

TO ENGAGE AND ELEVATE

NORTHSPAN WORKS TO DEVELOP BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

We all know that feeling when our favorite band hits the stage – that overwhelming rush of excitement and energy, the intensity of the moment energizes us. To “Engage and Elevate” is the guiding vision of Duluth-based Northspan.

Northspan is at the culmination point of a recent period of change in leadership, a re-evaluation of priorities, growth in employees and the launch of a new program, DAWN – Driving Access to Wealth and Networks – for which Northspan has been entrusted with administering with the backing of the community.

In 2018, the then 33-year-old nonprofit changed executive leaders for the first time in three decades, with Elissa Hansen replacing Randy Lasky upon his retirement, just as COVID hit.

Two years after weathering those challenges, the team has doubled their staff to help keep up with the demand for services and programming. The first post-COVID year saw the



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reevaluation of some of Northspan’s core programs, and this past year Karl Schuettler stepped into the role of vice president after the retirement of Bob Palmquist, another milestone changing of the guard.

Northspan is organized as a C-4, which is unique among nonprofits. Hansen explains that in a C-4 the basic premise is providing social

and economic well-being to your community.

“Oftentimes, most C-4s are lobbying organizations. We’ve never done that, and I don’t expect to and don’t plan to, but it allows us this flexibility,” said Hansen. “The consulting work that we do helps to fund our programs. Our programs are funded in all kinds of varieties of ways. It’s not



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- ELISSA HANSEN, PRESIDENT AND CEO - NORTHSPAN



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just donations from givers, or only grants, it's community partnerships. For instance, DEDA, the city of Duluth, invests in two of our programs, and then we're providing those services to the whole community. Nobody pays to utilize our service."

Hansen says it's been like that at Northspan since 1985. The mission hasn't changed. How they do the work has changed, because the times have changed.

"Our original articles of incorporation are still our mission. Our vision, Engage and Elevate, is high-level. We want to help people, engage with them and help them do something better, and then also," Hansen adds, "our mission is to be expert navigators. The true part of it really is turning ideas into accomplishments. Everything that we're doing is helping someone get to that next level, and that really hasn't changed since day one."

The programming side of Northspan has undergone some intense scrutiny since Hansen stepped into her leadership role. She is candid about making change. "We have started programs since I've been here,

we've shut programming down and we've totally reconfigured programs."

Launching DAWN could be considered a milestone in Hansen's tenure. She looked forward to the press conference announcing a massive federal grant they were receiving, money she says they will dedicate "to really change the ecosystem of how we're working together."

"I think that one of their strengths is they seek out grants that are going to have big impacts and they are thoughtful on how to implement them," says Erin Grabinger, Development Director for the Head of the Lakes United Way. "The programs that they put together are pretty incredible, as are the ways that Northspan seeks to improve the community by finding grants that can provide funding for organizations like United Way in the community."

Northspan recently worked with Head of the Lakes United Way to help them develop a five-year strategic plan. Grabinger says Northspan facilitators "brought our thoughts together, helped us kind of look at our work, look at our goals, the areas we needed to improve on."

The four-year grant worth \$2 million comes from the Minority Business Development Agency, part of the Department of Commerce. "We will be serving socially and economically disadvantaged individuals who are entrepreneurs," says Hansen, the excitement in her voice palpable. "This is the perfect fit! We had to turn Innovate 218 into something new, and went with DAWN, and trying to really create this ecosystem change."

Innovate 218 was the first step in a complex evolution that came about with DEED (Department of Employment Economic Development) developing the Launch Minnesota program, a statewide collaborative effort "to accelerate the growth of startups and amplify Minnesota as a national leader in innovation."

DEED divided the state into seven regions and tasked each one to organize and create a regional economic



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development hub for entrepreneurs and minority businesses. It was the only way to be eligible for funding. The Northeast region was late to organize and struggling to create a regional hub.

