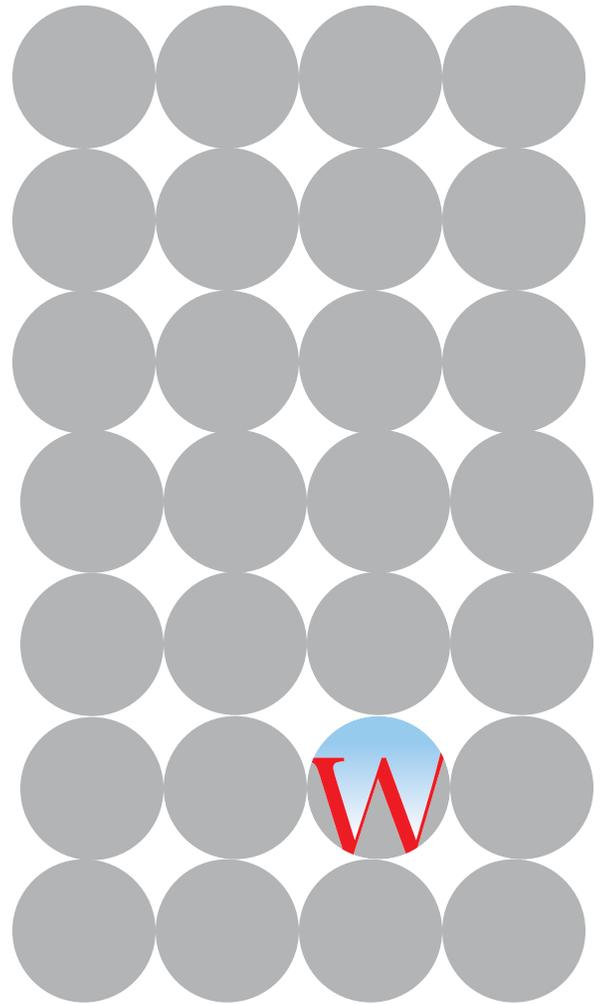
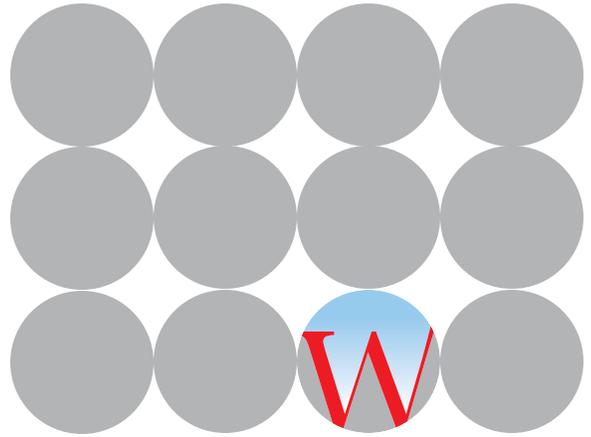


**LEADERSHIP**  
**CONVERSATIONS**



WOMEN'S FUND  
*of* OMAHA

# Introduction



This study is one in a series of reports by the Women's Fund of Omaha in which we measure the progress of women's leadership in our city. It has been exactly five years since we published the last major *"Women & Leadership in Omaha"* report, which compared data with that from a decade earlier and included information from interviews with 83 female and male leaders. Every two years we do quantitative research on the number of women in elective office and on non-profit boards and appointed commissions. In the last count, we added information on the gender composition of corporate boards and executive teams at Omaha's largest employers. To enhance that data, top female executives in those organizations were interviewed. This research is intended to inform the community about the factors that contribute to or inhibit women's ability to achieve success. We believe awareness of the barriers, combined with progressive attitudes and policies, will inspire women to reach their individual goals and assist their employers in realizing the full potential of their workforce. It is in that spirit we offer our findings.

April, 2012



The Women's Fund is grateful to the 47 accomplished women executives who shared their thoughts on leadership and personal experiences with us for this report.



**Sheri Andrews**

President and CEO  
*Lozier Corp.*

**Janet Barnard**

SVP/GM Central Region  
*Cox Communication*

**Nancee Berger**

COO  
*West Corp.*

**Anne Boyle**

Commissioner  
*Nebraska Public Service Commission*

**Karen Bricklemyer**

President and CEO  
*United Way of the Midlands*

**Susie Buffett**

Director  
*Sherwood Foundation*

**Sandy Callahan**

SVP  
*Lincoln Financial Group*

**Joan Chow**

EVP and Chief Marketing Officer  
*ConAgra*

**Melissa Crawford**

SVP  
*Physicians Mutual*

**Gail Deboer**

President and CEO  
*SAC Federal Credit Union*

**Leslie Delperdang**

COO  
*NP Dodge*

**Diane Duren**

VP and GM Chemicals  
*Union Pacific Railroad*

**Kathy English**

EVP and COO  
*Children's Hospital*

**Ann Finkner**

SVP and Chief Administrative Officer  
*Farm Credit Services of America*

**Jean Fober**

Merchandising and Buying Manager  
*Nebraska Furniture Mart*

**Andrea Frost**

VP Financial Reporting  
*InfoGroup*

**Kristy Gerry**

Director of Production  
*Omaha World-Herald*

**Vickie Hagen**

VP and General Manager  
*Omaha Steaks*

**Mary Hawkins, Ph.D.**

President  
*Bellevue University*

**Ruth Henrichs**

President and CEO  
*Lutheran Family Services*

**Sherrye Hutcherson**

VP Essential Services  
*OPPD*

**Susan Jacques**

President and CEO  
*Borsheims*

**Cara James**

SVP Compliance  
*First National Bank*

**Maria Jensen**

Director of HR  
*Airlite Plastics*

**Kathy Johnson**

VP Franchise Services  
*Godfather's Pizza*

**Mary Jones**

VP and Treasurer  
*Union Pacific Corporation*

**Sue Korth**

VP and COO  
*Methodist Women's Hospital*

**Johanna Lewis**

VP and Chief Merchandising Officer  
*Gordmans*

**Jan Madsen**

VP Finance  
*Creighton University*

**Kathy Mallatt**

Plan President  
*UnitedHealthcare Community and State, Share Advantage*

**Jane Miller**

Executive VP and COO  
*Gallup*

**Adrian Minks**

VP Essential Services (retired)  
*OPPD*

**Stephanie Moline**

EVP  
*First National Bank*

**Joan Neuhaus**

SVP and COO  
*Alegent Health*

**Connie Ryan**

President  
*Streck*

**Barb Schaefer**

SVP HR and Corporate Secretary  
*Union Pacific Corporation*

**Debra Schneider**

SVP and CFO  
*MUD*

**Stacy Scholtz**

EVP Corporate Services  
*Mutual of Omaha*

**Sara Smith**

President and General Manager  
*KETV*

**Deb Smith-Howell, Ph.D.**

Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Dean for Graduate Studies  
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Director  
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**Maryanne Stevens, RSM, Ph.D.**

President  
*College of St. Mary*

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SVP Human Resources  
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**Sarah Waldman**

VP Ethical Practices and Corporate Secretary  
*Blue Cross Blue Shield*

**Gail Werner-Robertson**

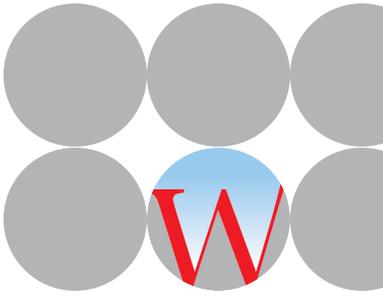
President and CEO  
*GWR Wealth Management*

**Mary Wise**

VP Technology and Administrative Services  
*Metropolitan Community College*

**Lyn Ziegenbein**

Executive Director  
*Peter Kiewit Foundation*



# A National Perspective

*The lack of women on corporate boards is especially puzzling given that research has shown board diversity is associated with higher stock prices and greater profitability.*

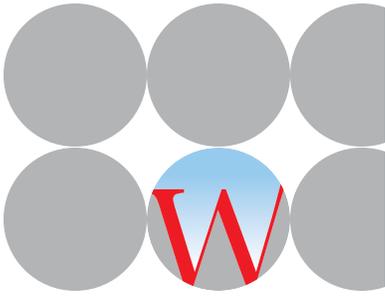
Although women make up 51% of the U.S. population and 47% of the labor force, there continues to be a lack of women at the highest levels of leadership throughout the country. According to Catalyst, among Fortune 500 companies, women account for only 3.6% of CEOs, 7.5% of top earners, 14.1% of executive officers, and 16.1% of board seats. Catalyst has been monitoring the progress of women and notes that between 2000 and 2010, the number of women on corporate boards in Fortune 500 companies has risen by only 4%.

Similar trends are found outside of the business sector. Females account for less than 30% of board members on college and university boards, even though 58.5% of degrees are awarded to women. Professional degrees are now the only degree category in which men outnumber women.

