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LEADING LATINAS IN EQUALITY

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Filling the Gap: A Conversation About Hispanics in STEM

The STEM fields represent an excellent pathway for job growth and opportunity right now as, per the National Science Board, there will be an estimated 3.4 million skilled technical job positions available by this year. Furthermore, a study from the PEW Research Center stated that while Hispanics make up about 17 percent of the U.S. workforce, they represent only eight percent of STEM fields, which is the largest gap of any minority or underrepresented group.

That means that not only is there an urgent need to find skilled technical workers, but Latinos are uniquely placed to fill that void and increase global competitiveness. We took the opportunity to sit down with the chief executive officer of SHPE, an impactful nonprofit member organization devoted to closing the gap for Hispanics in STEM to talk more about the future.

**Hispanic Network Magazine: What originally brought you to SHPE?**

**What personal and professional impact did the organization have on you in your role as the previous COO? What kind of impact do you hope to have as the new CEO?**

**Chris Wilkie:** My professional network initially brought me to SHPE. Throughout my 20+ year career in the nonprofit industry, I had the honor of meeting so many amazing
leaders and change-makers. Raquel Tamez, SHPE’s previous CEO, was one of them. Newly appointed in her role, she was looking for someone with extensive operational experience in this sector and reached out to me about filling the COO position. I was both flattered and thrilled to be considered.

Then, the more I learned about SHPE, the more I resonated with its mission. Suddenly, I wanted the job not only because I thought my skill set matched with what was needed, but because I deeply align with the values of the organization and the outcomes it strives towards. With the problems facing our country and world today, I truly believe that the world needs and deserves the brilliance of Hispanic minds at the highest levels of STEM innovation. We will all be better-off when this mission is fulfilled.

Now as CEO, I am focused on making this representative and diverse workforce a reality sooner, rather than later. As it stands today, SHPE is uniquely positioned to become an authoritative voice in defining the future of science and engineering in our country. With the help of our National Board of Directors, we just approved a Strategic Plan to guide us for the next five years. And I am committed to achieving the goals and objectives laid out in it. We’ll be concentrating on three key areas — staying true to our mission, growing reach and establishing renown and respect on a national level.

**HNM: What are the top three reasons companies in the STEM field should be actively looking to fill their ranks with more Hispanics and partner with more Hispanic-owned tech organizations?**

*Wilkie:* Well, the number one reason is that it is the right thing to do. Full-stop.

But honestly, it really boils down to whether or not companies in STEM can actually afford not to. According to a 2017 study by Deloitte,* organizations with both diverse and inclusive cultures are:

- 2 times as likely to meet/exceed financial targets
- 6 times more likely to be innovative and agile
- 8 times more likely to achieve better business outcomes

So, if companies want to stay relevant and competitive, they are going to have to prioritize recruiting, hiring and empowering minority employees, like Hispanics. Diversifying your workforce is just good business these days.

*Source: High-Impact diversity and inclusion: The new maturity model, Bernstein by Deloitte, 2017*

**HNM: What key trends set the most diverse and inclusive STEM companies apart and how can leaders looking to improve and grow their organizations follow suit?**

*Wilkie:* Companies need to be careful that they aren’t just performing “Diversity Theater” — where their public facing DEI efforts are falling short internally. Diversity and inclusion need to be value driven, not virtue signaling. Successful organizations intentionally include, or they are unintentionally excluding. They need to fully commit to authenticity, transparency and vulnerability. Our organizations must decide to genuinely change both our internal/external culture if we are to remain relevant and impactful.

As executives, we must regularly listen to our employees and stakeholders, adapt our thinking, rework what we believe to be correct.
and become comfortable being uncomfortable within our companies.

HNM: What is the benefit to STEM companies and organizations to institute ERGs or create executive-level positions for diversity, equity and inclusion officers?

Wilkie: I touched on this mostly in [the previous question], but there are both internal and external benefits. Internally, if implemented effectively, ERGs and inclusive leaders increase employees’ experiences of fairness, respect, value, psychological safety and inspiration by 70 percent! And this in turn increases team performance and decision-making quality. Ultimately, an environment that supports and encourages diversity of thinking enhances innovation by 20 percent and decreases risk by 30 percent.

And obviously, innovative, risk-averse businesses are more likely to solve the problems facing our community and country right now. Like I said before, as a society, we really can’t afford not to foster and encourage diversity in these influential STEM spaces. A successful future demands it.

HNM: What does the future you hope for look like in regards to the influence and impact of Hispanic engineers, mathematicians, scientists and more?

Wilkie: I am excited about a future where Hispanics are fully represented in STEM. We know that both STEM careers and the Hispanic population are on a projection of growth. But Hispanics in STEM are not growing at the same rate. There is a gap, and SHPE is working to close it every single day.

The future I hope for is one where Hispanic students are considered STEM’s biggest untapped resource; one where the talent inside companies reflects the diversity of their customer base. I can’t wait until the incredible gifts, brilliant minds and innovative solutions of SHPE members are known, sought-after and appreciated around the world. We need the brilliance, creativity and perspective of the Hispanic community today. And SHPE is positioned and ready to make this happen now. I mean, we can’t afford not to.

To learn more about SHPE and get involved, visit shpe.org.