In 2021, at a meeting of the Arrowhead Growth Alliance, the Itasca Economic Development Corporation (IEDC), which just serves Itasca County, said they would be willing to launch it and create the regional hub. Under the leadership of Tamara Lowney, president and CEO, the IEDC did a good job launching cohorts, having pitch competitions and partnering with different companies for sponsorship.

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- KARL SCHUETTLER, VICE PRESIDENT AND CEO - NORTHSPAN

About a year ago Hansen says she was again approached by Lowney about taking on the next version of Innovate 218. Hansen was ready to say yes. “We need to restructure it, and really be thinking about how we’re driving access to our entrepreneurs that we’re not serving” This was going to take ecosystem change,

which is not easy to do, said Hansen. They started looking at different federal and state funding programs.

“We’re very lucky, we have all these assets,” Hansen said, “and we all know we need to do it better together. We need to figure out how to change the current system where we are not serving our black community and our native populations in a way that we could be, and that we know we need to for the future. So that’s a big change.”



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Lowney was pleased with the creation of DAWN and supports its mission.

Consulting at Northspan, generally speaking, lands in three main buckets, says Karl Schuettler, vice president.

One is business development. This is often helping businesses access financing and providing valuations for businesses. These requests tend to be short term, one-time, with quick turnaround.

Organizational development is the second of the buckets, which

entails strategic planning for organizations.

"The actual planning process will probably only take a few months, but sometimes that means we'll do an update a couple of years down the road," explains Schuettler. "Sometimes they have us facilitate quarterly check ins so that they stay on track with their plans. So, it's shorter term, but can be stretched out over time."

Community Development is "probably the most nebulous of the three." Northspan has some

long-term relationships where they are facilitating some community conversations. "There's something called for example, Mineland Vision Partnership, which has been looking at how do you re-use mine land after it's been mined," says Schuettler. "You see some of these examples in the Iron Range of turning them into mountain bike parks or things like that, and so that group meets a couple times a year, but we've just been facilitating that for well over a decade now."

Schuettler defines it as "a regional partnership, or some sort of maybe even loosely defined group, that needs that long-term, almost, facilitator and staffing support."

Northspan works a lot with data. They let the numbers tell the story, data gleaned from the census, from economic sources, to understand

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- JANELLE GRESCHNER, FORMER BOARD CHAIR - NORTHSPAN





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some of the trends going on. "That's usually a piece of any strategic planning process, we update people on that. We do some one-off research type projects. One of our programs, which is called Northland Connection, is kind of focused on being that resource for information that people are just trying to figure out what that data point is, we're available to help."

While conducting everyday business the past 40 years, Northspan staff have developed a network of relationships across northeastern Minnesota, which has in turn fed their business.

"It's just a lot of boots on the ground, and understanding what's going on in these communities," says Schuettler. "Therefore, I think we're able to respond to what's going on with them in probably a more sensitive way than someone coming in from the outside. So, it's deep connections like that."

Prior to being groomed for the vice president's position at Northspan, Schuettler was the

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research director, his focus squarely on the analytical, data-mining side of the business. He had worked his way up through a few different levels of consultant before managing the Northland Connection program, "the premier commercial real estate and economic development research program." Northland Connection is a repository for background, economic and demographic information. "This is one of the supporting programs a lot of those economic development partners across the area use when they need those resources."

Jim Weikum has been with the Arrowhead Library System that serves seven counties; Carlton, St. Louis, Lake, Cook, and then going north,

Koochiching, Lake of the Woods and then down to Itasca. They were established in 1966, with the responsibility of helping develop and improve library services, and making sure that no matter where you live in northeastern Minnesota, you have access to at least some level of public library service.

The library system is required by statute to periodically conduct a strategic planning process. Weikum recommended looking at Northspan. "I've been a little bit iconoclastic in that I tend to like organizations that have kind of a broader background, particularly working with local governments or county governments and things like that. So that stands out for me. I'd been through a couple



planning processes with Northspan, so I was familiar with their abilities," Weikum said. "I liked how they go about the process. When you've been doing some of this work as long as I have, you've seen quite a variety of styles and consultants and things like that. I just felt that they knew what they were doing."