Women tend to fare better in the nonprofit sector, where the majority of workers are female (73%). However, a discrepancy still remains at the highest levels of leadership. Women make up 45% of CEOs at nonprofits, but only 21% of CEOs at organizations with budgets of \$25 million or more.

The lack of women on corporate boards is especially puzzling given that research has shown board diversity is associated with higher stock prices and greater profitability. In 2011, Catalyst found a 26% higher return on invested capital when comparing companies in the top quartile of women board representation (19-44% women) and companies with no women board representation. According to another study by Catalyst, Fortune 500 companies with high percentages of women officers experienced, on average, a 35.1% higher return on equity and a 34% higher total return to shareholders than those companies with fewer women officers.

Finally, there is evidence that society as a whole benefits when more women are involved in an organization's leadership. According to a recent joint study by Harvard Business School and Catalyst, "Each additional woman on the board equates to a \$2.3 million increase in giving. For every 1 percent increase in a company's women corporate officers, its annual giving increases by \$5.7 million. When leaders spotlight gender issues in their corporate social responsibility strategies, they often position their organization for sustained growth, and the payoff extends beyond the company to society." The White House Project sums up the case for women in leadership positions when it states "advancing women serves us all – men and women, businesses and institutions alike."



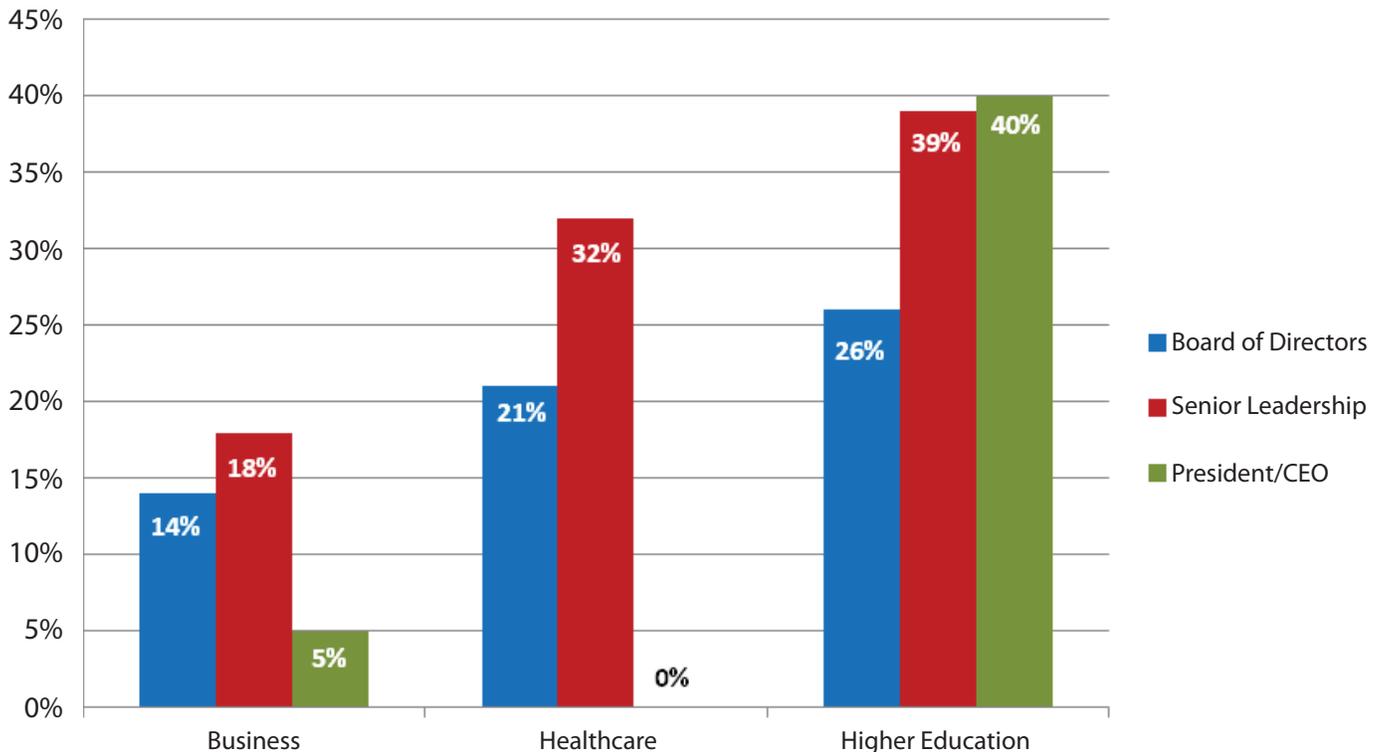
# The Local Scene

Demographics of the Omaha metro area tend to mirror those of the entire nation. Women make up 51% of the population and 48% of the labor force in the Omaha area. Unfortunately, in some instances, Omaha fares worse in terms of women's representation. According to a 2009 report released by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, Nebraska ranks third in the country for women's participation in the labor force, but 23rd for women employed in professional or managerial occupations. It should be noted that this is a dramatic improvement since 2006 when the Women's Fund last conducted a major study and subsequently identified increasing women's leadership as a priority. At that time, the state ranked 45th.

Although Nebraska may be improving overall in terms of women in professional and managerial occupations, there is evidence that females remain sorely underrepresented at the highest levels of leadership in Omaha. The city is home to five Fortune 500 companies and four Fortune 1000 companies. In these companies, women hold 8% of board seats, which is half the national average. There are no female CEOs.

In April 2011, the Women's Fund of Omaha surveyed 48 of the largest employers headquartered in Omaha as defined by the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce. We asked for the gender composition of the board of directors and senior management for each company. After achieving a response rate of 80%, we aggregated the data into three industries: business, healthcare, and higher education.

**Women's Leadership in Omaha across Three Industries**  
(percentage compared to total positions)



*Although Omaha's statistics are comparable to national averages presented by Catalyst, the number of women at the highest levels of leadership is severely disproportionate to the gender demographics of the area.*

Our results indicate that women hold 14% of board seats in the business sector and make up 18% of executive management. Women fare slightly better in healthcare, holding 21% of board seats and 22% of executive management. Finally, women have the greatest representation in higher education with 26% of board seats and 39% of senior leadership. Although Omaha's statistics are comparable to national averages presented by Catalyst, the number of women at the highest levels of leadership is severely disproportionate to the gender demographics of the area.

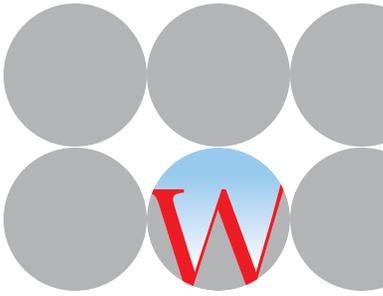
As a follow-up to this statistical picture, 47 female executives in Omaha were interviewed in order to reach a better understanding of their paths to leadership by documenting key elements contributing to their success, as well as challenges encountered on their journey to the executive suite. Interview subjects were reported as being the top-ranking females in their organizations, generally at the level of executive vice-president (or equivalent) and above, and were selected from companies on the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce major employers list. The subjects also included executive-level administrators of local collegiate institutions and major community organizations, and the highest ranking female elected official in the State of Nebraska.

All interviews took place between July and October of 2011. With the exception of five telephone interviews, all were conducted in person. It should be noted that because the emphasis of this particular study was on corporate/organizational leadership, members of professions such as medicine and law, small business owners, and other women who are leaders in their chosen fields or in volunteer roles in the community were not included.

We collected demographic data from each interviewee. We asked them to select from a range of ages. Over half (55%) of the women interviewed were between the ages of 50 and 59. Nearly a quarter (23%) were between 40 and 49. Seventeen percent of the interviewees were over 60 years old. The remainder (4%) were under 40. In addition, 19% of interviewees were single or divorced; the remaining 81% were married or engaged. The average number of children for this group of interviewees was two.

Our sample was very well educated. The majority (89%) had at least a bachelor's degree. A total of 36% had a graduate degree (often an MBA), and 11% had doctorate degrees. We also asked them about their years of work experience and found that the average number of years with their respective companies was 20. This suggests that tenure may be an especially critical factor in a woman's advancement to leadership.

Interview questions were created by the Women's Fund research committee. The complete list of interview questions is available in Appendix A. Some questions were deliberately chosen from previous Women's Fund questionnaires in order to assess potential changes since the initial 1996 study. Notes from the interviews were transcribed and aggregated by question. A combination of coding software (NVivo9) and a content analysis approach was used to examine common themes throughout the interviews. The major themes are incorporated in the following narrative, noting common threads between previous Women's Fund reports where appropriate. It is important to note that, although these 47 interviewees represent many of the highest ranking businesswomen in Omaha, they do not represent the entire population of females working in the city. Nevertheless, we believe that the information from these interviews is vital to understanding the importance and status of women in the community.



