



WOMEN'S FUND
of OMAHA

WOMEN IN Leadership

2016 RESEARCH REPORT — OMAHA, NE

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Introduction

It has been twenty years since the Women's Fund of Omaha first published its groundbreaking study that explored Omaha's corporate, political and community leadership, and ten years since our last update to that original report. The Women in Leadership reports from 1996 and 2006 provided Omaha's professional community with baseline quantitative and qualitative data about the leadership landscape for women in our community. The voices of our city's leaders gave us insight into how individuals become leaders, how those leaders drive change, and also how slowly change has come for women in the workplace.

This report once again focuses on the voices of our communities' leaders. Through 80 interviews with a wide array of Omaha's leaders, we tapped into the influential minds in Omaha's corporate, nonprofit, academic, governmental and medical worlds. We spoke to business owners, CEOs, senior administrators, organizational leaders, executive directors, COOs, and many more. The leaders we interviewed were as diverse in their backgrounds as they were in their current roles. However, each shared a deep understanding of Omaha, its organizations, and the kinds of leaders it produces.

We interviewed:

- 26 from the Business sector
- 12 from the Education sector
- 16 from the Government sector
- 7 from the Healthcare sector
- 19 from the Nonprofit sector

- 62 Women
- 18 Men

Interviewing such a wide array of leaders is important, since, as we noted in 2006, much of the progress in our community can be traced back to individuals who stepped up to tackle a problem or seize an opportunity. These leaders, who hail from the business, nonprofit, civic, and other sectors are indispensable to the fabric of Omaha and its community. This remains the case in 2016.

However, the demographics of leadership in Omaha also remain largely unchanged in 2016. While, as the leaders in this report note, women provide strong voices and leadership in many sectors of the community, their numbers are still only a fraction of men's. Moreover, much influence in Omaha is still concentrated in the hands of men. In this regard, Omaha is lagging behind other cities and metropolitan areas that have seen a diversification of their leaders in the past decade [19]. In terms of inclusion of both people of color and women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, Omaha in 2016 still falls short: while women's participation in Omaha's workforce is consistent and strong, and their educational attainment surpasses that of men [27] the ranks of Omaha's leaders are still largely male and largely white.

So why does this matter? Studies suggest that the inclusion of women in leadership can drive community success. More diverse companies, both in terms of gender and racial and ethnic identity, are better able to win top talent and improve their customer orientation, employee satisfaction, and decision making, and all that leads to increasing returns [20, 29, 19]. Companies, communities, and cities all benefit when women of all backgrounds are included in the ranks of leadership. We can observe the growth in productivity, output, mission adherence, and problem solving when *everyone* in a community is encouraged to succeed to their highest potential [20]. This is the kind of growth we want to see continue and expand in Omaha.

While it is undeniable that our community continues to benefit from the strong stewardship of its current and past leaders, the community is missing the creative problem solving and diverse thinking that a well-balanced leadership model brings. In an attempt to shine a light on both the continued lack of meaningful representation in Omaha's leadership and the extraordinary work Omaha's current female leaders do, we present this report. By lifting up and centering the voices of leaders advocating for gender equity in the workplace, we hope to show how powerful and beneficial for the whole community an inclusive work environment can be.

The testimonies that participants shared with us about both the successes and challenges, the positives and the negatives, and current realities of becoming a leader in Omaha are powerful. Their experiences and reflections urge us to ask how we can make Omaha's working world a more inclusive environment that inspires young girls to dream and reach success at equal rates to their male peers. With this in mind, as you continue through this report, we challenge you to ask "why?" and "how?" The power to make Omaha a leader in gender equity in the workplace rests with each of us.

Context of the 2016 study

Planning for the replication of the 2006 study began in early 2014, with the formation of this report's Research Committee. The committee reviewed the work of the research committees of the two previous reports, and identified the objectives of the original leadership study, conducted in 1996. These were:

- To determine the level of female participation in leadership positions in major corporations and organizations in the greater Omaha area
- To establish a community baseline of gender representation in work force leadership so that changes in representation could be measured and documented
- To identify the social and psychological dimensions that contribute to the attainment of leadership roles
- To describe various paths women have taken to successful leadership

The 2006 study sought to duplicate the methodology of the 1996 study and to compare information obtained with the baseline data established in the original report. In doing so, the Women's Fund hoped to learn more about the views of leaders on women's leadership in Omaha and the impact of gender on pathways to leadership.

This report seeks to update and refine the findings of the 2006 study by examining how leadership is fostered on three distinct, yet interconnected levels: Community, Organizational, and Individual. While it may be common sense that individual leaders grow in the context of the organizations and the communities they find themselves in, the Research Committee had yet to consider these contexts as analytical lenses. That is, we had yet to ask, "How do Omaha and the organizations specific to it **contribute to the pathways our communities' leaders follow?**"

With this in mind, we asked our more than 80 interviewees to discuss leadership on the community, organizational, and individual levels. By examining each stratum separately, we hope to provide a more comprehensive portrait of leadership in Omaha by answering the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of the leadership landscape of Omaha?
- What are the characteristics of successful organizations that grow strong leaders?
- What are the characteristics of individual leaders?

Women in Leadership: A Statistical Picture

National data about women in the workforce can give us clues about why and how leaders in Omaha may encounter and engage with workplace issues in our own community. The following summary of research documents a variety of data, including proportion of women in the C-Suite and the kind of gender-based barriers millennial women expect. Just as the leaders we interviewed grow into leadership in the context of Omaha and its culture, so too are they part of the broader national context of women in the workplace. The statistics and numerical exploration of gender-based workplace issues below can provide context for the words and thoughts shared by Omaha's leaders.

Barriers Facing Women in the Workplace: A Statistical View

Nationally, women continue to fall behind men in terms of pay equity and leadership. While they make up nearly half of the workforce in the nation's largest corporations, women still hold only a nominal share of executive positions and are also underrepresented on Boards of Directors. Owing to these low rates of women's participation in leadership, the United States falls short of the world's top ten countries for women in leadership. Additionally, many women still believe that their gender holds them back in the workplace and see little being done to address those barriers.

The following statistics illustrate this story. The most recent data tell us:

- 57% of women and 69% of men were participating in the labor force [26]
 - Nebraska: 65.2% of women [24]
- Women overall are paid \$.78 for every dollar paid to their male counterparts. [26]
- African-American women are paid only \$.64, Hispanic and Latina women only \$.56 compared to comparably employed white men. [21]
 - In Nebraska, white women are paid \$.75 for every dollar paid to their male counterparts. African American women, \$.54 and Hispanic and Latina women \$.59 [24]
- Women were underrepresented (relative to their share of total employment) in [11]:
 - Manufacturing (29%)
 - Agriculture (25%)
 - Transportation and utilities (23%)
 - Mining (13%)
 - Construction (9%)

Nationally, women at S&P 500 companies currently hold [11]:

- 4% of CEO positions (20 women, total)
- 19% of Board of Directors positions
- 25% of Executive/Senior-Level Officials and Managers positions
- 37% of First/Mid-Level Official and Managers positions
- 45% of positions in the S&P 500 labor force

Nationally, women are underrepresented at every level in the corporate pipeline, with disparities increasing as level of authority increases [18]:

	Men	Women
Entry Level Professionals	55%	45%
Managers	63%	37%
Senior Managers/Directors	68%	32%
VPs	73%	27%
SVP	77%	23%
C-Suite	83%	17%

- 40% of women in senior management believe their gender is inhibiting their success, compared to 11% of men [18]
- Only 28% of senior-level women are very happy with their careers, compared to 40% of senior-level men [18]
- 74% of companies report gender diversity is a top CEO priority
 - But, only 49% of men and 37% of women believe this [18]
 - Only 1/3 of people believe gender diversity is a top priority of their manager [18]

A Snapshot of Omaha

Analysis of local data shows that Omaha is still far from gender equity in the workplace, reflecting national trends. Across measures, women lag behind their male counterparts. Indeed, median earnings, representation on boards, and occupational representation all suggest that women do not have access to the same opportunities as men. While most major corporations have women on their board, men still make up more than 80% of board positions in Omaha and men are still earning more than women throughout the city [22, 28, 29].

