Many years ago, practically all organizations in this country were led by men.

Those days are long gone – especially in the nonprofit sector.

The majority of organizations in this industry are now led by women.

Last month we examined some of the various challenges facing female leaders in the nonprofit industry. The article looked at leadership bias, gender roles, salary gap, and gender traits.

This month we will hear from five inspiring ladies who lead Springfield nonprofit organizations.

Brandi Bartel
Executive Director, The Victim Center

Barb Brown-Johnson
Executive Director, The Child Advocacy Center

Katie Davis
CEO, Big Brothers/Big Sisters of the Ozarks

Debi Meed
CEO/President, United Way of the Ozarks

Pat Reiser
Executive Director, CASA of SW Missouri

The leaders were presented with seven questions. Their honest and thoughtful answers shed light on some of the challenges women face.

This month’s article will include responses to the first three questions. The responses to the remaining four questions will appear in next month’s issue.

(Because of the sensitive nature of these questions, responses are not connected to their names or organizations. Answers are not necessarily in the order of the names of participants.)

Have you ever experienced any inequality (pay, benefits, privileges, etc.)?

“I’ve never experienced discrimination related to pay, benefits, or privileges, but I have experienced sexual harassment while on the job. Often, sexual harassment is presented as a joke and thought of as funny.”

“When I was first hired for this position and we were negotiating salary, I asked about benefits. I was told that since I was married, I didn’t need benefits, and would be expected to obtain those through my husband!!”

Are there advantages to being a woman nonprofit leader, as it relates to having a program that has a “caring” or “nurturing” focus or in any other way?

“I do believe that women can generally make a better case for the caring and nurturing side of an organization because most of us are mothers and are very much in touch with that side of our personalities.”

“I don’t believe the advantages here are gender, but rather temperament and life-goal related. I believe having leadership skills, clear vision, the ability to influence beyond your authority and to bring diverse people and organizations together for the greater good is far more important than gender.”

“Both genders have their strengths and bring different attributes to leading an organization with a nurturing focus. However, many of our clients (at our center) are more fearful and mistrusting of men in general because their offender(s) were male. As a result, it’s probably easier for me to build rapport with those clients because of my gender.”

Do women leaders face unique challenges in managing male employees, different than a male leader would face?

“If both are mature and emotionally intelligent, I don’t think it makes any difference at all. I think that if male (or female) employees respect the female leader, gender need not cause any greater challenge than it normally would.”

“When I first assumed the role of CEO in a nonprofit and had to manage 25 staff I asked (my husband) for guidance. His style of management worked well for him, but I knew immediately it was not going to work for me. Men speaking with men or women speaking with women is very different than different sexes speaking.”

“No. Managing employees, male or female, is a specific skill that some people seem to be born with – but it is certainly a skill that can be learned. I have managed both male and female employees most of my professional life. The challenges I have experienced have derived from a person’s attitude, skill and ability rather than their gender.”

What are some of the challenges or obstacles you face, as a woman leading a nonprofit organization, that male leaders might not face?

“When a strong female leader’s style is similar to a man’s leadership style, she is often criticized for being ‘too pushy or strong,’ while a man, exhibiting the same decisions and characteristics, would be praised for being a strong, decisive leader.”

“(One) challenge is (f) unequal access to informal networking or face time with decision makers. I don’t believe it is intentional, but men tend to invite me to lunch, golf, discussion groups, etc. because it is comfortable. Maybe without realizing it, women are excluded from these informal settings and can lag behind in forming important relationships and partnerships. We must work harder to establish these relationships in more formal settings.”

“Early on, I had a very male-dominated board. I saw a distinct difference in their perception of my competence, and in their desire to micro-manage. Indeed, it often felt like they took a great deal of pride in ‘helping’ me make decisions that I didn’t need assistance with. I sincerely doubt that a male leader would have had a similar experience.”

“Sometimes I feel like our community finds it more compelling when a man advocates for those who are hurting, versus a woman. If a male leader talks about child abuse, for instance, people seem to be more attuned and more compelled to take action than a female leader giving the same message.”

“Society expects to hear from female voices on issues related to crimes against women and children, so when a man speaks out, it draws attention. As a female leader, I want more men to speak out against (particular issues), but I also recognize that as a woman, I have to work harder to be heard.”

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