# Interview Questions

## Qualities of a Good Leader

### How do you define leadership?

#### *It takes a vision*

This is a query that has been asked and answered in myriad ways and countless articles. Much of what we learned from the responses to this question by the women interviewed is consistent with national studies and, indeed, our own previous research on the topic. Perhaps most surprising this time was the consistency of the answers. One respondent summed leadership up as “the ability to have a vision that you communicate and others will follow.” Fully two-thirds of interviewees noted the most critical aspect of leadership is being able to create a compelling vision. The majority (57%) also noted a second component of energizing or rallying followers around this vision or goal. Finally, 38% said that leadership requires modeling behaviors and values such as empathy, courage and integrity.

- *“Providing vision, direction and inspiration to people – not tasks or things.”*
- *“Without both vision and courage, you’re in big trouble.”*
- *“Getting a group to work together as a team to achieve a defined goal.”*
- *“Someone who can make ordinary people do extraordinary things.”*
- *“It’s about values, ethics, behavior, building relationships, developing others, compassion. It’s setting an example. Being persistent and tenacious.”*
- *“A person of integrity who is there for their people.”*
- *“Being willing to stand up and make a decision – to listen to others in the process and then live with it.”*

*The need for a leader to be a great listener is an emerging theme.*

*“It’s all about listening and relationship building – typically I think women are better at it. Men get too busy trying to win and the testosterone gets in the way.”*

## **What are the key skills needed to be an effective business leader? What skills or characteristics do women bring to leadership positions?**

### *Did you hear what I said?*

Next, we asked participants about the skills needed to be an effective business leader and the specific skills they think women bring to leadership positions. Interestingly, listening was by far the most prominent response. In fact, 70% emphasized the ability to listen as a key factor in good communication and the most critical of all the skills required for leadership. In addition, 66% thought that women had a tendency to be better listeners than their male counterparts. The prominence of listening as a major theme has not been found in previous leadership studies by the Women’s Fund. Interviewees from the 2006 study noted the importance of communication skills, passion for their work, risk-taking, and the need to be flexible. However, the need for a leader to be a great listener is an emerging theme.

- *“Listening is at the very top of the list.”*
- *“Good listener first of all.”*
- *“Better listeners.”*
- *“Listen. Keep your mouth shut!”*
- *“Listening across the spectrum – lowest to highest. Inclusive.”*
- *“Women are better listeners. They have more concern about how people feel. They are less hierarchical.”*
- *“We don’t posture and dominate verbal space just for the sake of it.”*
- *“Women listen to men and women whereas men don’t listen to women – only each other.”*

In addition to listening, as might be expected, virtually every interviewee mentioned some form of interpersonal skill as being a key component of leadership. Oft-repeated examples included good communication, emotional intelligence, empathy, being relationship-oriented and inclusive. These themes are all consistent with our findings from 1996 and 2006.

- *“Communication. Communication. Communication.”*
- *“Ability to communicate a strategy and allocate resources to accomplish.”*
- *“More emotional intelligence.”*
- *“Empathy, decisiveness, emotional intelligence, integrity - but especially emotional intelligence! Better at compromise. Care more about people and the organization than our own egos.”*
- *“Better listening. More empathy. We use parenting skills in a positive way to keep emotions under control. People want you to say it will be OK. In a recent crisis, I was the least emotional one on the management team!”*
- *“It’s all about listening and relationship building – typically I think women are better at it. Men get too busy trying to win and the testosterone gets in the way.”*
- *“The relationship pieces. I think men discount that power 100 fold.”*
- *“Relationship building – the ability to see connections and to connect people. Better multi-taskers. They don’t lose sight of the fact something has to get done.”*
- *“Passion that we show. Relational. Multi-tasking. Women listen better and look longer beyond first impressions. They see people’s strengths. They are more honest than men. They share recognition/glory with others.”*

*“In general, women are more concerned with success of the whole vs. individuals – makes us stronger leaders.”*

Respondents also frequently commented that women tend to be better at collaboration/ teamwork and multi-tasking compared to men, two themes that were again prominent in our earlier research.

- *“Collaboration is a huge asset most women bring to the table. For many men it’s ego – they see it as a weakness to collaborate – asking for input is like asking for help.”*
- *“Most women are more concerned about making sure our teams are more diverse and representative of our customer base.”*
- *“Lack of testosterone! More of a sense of collaboration vs. competition. Caring about the organization vs. personal recognition.”*
- *“More humility. Not as outwardly aggressive. Maybe better listeners. Better team players – that’s the way we were raised.”*
- *“In general, women are more concerned with success of the whole vs. individuals – makes us stronger leaders.”*
- *“Women are good at negotiating win/win. Men slam it to get it to work.”*
- *“Women are usually better at time management and multi-tasking, which are learned behaviors because we have to juggle more in life. I have to be more specific with men than women regarding timelines.”*
- *“Multi-tasking. Men are not good at it and can’t do it without micro-managing.”*

Finally, nearly half of the interviewees (40%) agreed that technical expertise (especially in finance) or business acumen is an essential leadership skill for business.

- *“The smart person moves themselves around and becomes conversant in all parts of the business.”*
- *“Financial expertise is a requirement however you obtain it. And a broader view of general management/trends outside your own company.”*
- *“Even in support departments like HR, people need to understand budgets for the ultimate success of the company. It’s about being sustainable.”*
- *“Financially/economically literate – able to read a balance sheet.”*
- *“You don’t need to be an expert at everything, but must know how to hire those that are.”*
- *“Women are good problem solvers. They can step back, look over a situation, and then break it down into components for action steps.”*
- *“We bring exactly the same skills as men.”*
- *Acknowledgement that there’s a need to consider decisions through multiple lenses. It’s not all about the bottom line. That’s important, but need to consider how other factors can affect the bottom line: HR, structure, PR, etc.”*

Sally Helgesen, respected author of the landmark book, *The Female Advantage*, and co-author of *The Female Vision – Women’s Real Power at Work*, has noted that many of the strengths of women mentioned by our participants, such as sensitivity to others and a collaborative nature, are especially critical as we move to new paradigms of doing business in a 24/7, global environment. It is fair to conclude, then, that the female executives we interviewed generally believe they have a gender advantage when it comes to some of the most important factors of leadership in today’s marketplace.

*Volunteering for assignments paid off in getting noticed by decision makers.*

## Preparing for Leadership Roles

### What has prepared you for leadership?

#### *Raise your hand and get noticed*

We wanted to know what kind of preparation these women had for their leadership roles. Nearly half (49%) of the women mentioned experience as a stepping stone. Specific examples frequently included volunteering for extra duties, taking on risky or new assignments, or working in a variety of areas within the business. Volunteering for assignments paid off in getting noticed by decision makers that normally might not have had occasion to notice their work.

- *"I signed up for new things I didn't need to. I was very proactive. It gave me cross-functional exposure. Very senior leaders challenged me with new tasks that really made me stretch."*
- *"Big challenges helped me grow. I switched/took on jobs that on paper I didn't have the qualifications for."*
- *"The training I received at various places I worked – the opportunities for exposure to training and people."*
- *"All was on-the-job experience. It was the 'benefit' of some very difficult decisions to navigate. No schooling prepared me."*

In addition to their experiences, about 28% noted that formal education or career training was a big help in preparing them for leadership roles.

- *"It has been a slow, steady route for me. Hands-on experience and education prepared me well."*
- *"ICAN's Influence program really helped me. Learning for self-awareness ups your leadership game."*
- *"A business communication minor helped me be aware of how men and women communicate differently and generational differences in communication."*
- *"I have the education that taught me to ask why and why not."*

Finally, 28% also said that they had a role model or mentor who specifically helped prepare them for leadership and teach them necessary skills.

- *"I was assigned a mentor who understood the organization."*
- *"I learned more by watching bad managers than good ones!"*
- *"I've had access to very smart, accomplished professionals that have helped me."*
- *"What did prepare me was my mom. She's a tough broad! She made me believe women could do anything."*

Remarkably, similar themes were found when asked what *would have* prepared them better for leadership roles. However, the order of these themes changed. For example, nearly half (45%) noted that they wish they had more education or training in a specific skill such as finance. Over a third (36%) noted that more experience in the field or on-the-job training would have helped prepare them for advancement. Finally, 34% wished they had a mentor or more female role models to help guide them in their career path. A smaller percentage noted that they wish they'd had more confidence early on and had been braver or tougher along the way.

## Can you think of anything that would have better prepared you for leadership?

### *If I had the chance to do it all again . . .*

- *"Absolutely a formal education. I did not go to college. In my day the choices were teacher or nurse."*
- *"Taking more classes on human behavior. The higher you go the more you must deal with people."*
- *"More background and education in finance."*
- *"A college-based women's program and more female mentors."*
- *"It would have been great to have a female mentor within the company. I am the first female to reach my level."*
- *"More confidence in myself sooner. I perceived that men at the level above me were all smarter than me and I just wasn't getting it. When invited to the table, I realized that wasn't the case."*
- *"Just being tougher – having a tough skin. Women care too much and hurt too easily. They need to depersonalize – not take things so personally."*

Although on-the-job experience was a prominent theme for preparing for leadership roles, numerous women noted that experience did not necessarily have to come from their jobs. We asked participants how their experience in other settings has impacted their leadership skills.