As a nonprofit, Northspan provides a variety of services to the community on the programming side of the company; the programs are really the heart of Northspan.

"We are a unique nonprofit, in that we're not constantly chasing grant funding or facing some of the constraints that other nonprofits have," Schuettler said. "I really appreciate flexibility, too. I think a lot of people who want to work in regional economic development work in government, but I think the flexibility that you get in this role is fantastic. The ability to shape things

without also being front and center in the public eye. I won't complain about that, either."

Again, it is the consulting side that helps fund a lot of the programming at Northspan. One of their more recent projects was guiding the staff and leadership of the Great Lakes Aquarium. As a public aquarium/educational facility, more than 200,000 visitors tour the fresh-water aquarium yearly. "We see about 10,000 children come for our educational programs. Our focus is freshwater lakes and Lake Superior. And we use those two platforms as a lens to look at the world," says Executive Director and CEO Jay Walker.

Walker, and his team recently completed the process of updating their strategic direction. Walker said Northspan used a process that gets everyone at the table involved in the work. "Their processes are efficient, it's effective and they're great to work

with," reiterated Walker. "They really are accessible and really know what they're doing."

Schuettler says clients know that Northspan is a place where someone can bring a problem where there may not be a roadmap, there may not be a solution, they will at least provide a framework and a way to start responding to certain questions. "I think when you're facing some of these overwhelming challenges that you encounter in the economic development world having a framework is such a crucial starting place. Our role is really to go from that nebulous concern or panic and lay out a roadmap, a way to move forward and navigate through that."

Northspan's service program approach has been hugely successful, garnering respect and trust from the community they serve. In that vein, one of their programs, NorthForce, is a talent repository and conduit for professionals seeking and providing employment opportunities. The goal of the Welcoming Community program is "to increase belonging of underrepresented community members and trust between people from different backgrounds and lived experiences in Northeast Minnesota."

When talking about programming at Northspan you must include the word "community." Community programming is how Northspan reaches across northern and parts of central Minnesota. Janelle Greschner, a past board chair for Northspan, says the nonprofit does a great job of attracting savvy and diverse candidates for its board from a great cross-section of people in very high leadership roles across the region.





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The Chamber held a ribbon-cutting ceremony last May at Northspan's new location, 202 W. Superior St., Suite 202.

"There's actually a matrix that has been heavily thought of and used as a guide that represents diversity and inclusion, in addition to like a cross section of professional backgrounds," explains Greschner. "So, they're both involved in business and community development, in addition to being geographically representative, because we want folks from the Twin Ports, but also,

the Iron Range, a voice of rural areas too... so there's a matrix that's used to make sure we get a good diverse group, kind of like three legs of the stool; diversity, professionalism and geography."

When we think about the three programs we do have, they're so directly connected to driving access to wealth and networks across our region, says Hansen.

"You've got to have a work force, if you want to grow. You've got to have the data you need; we do a lot of feasibility studies for businesses and business valuations. You've got to be thinking about welcoming and belonging; if you're opening a store, how are you thinking about bringing people into that space and keeping them feeling like they want to be



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in your community? Then on the flip side, how are we thinking as communities about inviting new businesses to be in our community?” asks Hansen.

“We’ve been saying it’s a new dawn for entrepreneurs in our region,” says Hansen. Her excitement is infectious as she explains how internally, they’ve been calling each other DAWNtrapeurs. “We’re marketers, part of what we

all love here is our marketing. It’s kind of corny, but I love it,” laughed Hansen. “I know we’re going to use it.”

Hansen said that for Northspan, as an organization, it is not massive change. It’s how we look at it, she said, calling it transformative instead of transactional.

“Someone just said that to me, ‘You’re transforming it versus performing an individual transaction

with individuals; you’re thinking about what is the whole need, from a system perspective.’ For me, this is what my vision has been for the organization. How we’re seeing the future is how all these things really impact the system as a whole, so people want to be here, work here, start businesses here.” 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who was born in Superior.