

Pathway to Leadership a Steep One for Women in Government

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Although women comprise half of the government's workforce, a new research study found that women continue to experience barriers, challenges and prejudice that impact their leadership paths, despite regulations legislated to reduce bias.

The research study, conducted by Utah State University's Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP), in conjunction with USU Extension and Utah Valley University, includes data gathered from 435 women who completed demographic questions and rated statements that highlighted their perceptions. Data were collected through an online survey designed to capture participants' career progression and advancement experiences, and not all participants responded to every question.

Susan Madsen, founding director of the UWLP and inaugural Karen Huntsman Endowed Professor of Leadership in USU's Huntsman School of Business, said the research findings can benefit both individuals and organizations.

"Understanding women's career progression experiences provides useful insight for other women who aspire to lead by creating a more realistic understanding of what to expect," she said. "And government agencies and supervisors can learn which leadership development strategies are most effective, what barriers exist and how to best support efforts to attract and retain qualified women leaders."

Of the women who participated in the study, 245 responded to the question asking them what they

considered pivotal to their leadership development. The following themes emerged:

1. Mentors, role models and coaches: 39% mentioned their importance, and some noted the lack of mentoring opportunities. Others encouraged women to mentor each other. Studies confirm that most mentoring opportunities occur between those of the same gender.
2. Significant projects or assignments: 19% highlighted involvement in committees, workgroups, meetings, task forces or interim assignments. Many viewed significant projects as opportunities to learn and gain experience. One participant likened it to "being invited to the table."
3. New job opportunities and visibility: 15% referenced new opportunities, and 11% cited the value of having visibility or exposure to leadership.
4. Encouragement and listening: 8% emphasized encouragement to apply for positions, and 7% noted being listened to or accepted. Some likened being heard to simply being acknowledged or respected.

When asked what frustrations they had experienced during their leadership advancement, 271 participants noted the following challenges: biased attitudes (52%); lack of organizational support (37%); stifled voices, meaning not being listened to, getting shut down, ignored, talked over, dismissed, discounted and condescended to (28%); pay equity with male colleagues (8%); and caregiver responsibilities (15%). One woman expressed, "Trying to parent while meeting the demands in a leadership position is soul crushing at times."

When asked how government leaders and organizations could better support women's advancement, 253 respondents shared advice (in order of importance).

1. Intentionally support women. One participant wrote, "Don't expect women to work harder than men to gain the same opportunities." Another shared, "Make room for women to advance. Be supportive. Let us sit at the table and have a voice."
2. Provide equal access to opportunities. Participants often commented that they did not want—or expect—preferential treatment. They just wanted to be treated equally. One individual stated, "It is important to make staffing decisions based on the best candidate rather than their gender or if they participate in a certain religion. Treat everyone equally and provide opportunities for women to advance beyond administrative assistant positions."

3. Embrace inclusivity and diversity. Many noted the need for organization-sponsored leadership, diversity and unconscious bias training and development opportunities.

4. Engage in open communication, including active listening and honest feedback. One woman said, "Be aware of the personal and professional goals of the women in your organization, and support them in the achievement of those goals."

5. Advocate for yourselves as women. Finally, there was a call for women to proactively advocate for themselves. One woman noted, "Do not be afraid to voice your opinion and stand up for yourself." Another shared, "We need to be proactive. We need to take courage and do things that make a difference. We need to promote ourselves better because often we are the only ones who will." A woman further suggested, "Be true to yourself and don't be afraid to put yourself out there. Be confident that you are capable of being a great leader and an example to those around you."

April Townsend, lead researcher for the study, said she hopes leaders and supervisors within Utah government agencies can learn from the women's experiences and advice offered in the research study.

"By intentionally incorporating advancement strategies offered in this brief, leaders can provide a more inclusive leadership environment that reflects a variety of experiences and perspectives," she said. "As our communities face increasing challenges, supporting the advancement of women can be a valuable tool for government leaders. We know that when men and women work together in leadership roles, their diverse perspectives can help the organization thrive."

To see the full research brief, visit <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/26-women-leaders-in-utah-government-their-paths-to-power.pdf>.

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