## How has your leadership in other settings (e.g. opportunities/expectations to be involved in community boards, etc...) impacted your leadership in a corporate setting, and vice versa?

### *It's a two-way street and it's good for business*

The vast majority of interviewees had experience serving on community or nonprofit boards (87%). Only 13% noted little to no experience. Those with experience spoke very positively of the opportunity, noting that it was a valuable avenue for networking, making new contacts, and practicing or learning new skills such as leadership or public speaking. Others noted that the experience made them feel more engaged and connected to their community. In addition, volunteering on community boards can boost the image of the individual as well as the company they work for.

*Volunteering on community boards can boost the image of the individual as well as the company they work for.*

- *"It's helpful – you are exposed to different types of leadership. Volunteer and paid work can only positively impact and complement each other. You might have an opportunity for a project you didn't have at work that enhances your experience. You are exposed to more people, styles of leadership and diversity of thought."*
- *"Interestingly, I find that it's a more level playing field on boards than in other settings. There's a nice dynamic with automatic mutual respect."*
- *"It helps you know where to take your business. You meet some really great people that can become your resources."*
- *"My corporate experience was helpful to the nonprofits. I also gained personally – I'm sure the contacts helped me."*
- *"Absolutely! One of my core values is giving back. It's good for my company also. It establishes connections."*
- *"It goes both ways, but I've gained way more than I've given. It's knowing you've given back. I brought strategic/organization skills."*
- *"You can learn a lot – especially in leadership roles on boards. It adds a new dimension. You need to understand a variety of areas. It's one place to go to build skills you don't have."*

## Paths to Leadership

### Did you have a specific goal or vision for your career path?

#### *Driven by dreams or destination unknown?*

Catalyst recently surveyed senior vice presidents from Fortune 1000 companies and found that men and women had equal desires to become CEOs. In this spirit, we asked interviewees if they had a specific goal or vision when beginning their career. Responses were mixed. About 43% said they had a specific goal in mind (e.g. become a partner, obtain a VP position, etc.) Interestingly, there was a trend for younger interviewees to talk about having a specific goal or plan for their career. This may suggest that women may be becoming more intentional about their careers than in the past.

- *"I wanted to run our family business."*
- *"I declared I was interested – I was bold. My boss quit and I moved into a management role at 25. Six years later I was an assistant VP. The very best thing you can do is to work yourself out of the job. I delegated and groomed others to replace me."*
- *"I did. I was always looking at how I could do it better. I had a confidence that made me aim high. I was always invited to leadership roles and I never hesitated to do it better. I took advantage of opportunities."*
- *"I did. I'm a planner. I had specific goals to be a partner in a law firm and I made that at an unusually young age. I had yearly goals and a 5-7 year plan. When I got this opportunity I refocused my path. However, I continue to have a plan."*

*For many interviewees, careers had developed in a non-deliberate fashion.*

For many interviewees, careers had developed in a non-deliberate fashion. They mentioned either not having a plan, or having a general plan that they did not stick to because life circumstances forced a change (e.g. family obligations, relocation, and personal issues).

- *"My career was almost by accident."*
- *"No. Life takes you down many roads you think you'll never travel. Great opportunities come and they are usually disguised."*
- *"No. For me it's about continuously being challenged. I get bored with routine. When asked if I wanted to take on a special project, I always said yes!"*
- *"Absolutely not. I could never answer that question of where you want to be in 5 years. I give advice now to people not to lock in to an end goal of CEO, etc. Learn and contribute in your current job."*
- *"Absolutely not. I stumbled into my employment here. At the time my goal was survival and a job that would let me be home with my kids. I started to aspire to a career after about 4 or 4.5 years."*
- *"Life happened. However, when I saw opportunities I took them. I was not hesitant to take personal risks that I knew would be better for me and my family. I was flexible to move. If you have an opportunity, you should go."*

### How do choices for men and women differ when they pursue leadership positions?

#### *What are my options?*

Although more women are moving into leadership positions than ever before, there is still a sharp contrast between men and women in the highest ranks. We asked our interviewees how they thought choices in general differed for men and women in pursuing leadership positions. The majority of respondents (70%) noted that women's choices are heavily influenced by family concerns, such as their husband's work, the effects of relocating on

*There is still a need for companies to foster more inclusiveness for their high potential female employees.*

their families, childcare, etc. Many observed that these considerations are much less of a factor in the career decisions of male colleagues. This is particularly interesting when contrasted with the Women's Fund 1996 and 2006 Leadership Studies. Out of the over 400 women surveyed in 2006, 84% believed that a male dominated corporate culture was the largest barrier to women's advancement (decreased from 96% in 1996). The second largest barrier cited in the survey was balancing work and family (73% in 2006, and 61% in 1996).

- *"At one point, I had to have a 'come to Jesus' talk with my husband. He wanted me to move at a critical point in my career."*
- *"Men make choices based on doing what's best for them. They take offers and then come home and say 'we're moving.'"*
- *"It is very difficult during childbearing years to look solely at choices in the career – women are pulled to home life and those responsibilities. They are fundamentally difficult years for women."*
- *"Women who have kids early have it a lot harder to move forward. Those that wait have a better shot at both (career and family)."*
- *"What they are willing to give up differs. Lots of pressure on women to do it all."*
- *"Opportunities are no different in our industry except for having to move around. That is tougher for women."*

About 34% of women interviewed continue to believe – as did respondents in 2006 – that their choices have been limited by access to certain opportunities, factors such as an unsupportive company culture, lack of access to networking opportunities, being shut out of meetings, etc. Even though we did not explicitly ask, it should be pointed out that a quarter of interviewees (25%) said that they've observed an improvement in access to opportunities over the course of their careers. Therefore, while there are signs that Omaha's business culture may be warming to women and that positive changes are occurring, there is still a need for companies to foster more inclusiveness for their high potential female employees.

- *"When I told my boss I was pregnant, his reactions was 'Oh, no!'"*
- *"I don't think women in Omaha have been given the opportunity. Some men in leadership roles here are reticent to allow for maternity leave."*
- *"One big difference remains – the things you get invited to. There are still a lot of good old boy hunting trips and golf outings. I've just gotten used to exclusion."*
- *"Omaha is a tough market to be a woman. The boys invite you to the meeting, but not the after party...they have no guilt about golf, drinks after work, etc. Kids and getting work done are my priorities."*
- *"To use a metaphor, women do all the stages of making the cookies, but at the very end, when they are passed around for all to enjoy, the women aren't there. Women don't get the perks of power."*
- *"Men still control choices available to women. I can't just state my vision. I have to play along with my male managers to get to collaboration. They don't like to be told by a woman what to do."*
- *"I don't think they differ a lot. That has changed over the years. The choices are in our mind – if we have the idea we don't have choices, we don't."*
- *"It's changing. In my age group there were tougher choices about family vs. career. Now, many men have same desires."*

## What personal choices were made in order to reach a leadership position?

### *Where are my tradeoffs?*

To further investigate the choices women make in pursuit of career success, we asked our interviewees to tell us about the choices that they themselves had made during their careers. Consistent with the previous question, women again highlighted the delicate balance between work and family. In fact, just over half (51%) noted a personal choice they had made between family and work in order to reach their current executive status. Examples included spending less time with their family, or missing out on children's activities. Just under half (43%) noted that relocation was a significant choice that factored into their career (e.g. moving to Omaha, remaining in Omaha, commuting or other travel). 15% of interviewees specifically noted that they felt they had sacrificed their social life (not having a close circle of friends, especially female friends) in order to maintain their career and/or family life.

- *"To not be home with my kids through their teen years."*
- *"I don't think I gave my kids enough time in those middle years. I worked long hours and on weekends."*
- *"I had to accept the fact I wasn't going to be the traditional mom and some things I would miss, and then figure out what I would and wouldn't miss."*
- *"My husband stayed home with the kids for 9 years while I worked. Otherwise, I wouldn't have had the jobs."*
- *"Divorce from a husband who did not support me."*
- *"Work has been dominant in my life. It has been an active choice because I love what I do. I suppose others looking at it would wonder."*
- *"To move to Omaha. My husband has quit a job 3 times to move with me."*
- *"I had exciting jobs early on. I left because I didn't want to chase jobs around the globe. I wanted to stay in Omaha."*
- *"I've moved a lot. I've even gone backwards in salary for great experience."*
- *"I don't feel I have a core, steadfast group of girlfriends. You give that up."*
- *"I miss going out with my girlfriends for a glass of wine. I have to schedule it."*



## Female Leaders Need Strong Relationships

### Do you have role models of exceptional leadership in your life?

#### *I watch how you do it*

*More than two-thirds (68%) of the women executives noted having a strong female role model.*

A major theme that was present throughout the interviews was the need for leaders to have strong support systems. Through our questions, we found that this support came in several forms. For example, we asked interviewees to tell us about their role models of great leaders. Every interviewee discussed at least one person who had inspired them. Interestingly, more than two-thirds (68%) of the women executives noted having a strong female role model. This is particularly significant given the relatively small number of female leaders and underscores the important role they can play in providing junior women with a belief that they, too, can succeed. 45% of those interviewed noted that their role model was a boss or CEO, 38% named a family member (parents or other relative), and 21% mentioned both their parents and a boss had been role models. Many interviewees offered anecdotal evidence that fathers who tell their daughters they have what it takes to succeed often wield a powerful influence on their futures.