Median Income			
	Female	Male	Ratio
White	\$28,558	\$40,505	71%
Black	\$21,14	\$23,133	91%
Hispanic/Latina	\$17,385	\$25,132	69%
Total	\$26,410	\$35,519	74%

Occupation Type					
	Management	Service	Sales and Office	Farming and Construction	Production
Female	42%	19%	33%	0.6%	5%
Male	33%	11%	19%	20%	76%

Women in the Board Room: Omaha [22]

Berkshire Hathaway

Fortune rank: 4

Board members: 12

Female Board Members: 3

Percent female: 25%



Cabela's

Fortune rank: 663

Board members: 10

Female board members: 2

Percent female: 20%



Green Plains

Fortune rank: 712

Board members: 9

Female board members: 0

Percent female: 0%



Mutual of Omaha

Fortune rank: 391

Board members: 9

Female board members: 2

Percent female: 17%



TD Ameritrade

Fortune rank: 727
Board members: 11
Female board members: 1
Percent female: 9%



Union Pacific

Fortune rank: 123
Board members: 11
Female board members: 1
Percent female: 9%



Valmont Industries

Fortune rank: 729
Board members: 9
Female board members: 1
Percent female: 11%



Werner Enterprises

Fortune rank: 971
Board members: 8
Female board members: 0
Percent female: 0%



West

Fortune rank: 794
Board members: 9
Female board members: 2
Percent female: 22%



Millennials' Experience in the Workplace

Though most of the leaders we spoke to do not fall into the Millennial generation, it is important to consider the views and experiences of the youngest working generation as they become a significant portion and voice in the workplace. As young people aged 18-35 enter and move up in the working world, their perspectives and experiences will increasingly inform how workplaces operate. In fact, millennials have been identified as having outlooks distinct from prior generations [13] – a notion echoed by participants. However, when it comes to issues of gender equity in the workplace, national data reveal that millennials' expectations for and experiences of gender-based barriers at work are strikingly similar to workers of previous generations: millennial women report they expect their gender to be a barrier in their career at high rates – in some cases, even higher than women polled in the past [18,19].

- 30% of millennial women believe if they try as hard as other genders, they'll have equal success
 - Compared to 71% of millennial men
- 78% of millennial women expect gender discrimination to negatively impact their careers
 - Compared to 14% of millennial men
- 84% of millennial women agree inherent biases in the workplace hold women back
 - Compared to 43% of millennial men
- 90% of millennial women agree gender discrimination in the workplace is an issue today
 - Compared to 57% of millennial men

Additionally, new data show that Millennial women are more likely than Millennial men to say they are planning to leave their employers within the next five years [13]. Though respondents were not asked why they intended to leave, 48% percent of female respondents to the same survey reported that are "being overlooked for potential leadership positions." [13] The data bear this out. Millennial men (21%) are significantly more likely than women (16%) to report leading a department or to be members of senior management teams [9]. Considering these figures, it seems that questions of gender equity in the workplace will continue to have relevance as this generation grows into leadership.

Findings

Section One: Omaha's Leadership Landscape

Theme One: Omaha's Small, but Generous Leadership Landscape

Theme Two: A Professional Social Network Divided by Gender

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Recommendations and Action Steps

Note:

Throughout the report, participants' sector of work is indicated by the following colors:

Business

Education

Government

Healthcare

Nonprofit

Omaha's Leadership Landscape

The leadership landscape in Omaha reflects a strong, traditional base of a few powerful and identifiable individuals and organizations. While the guidance and stewardship of the community is remarkable, the continuing challenge of integrating new leadership, especially for women, has not markedly changed. Additionally, participants recognize that women of color and LGBTQ women face even greater barriers in becoming leaders, noting that Omaha's lack of diversity is an issue that needs attention.

Concerns about the influence of unconscious bias were woven throughout responses in this section. Along these lines, participants expressed concern that current leaders may tend to favor those who they perceive as similar to themselves. As a result, they said, women in general, and women of color in particular may be overlooked as companies and organizations look to develop, foster, and retain talent. The predominant themes from participants were:

Theme One: Omaha's Small, but Generous Leadership Landscape

Theme Two: A Professional Social Network Divided by Gender

Theme Three: Uneven Playing Field for Women of Color and LGBTQ Women

Theme Four: Few High-Ranking Female Role Models

Theme One: Omaha's Small, but Generous Leadership Landscape

The business community in Omaha has created a legacy of philanthropy that is generous, sustained, and consolidated around a small group of people in leadership positions. This group is responsible for an extraordinary number of social, civic and charitable initiatives, in addition to maintaining ongoing support for nonprofit organizations, as well as family and public foundations. Community leaders were characterized as belonging to the community, rather than being tenants, and for instilling a deep philanthropic responsibility in upcoming leaders. Indeed, participants felt that many in our community take their lead, and valuing giving back has permeated through our city's business community.

However, this generous and ongoing nature of the philanthropic community was viewed as potentially restricting dynamic and robust policy debate, especially where privately funded programs and initiatives alleviated the governmental and civic responsibility to provide needed services. Further, interviewees felt that integrating newcomers into this elite group of leaders was a tall task, and one at which women had not thus far succeeded.

Overall, while participants recognized and valued the civic good Omaha's historic and current leaders have done, they felt that there has been little change in the leadership landscape in the past decade.

- *Omaha's civically-engaged leaders are valuable* -

"I would say from a business perspective; we have some very strong leaders in the community. [who have] made some great things happen in Omaha... I think [Omaha has] grown up a lot and [is] culturally rich now, and I think that's due to a group of male leaders in the community that made that happen." – [Female, Healthcare](#)

"Very strong, very dynamic especially the business leadership. I would say that if you want something done in Omaha you need some key business leaders behind it."- [Male, Education](#)

"Philanthropists have done amazing things. Most of these initiatives have been led by males and have been exclusive to male leadership at the helm – we need more women in these visionary and influential positions." – [Female, Education](#)

- *Little change in Omaha's leadership landscape* -

"It's very controlled by a few powerful men...It's a plus and a minus. Some great things have happened because those men did have some foresight for some things for the community, but the bad thing is, it hasn't allowed some, particularly women, to come up and have roles." – [Female, Business](#)

"We still have just a lot of history in this community. It's a small community, even though we do have the five Fortune 500 companies...I think we still have a lot of legacy issues of retired executives from companies here in town, sort of that philanthropic group. That small cadre of men are still here. They're still making important decisions for the community and influencing the community. I haven't seen that turn over yet." – **Female, Business**

"Omaha is like a white Wonder Bread community...I'm not going to say it's gotten better. I'm not going to say it's gotten worse, but the 6 white guys that run Omaha are still the 6 white guys that run Omaha except now it's maybe their kids. I hope that that changes because while I think it's great and Omaha is a town with big hearts and deep pockets, [but] when you all share a similar world view it's hard for you to understand." – **Female, Nonprofit**

- Need for inclusion of new leaders in the future -

"The leaders are so pronounced here. I mean, they're great leaders, great leaders but we have to be looking out for Omaha of who's that next group and if they're ready to lead." – **Female, Nonprofit**

"I'm surprised at how the challenges seem to continue to be so much the same as when I was in the business community back in the 80s and 90s. When you look at the boards and the senior leaderships of most of the largest companies in the community, when you think about the power brokers in the community in particular, they're still pretty male dominated. It's really a pleasant surprise and a standout when there are women in leadership roles, because they're the exception to the rule." – **Female Elected Official**

"The real challenge is for us to figure out how do we make sure that we are giving a more limited pool of women as much opportunity as possible so that we foster that so that in 5 years, 10 years, 20 years we are not in the same position that we continue to have the percentage gap. We [have] got to do proactive things to kill that percentage gap." – **Male, Education**

Theme Two: A Professional Social Network Divided by Gender

The leaders in our study reminded us that relationships in the workplace matter. Since, as explored in Theme One, Omaha has a longstanding network of male business leaders, participants felt that breaking into leadership networks was difficult for women. Indeed, they felt that the strong relationship-based nature of the community was reflected within organizational structures, and frequently delayed the pace of change for women seeking leadership roles.

