

Women in Executive Leadership: A Crack in the Glass Ceiling?

This forum offered the community an opportunity to discuss the recent and current involvement of women in local executive leadership in our community, to explore the different ways that women are advancing and to determine what the future holds.

IN HER OWN WORDS...by Amy Rice, Facilitator

On May 7th, I had the opportunity to facilitate a lively forum on *Women in Executive Leadership*. As a group, we sought to explore the local landscape for professional women, across the nonprofit and for-profit sectors, and identify ways in which women can advocate for their development and advancement. Although many in the room did not see a clear path to the executive level, nor a sufficient set of female role models at that level, there was no lacking desire to be successful and to forge forward on our chosen career paths. In light of this, we focused ourselves on the things we *can* do, and the things successful professionals *must* do, to champion and proactively position ourselves for fruitful and well-paced career progression.

Of the 30 or so people in the room, nearly everyone made vocal contributions. The comments ranged from observations based on particular experiences, to posing questions to the room, providing input to the topic at hand, empathizing with others, and generously sharing guidance and advice. Some of our key findings included:

- Mentoring:
 - The need to actively seek out mentors, and to identify multiple mentors who can serve multiple needs. For instance, one mentor may have functional expertise of interest; another may be particularly politically savvy, such that he/she can help to navigate the organization; yet another may have leadership qualities to emulate. And sometimes, a great mentor is someone who can be a sounding board for issues one faces, and help reflect back ways in which to manage a particular situation.
- Networking:
 - Relationships matter, regardless of whether one resides in a complex organization or small business, in a corporate staff role or a personal sales role. Invest in relationship development for its own sake, and don't be afraid to leverage those relationships when needed.
- Self-advocacy:
 - Champion your own successes: to a boss, to a recruiter or interviewer, to a client or potential client. Take ownership for results you achieve. Don't be shy in bringing visibility to your results and achievements.
 - Throw your name in the hat for a stretch job! Be confident about your qualifications for such a job, even if you haven't mastered every attribute you'll use in that job.
 - Manage your compensation. Be proactive about negotiating job offers, asking for a raise (regularly), and getting what you're worth without feeling that doing so is greedy or inappropriate. Know the going market rate for your skill set and assertively, yet tactfully, ensure that you reap what you're worth.

We also covered self-selection and the importance of making deliberate choices that work for the individual, as well as the degree to which we believe barriers to women – real or perceived – are influenced or altered by generational perspectives. The balance of issue exploration with tangible steps for individual development made for a robust forum with some optimistic takeaways. What began as a not-overly-positive session, due to the hard facts about decline of women in executive leadership positions, as well as the contextual observations of the group on limited opportunity and role models, quickly turned into a collaborative and engaged dialogue about the action we can take, and the behaviors for which we're individually accountable, to propel our own success. Even after the session, many participants stuck around to introduce themselves, network, and seek counsel from one another on specific situations.

Personally, this was not only my first forum experience as a facilitator, but my first forum experience overall. I was energized and encouraged by the diversity and dynamism in the room, and thrilled to have had the opportunity to engage on a topic of both personal interest and critical importance to the professional environment.

Attendees: Amy Rice (Chair) Lynette Austin, Irmatine Bealyer, Casey Bonar, Clanzenetta Brown, Susan Burroughs, Elizabeth Cline, Daphne Colbert, Teresa Davlantes, Ashley Folladori, Melba Furlow Herrington, Heather Gwinn, Marcus Haile, Megan Irvine Kolar, Helen Jackson, Suzy Jackson, Laura Lane, Jacquelyn Lowe, Jennifer Mansfield, Heather McEachen, Kathy McIlvaine, Elexia Moss, Laura-Meade Myrick, Roslyn Phillips, Linda Scasz, Caitlin Sellers, Barbara Shepherd, Nichelle Stone, Erin Vance, Juliette Vaughn, Courtney Weatherby, Rhonda Williams, Regina Williams, Valerie Williams, Jessica Williams and Tina Wirth *Staff Michelle Simkulet*

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