- *"A female boss who taught me you can be driven and still be enjoyable to work with."*
- *"Most were female and it was because of the way they handled themselves. They made change happen in more effective ways."*
- *"I've learned from women bosses who had courage to take risks – to take a position. People who take ownership of their roles – that become more involved. If you treat yourself as a lower part of the pecking order, you will be. Look for what you can contribute."*
- *"The best boss I ever had was a female who taught me about hard work. We had open communication – I could blow off steam."*
- *"Yes. Our late CEO. He was a 'man's man' but he was comfortable in his own skin and a huge supporter of women – perhaps because he raised 3 girls."*
- *"Yes – a manager in my 30s who gave me rope but not enough to hang myself. He believed in me and gave me credit for accomplishments. Corrected me in private. He pushed and encouraged me. Also my dad who told me I could do or be whatever I wanted."*
- *"My dad – he taught me long ago that longevity in a job was not what but who you know. He also told me I could be anything I wanted to be."*
- *"My dad. He would point out women business leaders and why it was so important to learn about and from them."*

*In general, having a supportive spouse appears to be a common theme among executive level women.*

## How do you manage your time? Strategies for work-life balance.

### *I don't go it alone*

In addition to role models who offer moral support at the office, successful female leaders need help from many other sources. We asked interviewees about strategies they use to manage their time. The majority (64%) said they employ some kind of help such as childcare, cleaning help or a lawn service. Only six of the interviewees (12%) specifically noted that they did not employ outside assistance. Of these six women, all have husbands who assume much of the responsibility at home. Three of the six did not have children. In general, having a supportive spouse appears to be a common theme among executive-level women. Out of the 38 married women interviewed, 82% specifically noted that their husband had been a crucial element in the advancement of their career. Examples included sharing housework responsibilities, working from home, caring for children, or sacrificing their own career for their wife's work (relocation, etc.). A recent article in *Business Week* magazine suggests that this is a growing trend. It reports that the number of men in the U.S. who regularly care for children has increased from 19% in 1988 to 32% in 2010. In addition, seven of the 18 women who are current CEOs of Fortune 500 companies have had a stay-at-home husband at some point in their career.

- *"One of the biggest keys to success is a great assistant."*
- *"I'm a huge believer in hired help. I need a wife!"*
- *"The differentiating factor is family – the spousal team. Our company has observed that women with supportive spouses are much more confident in taking on responsibilities."*
- *"We have a house cleaner, but basically as a family we do the work. My husband is at home."*
- *"I have a stay-at-home husband."*
- *"Huge partner in my husband. He is as involved in parenting as I am. I made a conscious decision what was most important – it was family – so we hire everything done around the house."*
- *"I have a supportive husband and a great support structure with him. We worked it out so we were BOTH career and family. Omaha-based companies often require travel. I negotiated the travel with my spouse."*
- *"I have a supportive husband who does the cooking. The rest of the housework is shared. We have no kids."*
- *"I have a very supportive husband and I hire it done. I make the money, so I'm liberal about getting the help I need."*

Other popular work-life strategies include being highly organized with scheduling, making lists, prioritizing, and delegating tasks. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of the women interviewed described themselves as using any number of these strategies in an ongoing quest for balance. Several noted the need to pro-actively schedule personal time for relaxation or running errands. Many also said that they try to keep family and work completely separate from one another.

- *"My best strategy is to schedule my personal time like I do my business time. I deliberately schedule the personal."*
- *"I still struggle with it! I don't like to take work home. I try to take care of myself and take time for me. I have to make the effort and put 'me' time on the calendar. I don't do well taking care of everyone else without it."*
- *"There is no work-life balance. There are always trade-offs. I had to let go of trying to control everything at work and home."*
- *"I make very conscious choices. I take time off and really get away. Know what the right amount of time is for you and spend it like a savings account."*

- *"I'm not sure I have work-life balance. I'm VERY scheduled. I have very structured weekdays. I get up at 3:45 AM 6 days a week in order to exercise for an hour and 15 minutes. I do laundry while I'm running. I'm out the door by 7:30 taking the kids to school. 7-9 p.m. week nights and the weekends are strictly family time."*
- *"I now understand that I have to put the same amount of passion into planning my personal time – my friends, family and myself – as I do planning my work life."*

## Has networking been a factor in your success?

### *I connect with colleagues*

The 2006 *Women & Leadership in Omaha* study by the Women's Fund found that women were often excluded from informal networking opportunities. We asked our interviewees to talk about how formal and informal networking has played a part in their success. In general, respondents expressed a strong preference for authentic, organic forms of networking (e.g. building relationships and making real connections as opposed to just accumulating contacts). Over three-quarters (77%) of women interviewed said that networking had been a positive factor in their success, particularly in the context of developing genuine relationships both within and outside of their company. Some women noted that networking was helpful in getting their name known for promotions and other advancement opportunities, while others viewed it as a form of mentoring.

*"I don't know how you find jobs these days without a strong network. They propel you to the next level."*

- *"I don't know how you find jobs these days without a strong network. They propel you to the next level."*
- *"Oh yes! It's key. Omaha is a small town. I have female/couple/professional/personal circles. I worked at golf so I could have that key differentiator. Otherwise, you miss opportunities to network."*
- *"Yes – going to national meetings is the best example. It has been very helpful to build relationships with peers."*
- *"Yes. I was involved in a professional association and that got me this job. I stay in touch with former colleagues. I do LinkedIn. I always try to leave with good relationships."*
- *"Phenomenal. Very pivotal – even in getting this job. All kinds – formal and informal relationship building – knowing people in a mutually beneficial way."*
- *"Huge. It's one of my biggest skills. I'm also good at connecting others up. I network with all genders, ages. I have a great network of people. It brings me joy."*
- *"I've built personal and professional relationships that are supportive. They exposed me to new ideas and thoughts. They've enriched my life. I've grown my career because of it."*
- *"Oh yes! Relationships are huge. Not only from peer counseling aspects – i.e. 'how do you do it?' Business card type exchanges are important, too."*

*Many of those who dislike networking still acknowledge the importance of building real relationships.*

About a quarter (23%) of respondents reported that networking had not been a significant factor in their success and that it often felt disingenuous or uncomfortable to them. Interestingly, many of those who dislike networking still acknowledge the importance of building real relationships.

- *"People need to know you, but I never deliberately built a network. That always felt phony to me."*
- *"I hate meet and greet. It's so phony! I do network within my industry, but it is in a natural, organic way."*
- *"I build relationships with the people I encounter. Classic 'networking' seems shallow and is not me."*
- *"I've never found it to be helpful and comfortable (formal networking). It never felt genuine. I prefer one-on-one. Meeting people at a workshop, etc."*
- *"No. It's never been for me. I'm not a schmoozer. I do put a premium on relationships within the company. I've had life-long colleagues."*
- *"No. I'm terrible. It feels phony. I'll respond if someone reaches out, but I'm NOT proactive. I force myself to belong to a couple of women exec groups."*
- *"Sometimes it's hard or uncomfortable meeting new people, but I know it's a part of my job."*

## **Did you have a mentor or sponsor prior to achieving your position?**

### ***People believed in me***

Mentoring has been a prominent theme in leadership research for years. In the 1996 Women's Fund study, 68% of respondents reported having a mentor in their professional life. In our 2011 interviews, nearly all of the women surveyed (94%) reported having a mentor at some point in their careers. In addition to the traditional mentor, we asked our interviewees to differentiate between a mentor and a sponsor. A recent article from *Harvard Business Review* describes sponsorship as "active support by someone appropriately placed in the organization who has significant influence on decision-making processes or structures and who is advocating for, protecting, and fighting for the career advancement of an individual." Catalyst research found that when women's mentors are highly placed within an organization (i.e. in a position to be a sponsor as well as a mentor), women were just as likely as men to be promoted.

Carla Harris, Managing Director at Morgan Stanley and author of *Expect to Win: 10 Proven Strategies for Thriving in the Workplace*, was one of the first to point out the distinctions between categories of people who can help advance a career. As keynote speaker at the 2011 Women's Fund Annual Fall Luncheon, she explained her definitions:

**Mentor** – Someone who can answer discrete career questions and give specific career advice. They can be trusted to hear about successes and failures and to provide feedback that is helpful to career progression. Harris points out that some people cannot truly fulfill the requirements for a mentor role and should be considered advisors.