National leadership research agrees that building beneficial, reciprocal, and powerful relationships in the work world is of special importance for women, but often more challenging than for men [14]. Research shows that though women and men often have networks of comparable sizes, their networks are starkly different in gender composition: men have primarily male networks and women have predominantly female or mixed-gender networks [18]. Considering the fact that more men presently hold high leadership positions, this means that women often have fewer relationships with influential individuals. Indeed, only 10% of senior-level women report that multiple senior leaders helped them advance to their positions, compared to nearly 20% of male leaders [18]. Indeed, our participants' comments reflected these national statistics. Participants reported that both the professional and the informal networks that often determine whether a woman has access to decision-making power in her career are starkly divided by gender.

With this in mind, participants encouraged women aspiring to lead to take advantage of both organization and community based leadership training, in order to cultivate mentor and peer networks.

- *Omaha's professional networks are not gender-inclusive* -

"I still think that the biggest opportunities, at least in this city, at the biggest companies, are positions that are held by men. I think that's because that network of males continues to operate within an arena that they're comfortable with, which is involving other men. I think they do a great job of networking with each other. I think that there [is] still a huge lack of inclusiveness of women who have potential leadership skills in that particular club." – *Female, Business*

"I think there's a lot of barriers. The networks that you form. When we don't have women who are included in those networks, that can be a barrier to having a diverse group to make the key decisions for the community." *Female, Business*

"Omaha is a wonderful community but it's run by men and a particular group of men run a lot of things in this town. I think that it's all about connections and who you know and the deals that are happening on the golf course or out in the hunting blind." – *Female, Nonprofit*

"That's not to say that the leaders in these positions aren't extremely qualified, but when relationships end up being a tie breaker, it's really tough to completely make the shift...Especially if, in the current leadership roles, they're primarily male, and the relationships then are very strong leaders that are also males." – Female, Business

- Women in the community must also cultivate informal networks -

"I'd like to see more robust women's networking in the community. There is already quite a bit of it but somehow it's still not rising to the same level as the networking that the power brokers have." – Female Elected Official

"We've got so many wonderful female leaders in this community. Just continuing to support each other, lift each other up, providing opportunities, and those networking opportunities to continue to expand circles of women who are great leaders, and that we can learn from each other." - Female, Business

"How do you just develop an informal network and support group for women? How do we just develop that mentality and that attitude of support and help with our women leaders? That is something I continue to worry about, quite frankly, and struggle with because I think there are so many young women who need it." – Female, Business

"It doesn't even have to be hardcore networking, it's just talking to somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody and then, all of a sudden, "Do you know who I was talking to the other day, Lisa would be great at that. Yeah, let's call Lisa." It's very informal, but it's a way to give them that resource to connect." – Female, Business

Theme Three: Uneven Playing Field for Women of Color and LGBTQ Women

Recognizing the need for meaningful inclusion and recognition of employees' varied identities in the workplace continues to challenge leaders both in Omaha and throughout the country. Many participants recognized challenges in leadership diversity, specific to women of color and LGBTQ women in Omaha. Participants' reflections on the topic ranged from an acknowledged lack of information regarding diversity issues within the organization, to powerful statements indicating that women from racial, ethnic and sexual minority groups faced compounded barriers to leadership.

Several strata of barriers were identified by participants. First, participants recognized community-wide norms that perpetuate a lack of diversity and inhibit women of color from being hired and retained in organizations in Omaha. Relatedly, participants expressed concerns about young, diverse women leaving Omaha to work in communities with more inclusive work environments. Second, participants spoke to the additional barriers that diverse women face as they climb the career ladders. Finally, participants recognized that women of color, LGBTQ women, and women located at the intersection of these identities, have not made the same amount of progress as white, straight women in the past decade. They felt that women's progress needs to consider and include women of all backgrounds, and that the additional barriers that have slowed diverse women's promotion must be addressed.

Though some participants see an equal playing field for women of all backgrounds and identities, national data agrees with the barriers the majority of our participants perceived. Nationally, Black, Hispanic and Latina, and Asian women are more interested in reaching the C-suite than white employees: on average, women of color are 43% more interested in becoming a top executive than white women and 16% more interested than white men [18]. However, in 2013, Black, Hispanic and Latina, and Asian women comprised only 3% of senior and executive positions in the private sector [6], compared to white women, who comprised 24% of senior and executive positions [12].

To understand why this disparity exists, it is necessary to investigate the workplace environments that frustrate diverse women's exceptional ambitions to succeed. Researchers who have turned their attention to these issues find that women of color and LGBTQ-identified high potentials are less likely to experience support, promotion, and job longevity than their white and/or straight peers, ultimately impeding their ability to rise through the ranks. Nationally, women of color lack access to powerful, beneficial, and inclusive mentoring relationships: 62% of diverse women with mentors cited a lack of an influential mentor or sponsor as a barrier to advancement compared to 39% of white women [3]. Further, women of color were often the least likely to have access to those senior executives with clout [25]. Similarly, LGBTQ women are 6% more likely to downsize their career aspirations than straight women [25], and 23% fear they may not be offered advancement opportunities because of their sexuality [7]. With this context in mind, diversity issues presented multiple barriers to leadership for these women in Omaha.

- Current workplace practices and landscape perpetuate a lack of equity -

"I'm here because of some unearned privilege myself, I recognized it. I had people call for me, recommend me...I reminded them of them...That's what perpetuates gender and lack of ethnic diversity...I think if you don't recognize it and talk about it, you'll allow people to perpetuate. People are attracted by something they see in their own image. If you allow that to perpetuate, then you perpetuate the status quo." – Male, Business

"There's that invisibility of women in and of themselves, Caucasian women, but then you talk about African American or Hispanic women or Latina women who are very bright but maybe there's an accent or there's a name I can't pronounce. There is a prejudice in the Midwest of not even looking at that resume or not continuing that interview if I have a hard time thinking I can't relate to you." – Female, Business

"Part of the question may be, is this a place they want to be? Perhaps they want to be in a community that's more diverse. I think that is something that probably should be addressed. I wish I had a magic answer to that, but I would think it's a difficult challenge to be a woman of color or LGBT and to be in a leadership role in this community." – Male, Nonprofit

- Women of color, LGBTQ women have to "work harder" -

"Women of color still experience that they have to be superwomen if they want to have it all. I feel like women of color don't get that opportunity as much. I think that they are still expected to be superwomen if they want to have both." – Female, Healthcare

"Most of the time, I would say it's not intentional, but I think there's a lot of bias out there. In particular, if you combine women of color coming from a poverty situation, you combine some of those factors, it's extremely hard to break through." – Female, Business

"I think that there's huge struggles. I think it takes, in many cases, a lot for a woman of color to get on as strong of a career path...there's just more obstacles put in front of women of color and certainly in LGBT group...We don't want to say it's harder. We don't want to admit it's harder." – Female, Education

- *Women of color, LGBTQ women have not climbed the ranks at the same rates as white and/or straight women* -

