

ethics based as much on caring and connection as on rights

interconnection of all life (web rather than hierarchy)

cooperation and collaboration more than competition

importance of context (facts do not equal truth)

universality of the personal (the personal is political)

power of the personal (every woman has a story)

emotionality (the heart as much as the head)

creativity of difference, strength of diversity

process as important as product (the means are the end)

power with, rather than power over

We believe that

Women's words, experiences and knowledge must be honored.

Female values and priorities must be as dominant as male values and priorities.

A world in which women's words are heard and female values are operative will be a better world for all living things.

Our knowledge and beliefs compel us to act powerfully to further the acceptance and integration of women's words and values in all areas of life. We are committed to living and working in ways that recognize and promote:

strong girls and women

nurturant boys and men

all generations, and the connections across generations

all cultures, and connections across cultures

love of the earth and its creatures

laughing

Mollie Hoben and Glenda Martin December 1996

The Value of Women's Words and Women's Work (B)

Epilogue

In 1996 as a solution to its dilemma, Minnesota Women's Press did pay gainsharing to the staff and did get a loan and the new telephone system. The loan was not from the bank. A personal loan was made from Glenda to the company. Each month a check for payment on the loan was made to Glenda, rather than to the bank.

In 2000, as Minnesota Women's Press, Inc. celebrates its 15th anniversary, it is in many ways a thriving business. It has moved beyond surviving. The company has shown a respectable profit for the past three years, has added additional space and staff, and has a profit-generating web site. Overall, compensation has risen. The company offers health insurance to all staff who work half time or more (the restrictions are external, regulatory ones) and family members and domestic partners can be added. There is also a flex spending plan and a retirement plan to which the company contributes. The gainsharing plan continues. The office was recently redecorated and painted.

In other ways, the company continues to be challenged. Compensation for most positions is around the market rate, but certainly not above, which is now the goal. There are more good ideas than there is staff time to pursue them. Each staff person has her own computer, but some are seven years old.

The questions about survival have all but disappeared.

Glenda and Mollie, as the two publishers, have created a deliberate leadership succession plan. They have passed the leadership roles on to Kathy Magnuson and Norma Olson, the systems and production coordinator. Mollie and Glenda are ready for changes in their personal lives and are enthused about this transition in the company as well.

Glenda continues as publisher, but has mostly removed herself from the day-to-day operations of the business. She moved to Arizona and visits a few times a year. She continues to write for *BookWomen* and lead Book Groups on the Road. She also leads

book discussion groups at her local women's bookstore.

Mollie continues as publisher, but has removed herself from most of the daily operations of the business. She works about half time in the office and half time at home. For her, this continues to be more than a full-time activity, managing the books division, including the store, the library, book groups, retreats, Book Groups on the Road and *BookWomen*.

Now that the company is showing a profit, this flows through to shareholders and has an impact on their personal tax returns. The company distributes earnings to shareholders at an amount similar to the tax liability they incur. At the most recent shareholders' meeting, continuing to forgo additional distribution of profits, the shareholders voted in favor of using financial resources to invest in staffing and equipment.

The staff currently numbers 21. Faye, who boasts of being the first retiree, comes back to volunteer every Tuesday afternoon and stay in touch. A couple of others are close to retirement age, while recent college graduates also fill several positions. They live in the inner city, suburbs and one member of the staff commutes from her cabin in northern Minnesota. Efforts to expand the limited racial diversity of the staff continue. There are mothers of toddlers and mothers of adult children. One mom has taken two parental leaves while being employed here. Some have lesbian partners; others have male partners or husbands. Tennis shoes are found along with dress shoes and sandals and the occasional bare feet around the office.

The passion of the mission continues. A tagline was recently added to the front page of the newspaper: The newspaper of Minnesota's Feminist Voices—Independent—Women-Owned.

The Value of Women's Words and Women's Work

Teaching Note

Discussion Questions:

1. What do Mollie and Kathy need to consider in making these decisions? What questions should they ask?
2. Why would it be appropriate for the company to discontinue their gainsharing plan? Why would it not be appropriate?
3. What are the underlying values of the bank? What are the underlying values of Minnesota Women's Press? Are there values they share? Is negotiation possible? What can each learn from the other?
4. What do you think would happen if Minnesota Women's Press does not buy the phone system? What do you think would happen if they do not continue the gainsharing?
5. Do you think this is a "successful" business as defined from a feminist perspective? What is your definition of a feminist business?
6. Do you think this is a "successful" business as defined from a business perspective? What is your definition of a successful business?
7. This business persisted in difficult circumstances. Do you think it survived because of its feminist principles or in spite of them? Why?