**Sponsor** – Someone who will use their internal political and social capital to move one's career forward in an organization. They have the respect and power within the organization to make things happen. Harris believes this relationship is critical to success.

In our sample of senior executives, 77% reported having a sponsor and 74% of interviewees said they had both a mentor and a sponsor. Several interviewees noted that sponsors were people who saw potential in them and actively advocated on their behalf. Mentors provided a supporting role, helping figure out how things worked in their company, giving advice, or providing introductions or other networking opportunities. Although mentors and sponsors may play different roles, interviewees agreed that both were very important to their careers.

#### **Mentor**

- *"It's important to choose a mentoring group wisely from peers, those more advanced than you but with similar values, and employees."*
- *"With mentors I brainstormed and they helped build my skills."*
- *"Formal mentoring really helped me with the culture. He'd call and say 'you're doing well'. Other times he'd call and tell me I was screwing up. We were very honest with each other. I got general advice and learned the ropes. My sponsor decided I was special and I'm so thankful! She 'loaned' me her good will and credibility. It made me want to be sure she'd never regret it."*
- *"The mentoring was very informal – 'let's have a conversation'."*
- *"Both. Mentors you can learn things from. A sponsor has the power to influence where you go in your career."*

#### **Sponsor**

- *"Our current CEO said, 'I want this person on my executive team.'"*
- *"My boss flew me around with him and gave me access to see all of the growth at (the company). I watched him manage people. He included me in every meeting."*
- *"I had a female supervisor who was both. She advocated and got others on board for me, too, to save my job during rocky times."*
- *"I had a sponsor who went to bat for me – even when I messed up. As women we've done a decent job as mentors, but we do not sponsor people. Maybe we are afraid of the competition. Men do it all the time! If a guy fails, they'll swear he was successful. They cover for each other."*
- *"My sponsor was a wonderful woman who made it very apparent I should be advanced. She pointed out I was a high potential person."*
- *"Almost every opportunity has come through champions. A man got me my current job. He said if they didn't hire me, he'd quit."*

*Because there is a lack of women in the highest levels of leadership in Omaha, it is vital that men in our community take an active role in sponsoring women.*

As you can see, our interviewees had both male and female sponsors. However, we wish to make a strong case that because there is a lack of women in the highest levels of leadership in Omaha, it is vital that men in our community take an active role in sponsoring women. As one local female executive observes: "I believe we should choose the best candidate. We need to look at all candidates and not exclude women, but rather encourage them. When men are the ones that make the recommendations, they are going to think of those that they most identify with – other men. Men have to be willing to go outside their comfort zone to consider women who are just as qualified."

*The definition of success is in itself a very individualistic concept.*

## Successes and Struggles

### How do you define success?

#### *Different things to different people*

It is clear that we interviewed a group of extraordinarily accomplished and successful women. However, we were interested to know more about what success meant to them personally. First, we simply asked them to define success. Not surprisingly, there was little consensus among interviewees. In fact, many noted that the definition of success is in itself a very individualistic concept. Others confessed that their notion of success has changed over time.

- *"It's an individual thing. I was hard on myself. I thought success was being at this level."*
- *"You can't really separate the professional and personal – it's the whole package. It's to have a comfortable life. Really liking what you do and then being excited about coming home."*
- *"Believing I've made a difference with integrity."*
- *"The enterprise moving forward. The culture being supportive. That you yourself believe you're thriving and not 'stuck'. How I grew from experiences. I think it's easier when you are in a growing people job."*
- *"Pursuit of a goal and the honorable journey of getting there – as much about the how as the what."*
- *"It has changed over time. Out of college it was obtaining a top role. Now success is finding something to be passionate about."*
- *"Initially it was salary. Now, the respect of my colleagues and the respect of those I respect."*

### What has been your greatest success?

To expand on this idea, we asked our interviewees to tell us about their greatest personal success. Again, answers varied across several themes. Some interviewees (21%) gave examples of both personal and professional successes. Over half (57%) noted that their family was their greatest success (e.g. having a successful marriage, children, etc.). This theme was striking considering that the majority of the interview was centered on working and professional issues. It is clear that at the end of the day, many working women view their family as their most significant achievement.

- *"My family. They're your legacy."*
- *"I raised 2 wonderful sons."*
- *"Managing to – over time – progress in my career and being PRESENT in my 3 kids' lives. Somehow I pulled it off, and I never faced a huge price from a career perspective."*
- *"A 46-year husband who makes me laugh every day and 5 incredibly successful kids."*
- *"Professionally it's developing people. Personally that I've been able to keep a balance and have a 32-year marriage survive."*
- *"Achieving what I have professionally while still having a healthy and deep relationship with my girls. By showing them that's possible, I'm trying to be a thoughtful role model."*

*“The people I left behind who learned something about themselves and advanced because of me.”*

In addition to the family theme, some women cited professional success stories. In fact, nearly one-third (30%) mentioned an accomplishment at work or attaining a specific title or status.

- *“I took a \$40 million business into a \$300 million business in 3 years. It was THE most fun time.”*
- *“When I first went in, we could have declared bankruptcy. I took it from an \$800,000 budget to \$16 million.”*
- *“Being named as one of the best places to work locally and nationally.”*
- *“Building the marketing team I have now.”*
- *“Ability to work my way up over the years.”*

Finally, 23% of interviewees noted that having challenging work, helping others succeed, or being happy in their work in general were their greatest successes.

- *“The people I left behind who learned something about themselves and advanced because of me.”*
- *“If I’ve helped a lot of people.”*
- *“For me, I want the tombstone to say she was well loved by the people she touched. They had mutual benefit and meaningful interaction.”*
- *“Getting to a place where I have a rich life.”*
- *“Having purpose and passion.”*

## **What is it about you personally that has contributed to your success?**

Next, we asked our interviewees to tell us about what they believe personally contributed to their success. Again, while these answers varied among individuals, most fit into one of a handful of broad categories.

### **Upbringing**

Several respondents mentioned the importance of the way they were raised. They spoke of being instilled with values by their parents that have served them well in their careers.

- *“My upbringing. My parents. They taught me to have high standards, to not compare myself with others but to my own potential. I set my own high standards. I get upset if I’m a slacker.”*
- *“My upbringing in a strong family.”*
- *“My dad taught me early you get out what you put in. Being forced to adapt to varying experiences and environments gave me great training.”*
- *“I hand it to my mom. She taught me to go with the flow. My upbringing was you just deal with it. If you want to do something, learn how and go for it. It’s your choice whether to be happy or not.”*

*“I say what others are thinking but don’t have the guts to say.”*

*“I think about people when I make decisions. I care about people. I’ve acted with integrity so people trust me.”*

### **Courage**

Others mentioned the courage they mustered to take a stand, to speak directly and with conviction about their beliefs, or, as Carla Harris advises, “leverage your voice and have a penchant for taking risks.”

- *“I say what others are thinking but don’t have the guts to say.”*
- *“I think it’s my being open, honest, willing to speak my mind and contribute to the conversations in moving things forward. Sometimes women are fearful to speak up.”*
- *“What others have said is that I’m quietly strong. I know what I’m doing and convey a sense that I’m in charge. They always know where they stand.”*
- *“Always well prepared. Direct and candid. Credibility. Once won, the gender card never came up again.”*
- *“I’m pretty easy going – don’t get riled up. Being even has contributed to my success. I’m never afraid to take advantage of opportunities or ask the dumbest question in meetings.”*

### **Ambition and Work Ethic**

Some attributed their success to personal drive and the intelligence or desire to learn quickly and be productive.

- *“Fierce ambition – it moves success.”*
- *“I set high standards and am driven to achieve. I’m intense. I have good relationships and can build bridges to get stuff done.”*
- *“I learn quickly and process a lot of information quickly. It allows me to do a lot of stuff.”*
- *“My ‘A’ personality. I don’t have a lot of patience – I like to make things happen.”*
- *“I’m intelligent. I can communicate. I can see beyond the numbers. I’m always wanting to learn more from others around me.”*
- *“I’ve always had a great work ethic. I’ve never measured myself against others – just myself. I’m never done learning or developing my leadership skills.”*

### **Passion and People**

A number of the women spoke of the passion they have for their work - how much they care about their work and about the people with whom they work. They felt these qualities were what helped them achieve the highest levels of leadership in their companies.

- *“I’m passionate about what I do and genuinely care about the company and the employees.”*
- *“I help my employees with family matters, hence they give back.”*
- *“My passion. It’s real. I care about people. I’m a good listener, writer and public speaker. I treat others like I want to be treated. I’m very relational. I know how to build and tend to relationships. I send thank you notes!”*
- *“I think about people when I make decisions. I care about people. I’ve acted with integrity so people trust me.”*
- *“I care about the work I do – it’s never been just a job. I’m not as social as I appear – I’ve had to cultivate that.”*
- *“Truly understanding and becoming involved with my (work) family. Believing and inspiring them to success. I never ask them to do more than I would.”*

### **Tenacity and Persistence**

Lastly, as is mentioned elsewhere in this report, some interviewees indicated that just plain hanging in there was the biggest factor in their success.