"Omaha's leadership is lacking in inclusivity across the spectrum when it comes to what people traditionally classify as minorities and particular female minorities. Usually if people consider women's leadership it revolves around white women. I only know of two African Americans who are leading nonprofits in Omaha, and only one or two Latinas. Very dire situation." – **Male Elected Official**

"Women of color haven't excelled at the rate that Caucasian women have excelled... I see people put in positions to be representative. Though we are inclusive, they're not in positions that are power positions...LGBT women, it's triple-hard...First you have to recognize it and then you can hopefully promote, but I think there's a stigma." – **Female, Healthcare**

- *Some leaders **didn't perceive inequity*** -

"I don't see all that. I think those are social personal issues they're not about running a business, being successful. I think sometimes we get all focused on this little sub-group and that little sub-group and that little sub-group...I think it's women. I don't really care about all the other little sub-groups, it's women as a group." – **Female, Business**

"I don't see color as an issue. I really don't. They're a female, not what color their skin is." – **Female, Healthcare**

"I think women who are gay and women who are black face the same challenges all around that women that are white, Asian, whatever, because we have not, again, made the ultimate step in equalizing women into the man's world. We just haven't." – **Female Elected Official**

Theme Four: Few High-Ranking Female Role Models

Although participants reported that women in Omaha have made strides in attaining mid-level leadership positions in Omaha in the past decade and have consistently participated in leadership programs, they report that women are still not well-represented in top positions. This situation is somewhat improved in the nonprofit sector, where participants often noted more women had attained leadership. However, overall, most participants felt that female representation in upper leadership needs improvement across the board. Most significantly, they reported, the lack of female representation in upper leadership meant that up and coming female leaders and girls aspiring to careers had few role models.

- Women in the C-Suite are few in number -

"My general word that I would use to describe the leadership landscape in Omaha, at least what I recalled the corporate business level, is bleak...there are a lot of female leaders in second and third tier level positions. You'll run into lots of very impressive women on boards and different functions, but really, at those top level seats, I think there are still a gap." – [Female, Business](#)

"I know [Omaha] has a share of executive women that are really powerful, and I admire them, but not enough. Certainly not enough at the senior vice president, director level, as capable as I believe women are." – [Female, Business](#)

- Women and girls aspiring to lead need more role models -

"Women in the company see that, "Gosh, glass ceilings can be broken". We can be promoted. We can continue to broaden our careers. [When] they see that these women have been successful because they have certain attributes, like being strong, being willing to speak out, being willing to have a voice that may be different than even that of the men. That is something that is really important." – [Female, Business](#)

"Unfortunately, there haven't been a whole lot of people in my life that I can look and say, "That's it. That's what I want to be like." – [Female, Education](#)

"I think the challenge for women in our community across the nation, perhaps a little more in our community...is the limited number of very senior women in organizations... Oftentimes we've tried to have events and get female leaders in front of our students as role models. One of the things that we run up against is the fact that, when you approach them they typically will tell you, "My schedule is packed, I'm being asked to be on lots of boards and committees and things." – [Male, Education](#)

Current Organizational Climate

Participants shared that being a leader takes just as much perseverance and strategy as becoming a leader. Much of the strategy involved in being an effective leader in Omaha, they said, was fostering an organizational climate that values a collaborative, supportive, and inclusive work environment. For these leaders, genuine teamwork and collaboration is the key to engagement and investment in a successful workplace environment. Understanding what employees need and expect is part and parcel of this. In particular, participants spoke to the importance of promoting work-life balance for all employees, regardless of gender. Relatedly, participants recognized the importance of acknowledging and adjusting to generational differences among workers that lead to younger workers calling for increased workplace flexibility.

Theme Five: Leaders' Responsibility to Develop Future Female Leaders

Theme Six: The Best Decision Making is Collaborative

Theme Seven: Work Life Balance is Important for All Employees' Success

Theme Eight: Emerging Generational Differences

Theme Five: Leaders' Responsibility to Develop Future Female Leaders

While participants spoke at length about the initiative that aspiring leaders must take to further their own success, they also spoke passionately about the responsibility current leaders have to uplift and help guide the next generation of Omaha's leaders. They indicated that current leaders ought to shape their work environments and networks to better facilitate knowledge transfer and coaching to young potentials, while ensuring that young women are being fostered in the organizations they lead.

In fact, research tells us that while individual proactivity is indispensable for women's advancement in the workplace, intentionality on the part of employers is critical to enabling women to achieve their goals. Though development training and mentoring can serve as an 'amplifier' of high potential women's abilities, they in and of themselves are not enough to make a woman a leader [2, 23]. Instead, research suggests that employers must have specific goals in mind as they provide women with development opportunities [23, 17].

Participants saw this kind of intentionality and care taken towards developing up and coming female leaders as a critical aspect of their leadership role.

- *Current leaders have a role in changing Omaha's leadership landscape* -

"[U]nless the corporations take some ownership for moving women into those positions, it's going to be really hard to change it here in Omaha." – [Female, Education](#)

"I don't see a lot of businesses really creating situations where they are encouraging female leadership or creating an environment. It has to be nurtured." – [Female, Education](#)

"Informally, it's coaching within the office, coaching throughout. As you can see, we have an open environment here, so we can hear. That's by design, it's open, because that's the only way we can coach effectively." – [Female, Business](#)

"We are growing leaders. I consider it a great responsibility, because we have so many female leaders with potential, we have to grow that potential that sometimes gets lost. Let's face it. It's those soft skills that are so important...I'm really, from my part, making a concerted effort to mentor others and to seek those who are able and willing to be mentors." – [Female, Nonprofit](#)

"Being intentional and purposeful about "Here are the experiences that lead up to this, and here are the individuals that we need to take smart risks with before we take a huge risk. How are we bringing them along? Who's thinking about that now in companies?" I think that's a bit of a gap for us here in Omaha." – [Female, Business](#)

- Leaders can use their social capital to help others on their career paths -

"I absolutely volunteer my time to any and every single [upcoming female leader] and I tell them that "Look, I get it, my job now is to give back and make sure that the next generation and that we're creating this awesome, amazing, great succession plan. I am here for you, call me, talk to me about anything, come see me." I'm very affirming. I like to be very affirming, but I also believe that you have to be very frank." – **Female, Business**

"I love to be a connector. When I am someplace if I think there are a couple of people who could benefit from knowing each other then I am going to make sure that they meet I love hearing back that, "Oh, I got together with so-and-so and it worked out perfectly."" – **Female Elected Official**

"I think it's helping open doors for them. Helping them explore what they might want to do next...Anything that I can do to pick up a phone and help pave that way for somebody's next career, because people have done that for me. I feel obligated to do that for others as well." – **Female, Business**

- Encouraging informal development at work -

"We [try to help] people develop themselves within their own roles whether it's through coaching and mentoring from somebody, from their supervisor or somebody else on staff. We know that a lot of learning and growth comes from stretching yourself much more so than the formal opportunities. We try to look at the different ways we can foster that." – **Female, Nonprofit**

"When I was doing my consulting work, my piece of consulting work tended to be around leadership development...One of the big aha's was the coaching element. I don't see leadership development as a workshop where you just go one time. There has to be a sustained effort. There's various different types of leadership development." – **Female Elected Official**

- Formal Opportunities in the Community -

"We have that kind of internal training happening right now. Anything that we can send our staff to, we will as long as we can afford it, to leadership...Any kind of the external training site – "You would be great at this, really go to this." That's the best part we can do, try to get them to activate into it, to be interested in it." – **Female, Nonprofit**

"It seems like every week or so, I am hearing about new opportunities to cultivate leadership. Whether it's young professionals through The Chamber, Leadership Omaha, Leadership Nebraska. the [Chartered Advisor in Philanthropy] program that's through Omaha Community Foundation or Nebraska Community Foundation. It seems like there are lots of opportunities to develop and cultivate leadership and that people are taking advantage of those opportunities." – **Female Elected Official**

Theme Six: The Best Decision Making is Collaborative

As more women move into the C-Suite, so do their leadership styles, which are often more collaborative than those of their male counterparts [29]. As a result, studies have shown that women in leadership positions often engage in more effective team-based leading than similarly placed male leaders [29]. More than just representing a departure from men's more directive leadership styles, female leaders' inclination towards collaboration has proven to be more effective in the workplace [30,19].

