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## WomenUp: Lisa Brothers of Nitsch Engineering

KEITH REGAN  
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### Lisa Brothers

**Title:** President and CEO, Nitsch Engineering

**Age:** 52

**Residence:** Wilmington

**Education:** Bachelor of science, engineering, University Massachusetts Lowell, 1984; MBA, Northeastern University, 1999

### THE INFLUENCE FACTOR

**Who were the key mentors in your life?** (Nitsch Engineering founder) Judy Nitsch. When she said she was going to found her own company, I went into her office and told her “Not without me.” This has been a tremendous opportunity for me the last 25 years of my career and for her to plan out the transition of leadership of the company to me; there are not a lot of founders who have the foresight and wherewithal to do what she has done.

**Do you find yourself serving in a mentorship role to others?** I am active through the Center for Women and Work at UMass Lowell and definitely try to make myself available to others looking for advice, male or female. A lot of people made time for me when I was younger and it’s nice to give back when possible. Paying it forward is definitely part of our core values.



Lisa Brothers, president and CEO of Nitsch Engineering.

Every February for the past 13 years, Nitsch Engineering has invited school-aged girls into its offices for Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day. The goal: to help make the rest of the engineering world, where just 11 percent of professionals are women, look more like Nitsch, where roughly a third of its 90-person workforce is female.

“There is huge untapped potential that could be the future of our profession,” said Lisa Brothers, president and CEO of the Boston-based civil engineering firm. To date, more than 700 girls participated in the program, including one Nitsch employee who first visited the office as an 8th grader. She was hired directly out of engineering school, Brothers said.

“The best call we can get is when we find out a young girl actually goes into engineering,”

she said.

Brothers has led Nitsch for four years and has expanded its services to include land surveying, housing development and transportation. Next month, Nitsch is opening a second office in Worcester, an expansion that no doubt will draw even more women engineers its way. “We need to fill that pipeline,” she said.

Brothers recently spoke with the BBJ about her company, the engineering field’s gender issues and her passion for UMass Lowell.

**Do you feel being a woman in a predominantly male profession has been an obstacle during your career?** My first job out of college was at Mass. Highway Department. It was a great experience for me because I had an advocate. There were definitely

others who didn't fit with having a female on the construction site, but I actually became the first female engineer in the district out on the job, so they were unable to ignore me. I do feel like sometimes females have to work harder to get to the same place, but I also feel strongly it has some good points: People remember the female engineers.

**What are you most proud of from your time leading Nitsch?** I'm proud that we recently marked 25 years in business. That's a nice milestone. I'm also proud of the strategic direction we've set and the way our employees have really stepped up and engaged. We've had a 42 percent growth rate over the last four years and the performance of our employees is a big part of the reason.

**What are your thoughts on the current state of engineering education here in Massachusetts?** Everybody talks about STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and we need more and more young people to enter those fields. Especially as Baby Boomers retire, it's going to be a real struggle for us just to continue to find enough talent. Changes in foreign worker-visa rules just adds to the crisis. We definitely need to get more people interested in being engineers.

**Your alma mater, has long staked out a leadership position in engineering education. What role will UMass Lowell's engineering programs play in the future?** The reason I'm so passionate about UMass Lowell is that I would not be an engineer today if they had no engineering program and if it wasn't affordable. My family had

little money for school. Retaining that affordability and continuing to produce workplace-ready engineers is a key part of the mission going forward as well. The transformation of the campus under the new chancellor (Martin Meehan) has been incredible.

**You are a big networker. Do you encourage your employees to follow suit?** I always tell young engineers you cannot wait until you are a project manager to start building your network. You need to go build it now. If you start when you are younger and get involved in professional organizations, you can hone your leadership skills and grow up with those peers around you and by the time you're in a lead role in your job, you have that network already around you.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** Straightforward, approachable and fair.

**Do you have any pet peeves?** When people are not respectful or considerate of schedules and commitments of others. When you set a meeting and don't start or stop it on time and you have a bunch of people waiting around.

**What are you reading?** "You Raised Us, Now Work with Us," by Lauren Stiller Rikleen. It talks about the millennial generation and building a strong workplace with them. It's something that interests me on many levels as I also have two children who have just graduated and are in the workforce.

**Where do you turn when you need advice or guidance?** I want to make sure I continue to fo-

cus on strategy, so I rely a lot on the CEO leadership group I belong to, Vistage. There are 16 of us in the group with a lot of diversity in terms of company size and culture and it's valuable for me to spend a day with them all once a month to talk about issues CEO face. We have also had an outside advisory committee to our board since 1993 that have proven tremendously valuable for me when I need a bigger-picture perspective.

**How has the business environment changed for female executives?** I definitely think it has improved over the past 10 years. I think there is a different glass ceiling now, a more subtle form of unconscious bias out there that may come out in the way you write a job description or in other ways, such as the fact that men are more likely to ask for promotions or to be sponsored for them. We know diversity goes right to the bottom line, but until there are women in the board room – and more than one in each boardroom – I don't think the dynamic is truly going to change.

**What do you see coming soon that's new and different for Boston?** As a waterfront city, climate vigilance is going to be increasingly important. We are involved in the Living with Water design challenge through the Boston Society of Architects looking at out-of-the-box ways to address sea-level rise. Transportation obviously has to be more of a priority for Boston and the state and the mayor is spot-on when he talks about the need for more workforce housing to ensure people can work and live in the city and keep Boston thriving.