- *“Tenacity of purpose. 90% of life belongs to those who show up and try.”*
- *“Tenacity. Desire. Competitiveness. Compassion. Caring.”*
- *“Persistence! I’m curious and I ask a lot of questions. I can see relationships between things. I hire good people and can build teams.”*
- *“I have a really hard head. I persevere and am tenacious. I have high energy.”*

## **What were the major challenges that had to be addressed to succeed, and how did you overcome those challenges?**

### ***Hurdles and hoops are part of the game***

In addition to their great successes, our interviewees also had to overcome numerous challenges on their way to the top. Not surprisingly, there was a wide array of barriers to success. Despite the variability in answers, interviewees mentioned challenges that were either personal or professional in nature. The personal challenges included issues such as family concerns (e.g. divorce, family illness, raising children while balancing a career) or personal shortcomings such as lack of confidence in their ability or being shy or intimidated in their early careers.

- *“I had to accept the fact I wasn’t going to be the traditional mom and some things I would miss, and then figure out what I would and wouldn’t miss.”*
- *“The six moves have been hard – the personal transitions.”*
- *“Meshing my career with personal. I had to be willing to move.”*
- *“I work with executive men who have no home responsibility. The boss comes in on Saturday so the guys do too and they get brownie points I don’t because I have family.”*
- *“Daycare issue always huge. Balancing act, especially when single.”*
- *“My first hurdle was me – being comfortable bringing my whole self to the table and understanding people don’t expect you to be perfect.”*
- *“I was so shy when I started. I had to learn to communicate.”*

***“I was so shy when I started. I had to learn to communicate.”***

Professional or organizational challenges included being treated differently for being a woman or being young, or being in the minority in their respective field (e.g. lack of women in engineering or finance). Many women again cited instances in which the organizational culture presented obstacles like being left out of informal networking opportunities, such as golf outings or other events that took place outside of working hours.

- *“My age. I was young. Being able to earn respect – especially with board members. They saw me as a ‘kiddo’ not a seasoned pro.”*
- *“It’s getting better, but in groups your ideas aren’t heard until a man says it.”*
- *“Getting the attention of clients who were from the good old boys network.”*
- *“If you look around most major companies, it’s male dominated and they are still slanted to white males. You have to learn to finesse it. There are political hurdles that you need to learn to navigate.”*
- *“The perception of how women will handle pregnancy and small kids. I missed out on a job opportunity that came up when I was 8 months pg. There was the attitude it would affect my job.”*
- *“Sometimes it’s harder to get connected into companies’ networks as a female – the sports conversations and golf outings. Organizations have to be more open.”*
- *“The everyday barrier of working among the sexes in the workplace. The good old boys network still exists, but they won’t admit it because it’s no longer acceptable. I was not included in a golf outing that a guy junior to me was invited to.”*

*The concept of authenticity represents a new theme.*

## What advice would you give to other women?

### *Pearls of wisdom and other helpful hints*

The insights gained by the interviewees on their journeys to the executive suite fell into several common themes that are instructive, not only for other women who aspire to grow in their careers, but also for employers concerned with providing environments where female employees can flourish in leadership roles.

#### **Self-awareness and authenticity**

Several of the themes our local executives wanted to share with other women appear in Carla Harris's book *Expect to Win*. For example, just like those we interviewed, she encourages women to be authentic and to "bring the real you to work every day". The concept of authenticity represents a new theme that was not mentioned in any of the Women's Fund's earlier leadership studies. It also implies self-awareness, which many women we spoke with emphasized. They stressed the need to understand personal strengths and weaknesses in order to pursue a career path that is the right fit. They cautioned against trying to be something you are not.

- *"Before you can grow, you need to understand yourself. Be honest about what you want and whether it's possible."*
- *"Be yourself and get out of your comfort zone."*
- *"Women see their flaws through a magnifying glass. We can create our own barriers."*
- *"Follow your strengths and understand the strengths of your co-workers. Help them do their jobs better."*
- *"Leverage your strengths, which are very relational."*
- *"Be true to yourself. If you don't like what you're doing, make a change."*
- *"You have to be your own conductor and drive your own train. You can't rely only on serendipity."*
- *"Like yourself. Do what you want to do. Go with the flow."*
- *"Don't try to be like a man. Be who you are. Play to your own strengths."*
- *"You don't need to assimilate. You don't need to be a guy. Be an individual – be authentic."*

#### **Self-confidence and risk-taking**

Interviewees encouraged others to be confident and open to challenges that often result in getting noticed by people in a position to advance careers. This is also consistent with Harris's message of speaking up and taking risks to thrive in the workplace.

- *"Develop self-confidence."*
- *"Believe in yourself and don't be afraid of hard work."*
- *"Believe in yourself and that you can do it."*
- *"Be bold and be confident. Let yourself be challenged."*
- *"Take risk. It's OK to change your path for a good opportunity."*
- *"Sign up for special projects that will make you visible within the company."*
- *"Volunteer – the visibility leads to other opportunities!"*
- *"Volunteer for projects. Set yourself apart. Learn from failure."*
- *"Pick an area and get the experience to be really valued – it gives you a springboard."*

*“You deserve balance in your life. However you define it, relentlessly pursue it.”*

### **Persistence**

Although there are often setbacks during the course of a career, interviewees stressed how important it is for women to persevere and not give up. This concept is reinforced by the fact that, as noted earlier in the study, the average number of years our executive subjects had been with their companies was 20.

- *“You have to have grit. If you’re going to play at this level, you have to stick it out.”*
- *“You need to know what route you want to take and then try to hang in for the ride.”*
- *“Focus on the long term and deal with the short term.”*
- *“Hang in there. Keep going. Don’t give up.”*
- *“Think LONG term. Don’t sell yourself short by thinking your kids are a roadblock or people won’t support you. I never would have thought I could get to the senior positions.”*
- *“Too often, women give up. Many women are falling off their career tracks. They are not competitive enough and have high expectations of themselves. Those that made it just stuck to it.”*

### **Assistance**

Seeking support from others and letting go of perfectionism in every aspect of life is another lesson learned by many successful women. Our subjects ascertained that by seeking assistance, they gain necessary time for themselves and for important relationships – especially with other women – that nurture the soul.

- *“You’ve got to develop a support network – a personal board of directors to help you get what you want.”*
- *“If you want the career, hire a nanny.”*
- *“You have to let some things go.”*
- *“Give yourself a break from guilt – from being all things to all things.”*
- *“Work hard, but don’t neglect the rest of your life.”*
- *“You deserve balance in your life. However you define it, relentlessly pursue it.”*
- *“Make women friends early and maintain the connections.”*
- *“Have fun. Get involved in the community and meet other women.”*

### **Timing**

Several of the executives wanted women - especially younger women in the early years of their careers - to hear that success does not necessarily come in a straight line. They believed that to understand there is a time for everything and everything in its own time is an especially important concept for women.

- *“We have seasons as women. When I was having kids it was OK for aspirations to wait.”*
- *“Women’s paths are not linear. It’s OK to zig and zag.”*
- *“Be sure it’s the right time for you to take opportunities. Prioritize your responsibilities. Do NOT feel guilty. Don’t over extend, but go for it.”*

*“Don’t allow yourself to be excluded. Don’t be offended by some of the boys’ behavior.”*

### **Values**

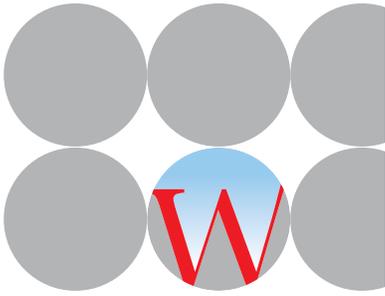
Interviewees touched on the significance of values. They advised other women to seek out organizations that reflect their own values and to look for colleagues who share their values.

- *“Work for an organization you’re proud of.”*
- *“Try to be aware of those you’re working for. Do what they say and do align? Make sure the company has the same values as you do.”*
- *“Get a mentor or role model – male or female – with a matching value system.”*

### **Backbone**

A significant number of our executives advised other women who want to make it in what they still consider to be a man’s world to grow a thick skin and to speak up for themselves. They cautioned against playing the gender card or reinforcing stereotypes at the office.