Indeed, groups led by women are more likely to successfully solve problems and come up with solutions [30]. Likewise, Boards of Directors that include women have been proven to be more effective than boards that are comprised solely of men, across sectors [19]. With this in mind, recognizing and valuing a breadth of leadership styles may be advantageous not just for women, but for business as a whole. Participants of all genders spoke about the importance of this style of leadership, emphasizing a willingness to collaborate, listen, and problem solve with colleagues.

- Collaborative decision making -

"I'm a huge, huge, huge fan of collaboration and I think having more input [means] seeking out as much information and as many diverse opinions as you can, I always believe [collaboration] makes the solution that much better. You're not always going to agree with everyone's opinions and inputs, but I do believe if you get them and you use them in the evaluation process, again, it makes the company, the organization, whatever we're calling it, that much stronger." – [Female, Business](#)

"You know when I see the best decision-making happen? When you've got a strong team and you have an environment of trust and respect and a lot of collaboration. That sets the foundation, because then issues and problems and challenges can be openly debated and discussed." – [Female, Business](#)

"I think that leadership to me is the ability to listen. As a CEO, you have to listen. It's just not listening for the sake of listening but being deliberate in how you approach and take feedback." – [Male, Healthcare](#)

"I have to really make sure that all voices have an airing and make sure that people are prepared to contribute to the conversation and be heard. That goes to the naysayers as well as the positives. Sometimes the positive voices get lost in the shuffle and they get intimidated but I want to make sure that there's a space for all voices." – [Female Elected Official](#)

- Problem solve with people -

"Once we talk it out and figure out, "okay, why do you want to do it this way? Are you just trying to delay because you think there's a workload that you can't handle? How do we work around that? Is it the wrong direction for that project? What is it?" We found that once we start asking the whys behind how they feel about something, that we can then work around it or see another perspective and it comes out way better than had I just gone ahead." – Female, Business

"The mutual respect and trust - expecting all your executives to show respect for ideas, even if they don't agree with them. To listen to ideas, and to allow their ideas to be challenged...It's not a threat to me to discover known unknowns. That's leadership." – Male, Business

"Your influence is through relationship...if you're going to tell people hard things and ask them to make changes, they're more likely, I think, to listen and respect your opinion when you have that relationship and they know that you're coming from a really good place; they know what your philosophy is, they know what your motivation is, and there's a lot of trust." – Female Elected Official

"I think in my world we've spent way too much time trying to do that: "We're going to fix you and make you the right person," instead of saying, "Here's our challenge, how do we work together to create? What are the causes that create the symptom?" Because that really is what it is." – Male, Education

Theme Seven: Work Life Balance is Important for All Employees' Success

Over the past decade, it has become increasingly clear that the notion of work-life balance as a “woman’s issue” is outdated. In fact, research shows that there is no gender difference in how much priority executives put on work versus their family lives [14]. Not only are men and women likely to put an equal amount of emphasis on work and their home lives, but men and women also report difficulty balancing work and life at equal rates [8]. As a result, businesses that approach balancing work and home life as a “people” issue rather than an exception for mothers have been shown to have more success in recruiting, retaining, and advancing talented employees of all genders [5].

Moreover, ensuring that all employees – parents and those without children, those who are partnered and those who are single, straight and LGBTQ individuals, and people of all genders – have access to workplace flexibility enhances its associated business impact [5]. Flexibility, when instituted and encouraged alongside providing meaningful planning for off- and on-ramps for employees, helps ensure that all employees can best plan and achieve their career goals.

Many in Omaha recognized the importance of ensuring that all employees had proper tools for striving towards work-life balance. Most echoed national research that indicates that all employees, regardless of gender, benefit from flexibility and other tools intended to help attain work-life balance.

- Promoting work-life balance benefits all employees -

“I think we have to get to the point where we don't [see] some of these things as women's issues. Child care should not be a woman's issue. Taking care of parents should not be a woman's issue. These are family issues. These are societal issues” – [Female, Nonprofit](#)

“Having the flexibility to make family life a part of all your executives' [lives], so that, actually, being away from family is not an expectation to being executive. That shouldn't cut across either gender. If you have that culture that puts families first, so you want your executives to take time off to go to the child's school or pick the child up early and have the flexi time to work, then you're empowering both genders. You're setting an example then that it shouldn't hold either behind.” – [Male, Business](#)

“An unhappy employee or an employee [worried] about missing stuff or not being there for their family is an employee that's not focused today. We try very hard to have a great balance.” – [Female, Business](#)

“Men are doing that too these days. I think if we can do a better job of making family friendly work environments and understanding you can't work long hours and there just needs to be more support for people with young children, that that would help.” – [Female, Education](#)

“Just learning how to balance things is difficult. Regardless of what your personal circumstances are, if you want to move forward, you’re going to have to put a lot of work into it. To remain sane, you have to learn how to balance work and play. That’s not easy to do.” – Female, Education

“I also believe that there's a work-life balance and I've had a number of employees leave for maternity leave or paternity leaves and I think that that's really important that there should be a work-life balance. I think Omaha itself is a very work-life balanced community.” – Male, Nonprofit

Theme Eight: Emerging Generational Differences

As more and more Millennials enter the workplace and grow into leaders, Omaha's organizations have to contend with generational differences in expectations and work styles. Indeed, many of the leaders interviewed (most of whom were not Millennials) spoke of the need to learn about and adjust to the increasing influences of the younger generation in the workplace. They indicated that that type of inter-generational understanding was important not only in order to be able to be an effective leader for a younger generation, but also in order to stay relevant in a changing working world. Most participants welcomed this challenge. The generational differences participants perceive, by in large, concern issues of flexibility and work-life balance.

- **Welcome changes in generations' desires for flexibility** -

"In general, I think the millennials value some things vastly different than my generation, and I think some of it is flexibility and I think some of it is the ability [to work remotely]. I think we have to acknowledge this, we have to get better at continuing to attract the millennials because I do think that they're definitely a part of our innovation strategy and should be." - [Female, Business](#)

"I think flexibility is an area that's really changing fast. People of my generation would be smarter to wise up to it sooner rather than later. I don't need to micro manage these people." – [Female, Nonprofit](#)

"I think when leaders stop thinking or learning about leading, they stop leading effectively. I personally believe that you have to think about leadership until you're done working because even if your gut is really good, the world changes so quickly...The Millennials are so much different than Gen X that's different than Gen Y. You just have to think about leadership all the time. The world's changing too quickly not to think about leadership in your whole entire career." – [Female, Healthcare](#)

"I've read a little bit about that where they suggest that the millennials are more likely to want more time with family, more likely to want more time with friends, more likely to not want to be as dominated by your work career life. I've read that and I certainly see examples of that, but I see examples of outside too where I have some younger staff that I see work really hard." – [Male, Education](#)

- Some are resistant to changing generational expectations -

"I'm preparing myself for the so-called terrible millennial, that is totally independent, that wants a lot of recognition, that wants recognition for little routine things, that is coming to work with an expectation of work life balance out of the get-go, versus my generation that said, "You work hard, and you work hard until you drop. That's the best way to get the attention. By showing you're willing to do your job into others, then that's how you're promoted." The millennial says, "I should be promoted on my competency." – [Male, Business](#)

"I see the young group very different than the old group...The young group is too much into, in my opinion, strategy, process I'm saying this cautiously, and consensus...[the older] group really believes in 8 to 5, 9 to 5, and this [younger] group wants the freedom of 24 by 7." – [Female, Business](#)

Individual Leadership Development

While community and organizational leadership pathways are critical in growing women's leadership, individual initiative and strategy are indispensable as women seek to become leaders. Participants recognized that women who hope to become leaders need to be creative and practice diverse strategies in their pursuit of success; both formal leadership programs in the community and informal support like peer circles can support a woman on her leadership pathway. Along this pathway, women are advised to invest in beneficial sponsor relationships. Our participants shared that these types of relationships can both provide future leaders with useful workplace wisdom, and also serve as connectors to others in leadership positions.

