

# W

## Conclusions



# W



## Conclusions

Ten years ago, when our predecessors at the Women's Fund published the first ground-breaking study on women and leadership in Omaha, they concluded their report with the observation that "profound social change comes slowly". Our research now proves that is an understatement. Given the current rate of change, it will be 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. This is unacceptable. If we want to remain competitive - let alone thrive - the time is now for this community to work together on an action plan for change.

*Women in Omaha are under-represented in leadership ranks and in policy making positions.*

Not only has there been little improvement, in some cases female representation and the opportunity for influence has taken a step backward from a decade ago. This is cause for concern. As the trend of a tightening labor supply progresses, a community that does not foster visibly inclusive leadership will be at a real disadvantage in sustaining growth and prosperity.

There have been some gains locally in female corporate leadership, especially at the second and third tier levels. However, women remain very scarce in the top spots. An 8% increase in female CEOs (20% up from 12%) is good news. However, that increase is tempered by the fact that only 20% of Omaha companies surveyed in 2006 had female CEOs while at the same time our city's female labor force participation is among the very highest in the country. There is near equity between men and women in the lowest management level jobs, but despite some progress there continues to be much disparity at higher levels. Data shows the pipeline has been full of well-educated women for years, but advancement to senior level leadership remains slow.

Women are noticeably under-represented in leadership positions influencing public and civic policies. In fact, they have lost ground in recent years, holding 29% of elected offices compared to 34% in 1996. In spite of being 51% of the population, women have a majority voice on only one of the 39 appointed boards and commissions surveyed and no representation on 13 boards (33%). Compared to many other locations across the country, Omaha continues to lag on this measure of leadership.

*Improvements are necessary in Omaha's cultural infrastructure to grow women leaders and to allow them to flourish.*

It does not appear that much systemic change has occurred in Omaha during the past ten years. Phrases such as "women have to work harder" and "prove themselves" or a "lack of senior management commitment to diversity" appear in both 1996 and 2006 data.

In 2006, women reported the greatest barrier to their success in the workplace was a male dominated corporate culture. Additional barriers cited included the exclusion of women from informal networks of communication and the belief that women were less career-oriented than men. While these three barriers showed improvement from 1996 levels, it remains a concern that over three-quarters of women still believe they are operating at a distinct disadvantage. This lack of organizational support is apparent in interviews with both male and female leaders. As one male interviewee stated: "It is still not a level playing field, especially in the higher roles. It's maybe not fair but women need to work harder. They must be hungry and vigilant and have a little chip on their shoulder."

The perception of efforts of Omaha companies to recruit, develop and promote women has improved in the ten years since the original study, with 14% more women now believing those efforts to be very good or excellent. On the down side of this measure, less than half of local working women believe their companies have a strong commitment to helping them succeed.

Local companies have much work ahead both in building paths to advancement for women as well as changing perceptions. There do not appear to have been many gains for Omaha women in accessing networking and social opportunities to further their careers, nor have there been many improvements in more formal organizational policies such as mentoring, professional development and on ramp/off ramp options. Nationally, there are many models which show it is easier and less expensive for a company to bring back an "off-ramped" employee looking to re-enter the work force than to hire and train a brand new worker. Companies need to find innovative ways to develop and stay connected to their female employees in order to maximize investment in human capital.



*Relationships make or break leaders. Individuals make a significant contribution to a woman's leadership path.*

Leaders, when it comes down to it, are made one person at a time. Local data from both 1996 and 2006, as well as numerous national studies, indicate how important it is that "someone believes in your potential." Self-confidence, or a confidence derived from another's demonstrated belief in them, is fundamental to the success of most female leaders. Therefore, It is essential to persuade young women at an early age to take risks and pursue leadership opportunities. It is also vital that managers recognize gender differences in their employees and encourage competent women to take on leadership challenges.

Women themselves must also take personal responsibility for seeking advancement. Leadership traits that were identified as important to either gender - vision, communication, passion, risk taking, flexibility - need to be developed and nurtured. While research has shown women often wait to be invited to assume leadership roles, this is a self-imposed barrier that needs to be recognized and dealt with. Women have to step out of their comfort zone and ask for opportunities. Conversely, it is important that current leaders recognize the importance of encouragement and support in their efforts to grow new leaders.



“If the shoe  
doesn’t fit, must  
we change the  
foot?”

*Gloria Steinem*

***A longitudinal perspective: does change really need to take THAT long?***

What strikes the researchers - and hopefully the readers - of this study are the common threads between our findings and those of a decade ago. *Not much has changed in Omaha since 1996* in either visible or attitudinal indicators on the status of women.

Interestingly enough, the past ten years have seen transformational change on other fronts in Omaha. Over \$2 billion in private investment has transformed downtown Omaha with much more on the horizon. About 50,000 people have been added to the work force, an estimated 3,600 new businesses were created, the Qwest and Holland Centers have become a reality, and the West Dodge Expressway was designed and built. These are achievements for which the community can be immensely proud.

**In the next ten years, we challenge our leaders to make similar improvements in human capital. We want to see that same "can do" attitude applied in an effort to attract and retain top talent for our community.**

Women face substantial challenges in integrating the demands of the modern, turbo-charged workplace with the needs of home and family. Increasingly, more men share in these challenges as we continue to move away from the traditional roles of dad at work and mom at home. ***It is time for organizations and institutions to prioritize changes to accommodate the realities of people's lives.*** We call on civic and business leaders with the power to set agendas to guide that process. By working with their constituents to maximize the potential of each individual in a spirit of progressiveness and inclusiveness, we can move toward a more stable, brighter future for all.

# W



## Recommendations

The following is a list of general recommendations based on conclusions drawn from this study. They are offered as a starting point for discussion. It is hoped that dialogue within organizations and across the community will ultimately drive change and *increase the breadth and depth of female leadership in Omaha.*

### Increase the number of women participating in leadership positions

There are many women capable of filling positions on appointed and community boards. Support is needed both for programs which develop women for these positions and a central source that connects qualified candidates with available opportunities.

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

Develop and implement resources and mechanisms for sharing best practices tools. Recognize organizations committed to keeping and advancing women in the workforce.

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

Ensure women have access to the highest levels of leadership opportunities, networking and mentoring, moving away from the perception of a "good old boys network."

### Raise community awareness of women leaders

Provide role models by recognizing women who have achieved leadership positions.

## Encourage individual women in their pursuit of leadership

Develop fellowships and scholarships for women wishing to enhance their leadership skills. Support capital formation for female entrepreneurs.

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

Research has shown girls begin "opting out" of leadership challenges as young as fifth grade. Opportunities must be provided for young women to develop leadership skills, and appropriate curriculum must be available to assist parents, teachers, etc. in their efforts to support them.

*“Today’s 25-to-34 year-olds represent the first generation where women are measurably better educated than men. If I’m an urban leader serious about success, I’m going to spend a lot of energy making sure my city signals to women that they can find opportunity here. And I’m going to make sure my city delivers on that promise.”*

*Carol Coletta, CEOs for Cities*