- *“Never complain and never explain. Work hard. Always show up.”*
- *“Don’t use gender as an excuse. If you give into that, you’re done. Take responsibility for yourself. The woman herself has to believe being a woman doesn’t matter.”*
- *“Don’t be too sensitive. It’s OK to be treated like one of the guys. Unless it’s intended in a hurtful or personal way, ignore it or deal with it head on.”*
- *“Don’t be catty or dramatic.”*
- *“Toughen up. Learn to deal with conflict. I tell my daughter to learn how to deal with conflict because it’s inevitable.”*
- *“Be your own cheerleader. Stand up and don’t beat ourselves up as women. Support one another!”*
- *“Don’t allow yourself to be excluded. Don’t be offended by some of the boys’ behavior.”*
- *“Don’t let your gender be a handicap – look for companies that will appreciate you!”*
- *“Ask questions and speak your mind – put your opinions on the table.”*
- *“Don’t be afraid to take the initiative or to ask questions.”*
- *“Most important thing is to speak up. Don’t assume people know what you’re doing or thinking. Usually, your instincts are right on.”*



# Conclusions

The Women's Fund began studying the topic of women's leadership in 1996. Although Omaha has made some progress in the realm of women's representation at the highest levels of leadership in the community, our research indicates there is still much room for improvement. Several of the themes that emerged from interviews in this study echo those from our initial research. For example, common obstacles cited in 1996 included institutional mindsets (e.g. glass ceiling, good old boys club, etc.), difficulty balancing demands of family and professional obligations, and self-imposed obstacles (e.g. lack of confidence). These themes were present again in 2006 and remained in 2011.

In addition to the barriers, however, there are also positive themes that are consistent across the studies. The observations that women in general have skills valuable to business such as strong communication, collaboration, and consensus building surfaced in each of our reports.

We believe our own research, in addition to numerous national studies, has built an irrefutable case for the value women bring to the table. In fact, in a recent report published by *Harvard Business Review* that utilized data from evaluations of over 7,000 leaders, women actually outscored men significantly in 12 out of 16 leadership competencies (e.g. develops strategic plan, communicates powerfully, champions change, etc.). The authors Zenger and Folkman note that two of the traits where women outscored men to the highest degree were taking initiative and driving for results, traits that have typically been considered male strengths in leadership. In *The Female Vision, Women's Real Power at Work* co-authors Sally Helgesen and Julie Johnson sum it up succinctly when they observe that without female vision organizations lose power; they become one dimensional in a multi-dimensional world.

The challenge now is for organizations, and the predominately male leaders who run them, to find ways to effectively remove the traditional barriers that have kept all but a small percentage of women from reaching the executive suite. Although important, it is clearly not enough to have a few "family friendly" policies in place. Companies must create the conditions where women can succeed. They must listen to and value women's perspectives. They must provide encouragement and sponsorship. They must foster an environment where women have equal access in a fully integrated corporate culture. It is undeniable that it is simply in their best interest to do so. Helgesen and Johnson provide specific suggestions to begin a transformation:

**Value diverse ways of knowing** – Recognize that intuitive thinking and sensitivity to environmental signals have merit. "Subjecting every assertion or suggestion to quantitative analysis makes it difficult to identify new trends because it forces the focus onto data that reflects the past. Habitually dismissing what cannot be 'proved' by numeric formula impairs an organization's ability to develop innovative solutions."

**Encourage mindfulness** – "In an era when 24/7 technologies have the capacity to raise expectations exponentially, organizations must become better at helping their employees push back against invasive demands. Otherwise, companies risk burning out their best and brightest people, fostering an environment in which habitual busyness becomes addictive and self-defeating."

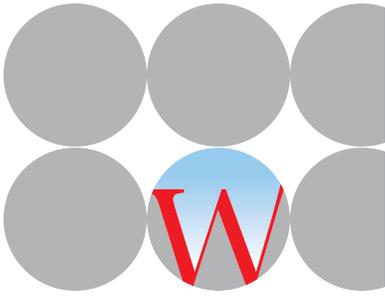
**Support webs of inclusion** – “Women thrive on strong relationships, both as a means for coping with stress and as a context in which to process and develop ideas. Simply put, the opportunity to develop high-quality relationships is what makes work worth it for many women. Organizations can therefore support women’s ability to make strategic contributions by encouraging them to connect broadly and deeply, and by making this an aspect of their (and their bosses’) performance review.” Furthermore, the authors point out that as the world becomes more web-like; an ability to see decisions in a larger human context provides a “profoundly strategic advantage”.

**Respect the power of empathy** – “Empathy can provide concrete benefits in organizations that seek to leverage customer insights, understand the competition, create more effective sales practices, and free the skills of talent development teams. . . Empathy is also an essential resource in managing a diverse workforce.”

Finally, we would like to note that women themselves have a responsibility to follow Gandhi’s advice to “be the change you want to see in the world”. If women aspire to reach the executive suite, they must be willing to put into practice the myriad lessons learned by the female leaders participating in this report that have already made it to the top. They must stretch beyond their comfort zones, take risks, speak up, and deliver on their promise. They owe that to themselves, their employers, and the women who will follow in their footsteps.

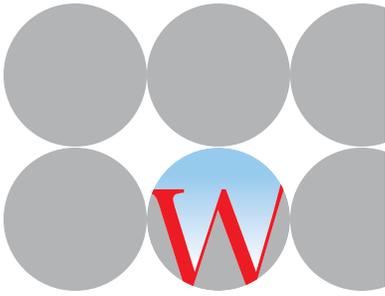
Visit our website to read current and historical research studies (including the 1996 and 2006 Women in Leadership reports).

**[www.omahawomensfund.org](http://www.omahawomensfund.org)**



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# Appendix A

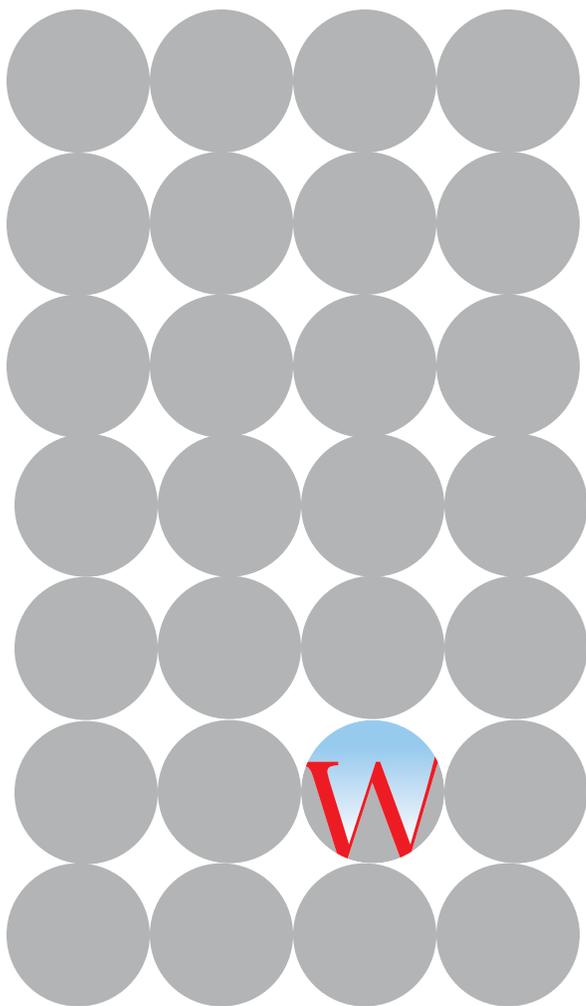
## Interview Questions

1. How do you define leadership?
2. What are the key skills needed to be an effective business leader?
3. What skills or characteristics do women bring to leadership positions?
4. Can you think of anything that would have better prepared you for leadership? What has prepared you?
5. How do choices for men and women differ when they pursue leadership positions?
6. Did you have a specific goal or vision for your career path? Describe.
7. How has your leadership in other settings (e.g. opportunities/expectations to be involved in community boards, etc...) impacted your leadership in a corporate setting, and vice versa?
8. Do you have role models of exceptional leadership in your life?
9. How do you define success?
10. What has been your greatest success?
11. What is it about you personally that has contributed to your success?
12. What were the major challenges that had to be addressed to succeed, and how did you overcome those challenges?
13. What personal choices were made in order to reach a leadership position?
14. How do you manage your time? Strategies for work-life balance?
15. Has networking been a factor in your success? Describe.
16. Did you have a mentor(s) prior to achieving your position? Mentor vs. sponsor?
17. What does your organization currently do to encourage women to develop their leadership skills?
18. What kind of programs or support would help women leaders at your level?
19. What advice would you give to other women?

## Demographics

1. Age:     < 40     40-44     45-49     50-54     55-59     60-64     65+
2. Education completed:  
    High School     Some College     Bachelor's     Graduate     Doctorate     Other: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Years at this company when receiving the job:     < 1     1-4     5-9     10-14     15+
4. Marital Status:     Married     Divorced / Separated     Single (Never Married)     Widowed
5. The number of dependent children at home under the age of 19:     <3     3-5     6-9     0+

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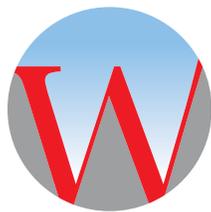
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