Participants also observed a tendency among women in the workplace to over-prepare in the workplace, leading to a perception of women's doubting their abilities or holding back when presented with leadership opportunities. As a result, participants suggested that women and girls ought to be exposed early in life to opportunities that allow them to grow confidence and visualize success. Alongside confidence, participants reported, all leaders must practice hard work, planning, preparation, and persistence.

Predominant themes included:

Theme Nine: Building Strategic Relationships Matters

Theme Ten: Women May Need to be Encouraged to Lead

Theme Eleven: Prepare Girls for Leadership Early

Theme Twelve: Success is Driven by Hard Work and Preparation

Theme Thirteen: Respect, Integrity, and Vision Matter

Theme Nine: Building Strategic Relationships Matters

Participants spoke about the importance of finding and pursuing mentors throughout their careers. They highlighted the importance and benefits of young professionals seeking guidance from others, and encouraged those of younger generations to do the same. Considering that having a mentor at the executive level is linked to increased promotions and compensation for women, their advice is well-taken. In fact, national data tell us that ensuring that women have access to quality relationships is critical as women seek to advance their careers [2].

However, studies suggest that many high-potential women are over-mentored and under-sponsored relative to their male peers [15] and that ongoing mentoring does not completely close the gender gap in terms of both advancement and compensation [2]. As a result, best practice models call for an increased emphasis on senior leader sponsorship of promising women. While mentoring relationships offer crucial career support alongside advice and coaching, women need the active advocacy for their advancement that only sponsors can provide. To this end, best practices recommend that companies seeking to aid in women's advancement systematically identify and tap senior managers with influence to commit to sponsoring women [15]. With this kind of support, women can reap the benefits of ongoing relationships with senior leaders who are committed to making sure they are considered for promising opportunities and promotions.

- Seeking Out Mentors Can be Beneficial -

"A lot of mentoring, I sought it. I asked for it. I think we have to train people to ask for that and then we have to actively expect it of our leaders to give it when asked." – [Male, Business](#)

"You do really have to connect on a personal level and it has to be somebody who you can really respect. I don't think it's a relationship where a mentor says, "Well, this is what I do." To me it's more of watching that person, watch how they interact in relationships or with difficult situations or in stressful circumstances, that to witness that in action is way more powerful even than sitting down one-on-one and just chatting." – [Female, Education](#)

"I was very aggressive in my approach in trying to identify mentor. I sought out a few people that looked like they were about something. I just approached them and said, "Hey, I don't know much about you. I just like the way you carry yourself and believe you're somebody. Would you be willing to take me under your wing?" Some folks said, "Absolutely," and others said, "Come back to me when you're ready."" – [Male, Healthcare](#)

"When I decided to run, I sought [a mentor] out...She was very generous with her time. I would call her all the time and say, "How did you do this, how did you do that?" There's been lots of people who, when I've called on them have sat down with me and walked through things." - **Female Elected Official**

"I think leadership is all about having relationships and having mentors and having people that you can give advice to that can coach you. I don't mean paying for a formal coach. I think if you have relationships that people can get you in the door, that you can sell yourself and give you again, I think it's all about relationships and experiences...You can't underscore the importance of getting out there and building relationships." – **Female, Nonprofit**

Theme Ten: Women May Need to be Encouraged to Lead

In past studies, participants noted that women may need to be asked to lead or encouraged to recognize their own strengths and abilities. While there are a variety of explanations for this hesitancy, including a tendency among women to over-prepare for positions, this theme continued to warrant attention among this set of participants. Participants of all genders acknowledged that this habit among women, though advantageous for preparation, may be a barrier to women's advancement.

Women in Omaha, however, are not unique in their tendency to hold back. Hesitancy in risk-taking is common among women in the workplace: more than half of working women report that, "as women," they are more cautious in pursuing leadership roles [17], despite not differing in ability or performance from their male peers [16]. This aversion to risk has real consequences in the workplace. Women are less likely to pursue highly beneficial relationships including mentoring and sponsorship, volunteer for high-visibility stretch assignments, and to apply for promotions. For example, 92% of women said they do not feel confident asking for sponsors, and 79% lack confidence seeking mentors, despite the fact that 82% believe access to female leaders will help them advance [17].

In the workplace, programs that provide individual feedback can empower women to take on more high-profile assignments and leadership positions sooner [17]. When companies intentionally reward women's success in the workplace, women are able to reap the benefits. In fact, confidence-building development opportunities have been shown to give women the tools to advance in their careers at more equitable rates to men [23].

In line with these recommendations, participants recommended that aspiring leaders stretch themselves, whether that meant taking on high-profile assignments, running for office, or putting them forward for a promotion.

- Some women wait to be asked to lead -

"Women think that they have to know everything and hit every bolt for any job description before they'll apply. That's not my opinion, research tells us that. Really put yourself out there and don't limit yourself...Seek out people that can help you push yourself and then you can in turn push other women to grow and push themselves." – *Female, Nonprofit*

"That age old situation, [that] no question that occurs, men will always step up and take the promotion or the opportunity and figure [it] out where woman are going to second guess, "Am I ready for this?" – *Female, Business*

"You hear that one of the biggest obstacles is that women wait to be asked. Just thinking about both my positions, I was recruited for both of those. Someone did come and say to me, "Would you consider this?" I did. I still think that women oftentimes don't visualize themselves in those positions, positions of leadership unless somebody says, "Would you consider?"" – [Female Elected Official](#)

"The taps of the shoulder, the encouragement, even when I was the one saying 'when hell freezes over,' I had mentors around me who were saying 'No, no, no. This is what you're called to do and this is what you need to be doing'." – [Female, Education](#)

- Aspiring leaders ought to accept risk -

"The big thing for women is having enough confidence in who they are and not letting the insecurities or, "I don't think I'm ready" get in the way. Then making sure they take their skills and negotiate for themselves. Taking the risks...It's okay to make mistake and learn from it." – [Female, Business](#)

"If you just close the door and you say, "I'm not going to try it," then you'll never know. You're not challenging yourself. We talked about courage and taking risks and so forth. They have to be calculated risks but don't be afraid to try. If you fail, you fail and have a fall back plan. That always works." – [Female Elected Official](#)

"I think some of it is for some females just to know that they're good enough, to have the confidence to say, "Yeah, I can go after that. I can pursue that. I'm good enough. I'm smart enough. I'm educated enough. I'm skilled enough. I'm enough of whatever-it-is, fill in the blank," but to have the confidence and the drive to pursue that." – [Female, Education](#)

Theme Eleven: Prepare Girls for Leadership Early

Early and frequent messages for young women are viewed as essential to changing the pattern of women's reluctance to take leadership roles or career risks. With this in mind, the leaders we interviewed spoke about the need to expose young women and girls to leadership activities while encouraging them to participate. This kind of early and ongoing encouragement from supportive adults was considered critical in forming trajectories for future leaders. Specifically, participants emphasized the need to reach young girls with messages about leadership and potential career paths, and to develop specific training opportunities to enforce these concepts.

Indeed, national data collected on women in leadership suggest that confidence building initiatives that start young and are consistent and intentional can help foster women ready to lead. Research shows that women who had positive female role models as children and were encouraged to be vocal leaders from the time they were young to when they entered the workforce are more likely to grow into corporate leaders [17]. Considered together, these data provide a framework for practices that identify and develop promising girls and young girls who aspire to lead by channeling qualified young women into leadership opportunities at each stage of their development as young leaders [17].

- Girls need support from encouraging adults -

"I think it's got to start at home with the families. Instilling [in] the little girls that they can be whatever they want to be. Whatever they want to be is made up of the things they decide and they do, they have to be a part of that." – [Female, Business](#)

"You have to have parents that tell you [that] you can achieve anything regardless if you were a little boy or a little girl. If you have a home or a kid not experiencing that, it has to come from the next most trusted person for that child...[C]hildren have to hear that message. Young girls have to hear that." – [Female, Healthcare](#)

"You have to encourage girls with confidence and courage, I think, even if they're not in leadership training... making sure that girls just aren't going to school and then going home but then giving them opportunities to just participate and develop healthy relationships is important." – [Female, Healthcare](#)

- Formal leadership development targeted at young women -

"I think any amount of having leadership academies for girls while they're going through high school is awesome. My daughter got leadership opportunities all the time because she was in an all girls' school. A lot of girls that are in other schools don't get that opportunity." – [Female, Business](#)

"I'm a huge supporter of mentoring, coaching and sponsorship and so forth of young women and girls... So much potential...girls from any age on but particularly middle school on can benefit so much from having role models in their lives and champions and people who are willing to give them feedback, supportive feedback." – [Female Elected Official](#)

- Provide young women with examples of career paths -

"I really do think it starts young because little girls, you ask them today what they want to be, and I'm sorry but they're still saying they want to be teachers. That's great. That's important, but why is it that they're not talking about being CEOs?" – [Female, Education](#)

"I think it's important for us...to show the girls their option is for higher education, there are opportunities for different types of jobs and not just jobs that are female dominated. Just really show them that there's no limit to what they can do." – [Female, Nonprofit](#)

Theme Twelve: Success is Driven by Hard Work and Preparation

Highly successful leaders do not achieve success serendipitously. Instead, as participants told us, leaders are proactive in focusing on career goals and identifying how to achieve them. For example, research indicates that women in leadership positions benefit from advocating for themselves and becoming visible at each stage of their career. According to KPMG, this meant saying 'Yes' to assignments that felt like a stretch and taking credit for jobs well done [17]. In addition, intentionality in each career step is recommended so that high-potentials fully understand what they hope to achieve and what is necessary and expected in taking steps towards those goals [1].

Additionally, participants indicated that they felt that aspiring women had to work hard, possibly even harder than their male counterparts. Women currently in leadership positions reported histories of sustained effort and long hours in preparation for their careers. No short cuts or substitutions replaced the need for hard work to achieve and maintain successful leadership.

- Engage in career mapping -

"That's what I would say is identify early and shoot for. Because you don't know what you are aiming at, you are never going to get there." – Female, Business

"It's all about the next step. It's all about what you're going to do next. It's about making sure that you have energy when you're at the top, that you've done everything efficiently and correctly, and you're building up your stamina and your capital." – Female, Education

- Put in the hours -

"Women need to know too, that being an executive is an extreme sport. They're going to have to figure out some way that they can work fifty to fifty-five hours, but companies can't expect that it's going to be that way every single week" – Female, Business

"I just think it just takes some energy, and focus, and want to be in the game. You just want to be there. You want to work, and give 100%." – Female, Business

"Working hard is a core value. I do something, I have really high standards for myself. I have quality standards for myself. I'm not a perfectionist by any means, but I'm always pushing us as a team, or myself, or my boss, like, "Ooh, how can we do that better?" That is, I think, excellence is just a core value." – Female Elected Official

- *Prove yourself* -

"I do think that you have to prove yourself. I do think that you have to come in and establish your brand within the environment you're working before you get to garner that set of liberties and I think that that's expected in you. I don't know that that's a gender-specific thing." – [Female, Business](#)

"They have something to prove, but just to themselves not to others. They ignore the 40-hour work week and they just work smarter, but they also outwork others, whatever that takes." – [Female, Business](#)

Theme Thirteen: Respect, Integrity, and Vision Matter

Lastly, many participants identified the fact that core values matter in leadership. Integrity, honesty, respect for others and self, and hard work were stated as essential for leadership success in Omaha. Values matter and many stated the foundation of their careers included forming circles of relationships in which core values were evident.

- Integrity, honesty, respect (create a circle of relationships) hard work -

"Omaha doesn't distract from humanity. It's really about the people, and I think it always starts with the strength of how hard we work, how much we care, and somebody like Warren Buffet, who has the resources to be able to do that globally, I think sets a standard for our town to feel that these were the roots you were raised in so we can do that for our town together, and I think it sends the right message." – Female, Business

"Integrity. Flexibility. Core values. It is tough. Who am I? I am a compilation of a lot of people throughout the years. I would say respect." – Female, Business

"I think you have to have a personal drive and to be a leader. You have to stay true to who you are. You have to look out for yourself...I think the second is you have to be good at relationships, at building your social capital. You cannot be a leader without social capital. Probably third is just your respect for human beings. You have to have respect for cultures, for why they are the way they are, why you are the way you are and respecting each other." – Female, Nonprofit

"The core values, actually, that's what your parents taught you in being polite, and listening, and respectful. Respectful is a biggie. It really is a biggie. You can disagree, and that's a good thing...but if you disagree, disagree respectfully. Not with...hatefulness...Don't lose that." – Female Elected Official

"The singularly most important core [value] that I know is in my heart is to do everything I can to be a servant leader, meaning it absolutely is about the organization and it cannot ever be about the individual...It has to be so the relationships, to be as joyful as we can, in the work to be as joyful as we can, to feel there's a purpose, that there's a mission, that there's something good that we are trying to accomplish. If it's not good, then why would we do it? To me, that's core value." – Female, Education

"At the end of the day, when you're done with your leadership, when you're done with your service, what is it that you want to be remembered for? Don't get caught up in the political minutia, don't get caught up in people's positioning and posturing, pressures from outside groups. All of those things happen, what was important to you?" – [Female Elected Official](#)

Recommendations and Action Steps

With the results of our research in mind, we offer the following action steps to our business community, individual organizations, and individuals seeking to lead. These were developed with careful consideration of both the voices of the participants and an extensive review of best business practices. We hope that members of our community view these action steps as both challenges and tools to succeed.

Community

- Recognize the losses associated with not having a welcoming and inclusive leadership landscape, with special focus on the informal networks that drive decision-making in Omaha.
- Take steps to eliminate barriers to including all leaders, regardless of gender, in professional networks.

Further reading: McKinsey & Company (2015). Diversity matters. McKinsey & Company

Organization

- Evaluate each stage of your professional pipeline (including hiring, promotions, and succession plans) for unconscious bias with special attention to race and ethnicity, gender, and other social identities.
- Construct accountability systems to evaluate and foster the advancement of candidates from non-majority candidates.

Further reading: Catalyst. (2012). Optimizing mentoring programs for women of color. Catalyst. (2013). Why diversity matters.

Individual

- Map out your career trajectory and assess your own skills and experience against that trajectory.
- Make a concrete plan to fill any gaps in your experience or skills, and engage help from both mentors and sponsors.

Further reading: Carter, N.M., & Silva, C. (2010). Mentoring: necessary but insufficient for advancement. Catalyst.

We know that we observe the growth in productivity, output, mission adherence, and problem solving when everyone in a community is encouraged to succeed to their highest potential. This is the kind of growth we want to see continue and expand in Omaha.

The power to make Omaha a leader in gender equity in the workplace rests with each of us.

Methodology

The Research Committee chair was appointed in 2013, and committee members were selected and began work early in 2014. A budget was designated by the Board of Directors of the Women's Fund for the leadership project, allowing data recorders to be purchased and the qualitative interviews to be professionally transcribed. In previous studies, members of the Research Committee both interviewed and transcribed their individual interview materials, with results compiled and analyzed by the committee. The process was streamlined by the use of recorded sessions and professional transcription services.

Initial work of the committee centered on the process of replication of the 2006 study and a review of the process involved. With a smaller committee, it was decided that the planning process, coding of data, and dissemination of the results would be the responsibility of committee members. Assistance in the gathering of data through the process of individual interviews would be sought through additional volunteers, including members of Circles and other volunteers. It was decided to include a media specialist as a member of the Research Committee, and to structure activities and planning issues with the consideration of media issues in the forefront.

Identified participants were sent a letter of introduction to the study, explaining the purpose and process of the project. They were asked to respond via an enclosed postcard agreeing or declining to participate. Lists of participants who had agreed to be interviewed were then compiled, and additional volunteers were sought to conduct the interviews. Two training sessions were held for the volunteers, with an overview of the process, and detailed explanation of the process of qualitative interviewing using open-ended questions.

Questions were designed to allow the participants to begin the discussion focused on the leadership landscape of the community, progressing to the issues within their particular organization, and ending with an exploration of their personal experiences, values, and recommendations for future strategies to improve the leadership status of women in Omaha. The interview guide used by interviewers can be found in the Appendix.

All interviews were professionally transcribed. Coding of the data was conducted at multiple levels. Transcripts were initially divided into the area of the participants identified workplace categories, including business, education, healthcare, government and nonprofit organizations. Committee members conducted initial coding of the transcripts, identifying significant themes which emerged from the interviews, and quotes to support the themes. The committee chair read all interview transcripts to provide an overall framework for the coding procedure. The committee then met three times for thematic analysis, and to determine the template for the data to be reported. Each committee member identified significant responses from the interviews to illustrate the themes identified. A review of relevant literature was conducted and composed for the report and quotes relating to each theme outlined in the report were identified and collated.

Drafts of the report were written, and distributed to committee members for comments and editing.

History of Leadership Studies by the Women's Fund of Omaha

The initial study on women and leadership was conducted in 1996 by the Women's Fund, and constituted the first in-depth examination of the status of women's leadership in Omaha conducted by a nonprofit organization in the community. The report concluded that "profound social change comes slowly." A decade later, the leadership study was replicated and expanded to include an extensive qualitative study of participants. Its results proved that the 1996 report's prediction that social change would be slow coming was an understatement, at best.

The 2006 report predicted that at the current rate of change in the Omaha community for female leaders, it would require "decades before women hold leadership positions approaching equity with their percentage of the work force, their educational attainment, and their share of the city's population, their educational attainment, and their share of the city's population." It also firmly stated that "this is unacceptable."

The report declared that women were still under-represented in leadership ranks and policy making positions. Women's numbers on appointed boards and in civic and public policy positions had also decreased, and despite Omaha having one of the highest percentages of women in the labor force, few of the major companies or organizations had women in visible upper level leadership positions. Women were perceived as "needing to work harder...they must be hungry and vigilant and have a little chip on their shoulder" (a male interviewee in 2006). Sentiments like these reflected attitudes expressed by participants in the 1996 study, showing that little had changed in the decade that had elapsed.

Considering this, the 2006 report made a strong call to action: "It is time for organizations and institutions to prioritize changes to accommodate the realities of peoples' lives." In doing so, the authors hoped Omaha would "maximize the potential of each individual in a spirit of progressiveness and inclusiveness, [and] move toward a more stable, brighter future for all."

To that end, six general recommendations to "drive change and increase the breadth and depth of female leadership in Omaha" were made based on the conclusions drawn from the 2006 study. The recommendations were to:

Increase the number of women participating in leadership positions

The authors recognized that many women were capable of filling positions on appointed and community boards and, as such, recommended that support be provided for programs to develop women for these positions. Additionally, the authors recommended the development of a central source to connect qualified candidates with available opportunities.

Modify organizational cultures to support women, specifically in the areas of recruitment, development, mentoring and work/life integration

The development of resources and mechanisms for sharing best practice tools, and the recognition of organizations committed to keeping and advancing women in the workplace was recommended.

Broaden women's access to informal settings where leaders often make decisions and form relationships

Researchers called for increasing women's access to the highest levels of leadership opportunities, networking and mentoring. This, they believed, would serve to move away from the perception of a "good old boys network" within organizations.

Raise community awareness of female leaders

It was recommended that Omaha recognize women who had achieved leadership positions within their organizations in order to provide role models for other women in the community.

Encourage individual women in their pursuit of leadership

It was recommended that fellowships and scholarships be developed for women wishing to enhance their leadership skills. In addition, support for capital formations for female entrepreneurs was requested.

Identify community resources that support leadership for young girls and fill the gaps in service

Based on research that shows that girls begin "opting out" of leadership challenges as young as fifth grade, the report recommended that opportunities be provided for young women to develop leadership skills, and appropriate curriculum be made available for parents, teachers and others to help support young women in the development of these opportunities and skills.

List of Participants

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Jack Becker	Steve Martin
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Anne Boyle	Frank McGree
Chris Bradbury	Anne McGuire
Eileen C. Burke-Sullivan, S.T.D.	Kenny McMorris
Linda Burt	Councilwoman Aimee Melton
Inglish Camero	Jane Miller
Lorraine Chang	Beth Morrissette
Senator Tanya Cook	Susan Ogborn
Pat Crisler	Penny Parker
Suzanna deBaca	Amy Parks
Gail DeBoer	Robert Patterson
Michelle Dill	Karen Peppmuller
Sheriff Tim Dunning	Barbara Person
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Mark Evans	Crystal Rhoades
John Ewing	Amy Richardson
Annette Farnan	Ariel Roblin
Marian Fey	Kim Rowell
Ann Finkner	Connie Ryan
John Fraser	Randy Schmailzl
Karen Goracke	Stacy Scholtz
John Griffiths	Mindy Simon
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Pam Hernandez	Peg Stessman
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Sherrye Hutcherson	Shelley Wedergren
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Appendix

A. Interview Guide

Prompt: Now that you have had time to review the 2006 report, do you have any general thoughts or comments to begin the interview?

Community

1. From your perspective, describe the leadership landscape in Omaha...
2. What do you see as the biggest obstacles for women? Challenges for women of color and/or gay women?
3. What types of community programs for leadership development are you aware of? Have you participated in any of these, or recommend them to other women? (ICAN, Ready to Run, Leadership Omaha, Toastmasters?)

Organization

4. What types of leadership development, both formal and informal, does your organization offer? What have you participated in?
5. What types of sponsorship have you received in your career as a leader? Do you provide sponsorship to others? How?
Prompt: Do you use your social capital to help others succeed? Participate in succession planning in the organization?
6. In your organization, what do you think contributes to the best decision-making process? What would you describe as your organizational climate right now?
7. What kinds of generational changes do you see in your organizations' support for work/life balance issues? How is it different for new employees?

Individual

8. Identify the three (3) most critical or core values that contribute to your unique leadership...
9. Dream big...What would you like to see in Omaha/your organization to ensure that your daughter/granddaughter succeeds? What kinds of activities in your organization?

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Women's Fund of Omaha: Mission and Vision

Our Mission

The Women's Fund of Omaha examines issues and conducts research to provide informed support for initiatives that improve the lives of metropolitan area women and girls.

Our Vision

A community where every woman and girl has the opportunity to reach her full potential.

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