For the last three months, we’ve looked at some of the unique challenges facing women who lead nonprofit organizations.

Five ladies who oversee Springfield area nonprofit organizations have shared their perspectives on what it’ll be to be a female leader.

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, United Way of the Ozarks

Pat Reiser  
Executive Director, CASA of SW Missouri

In this final article, we ask the ladies about fundraising, balancing work with family, and advice to young women who aspire to lead an organization.

(Because of the sensitive nature of these questions, responses are not in the order of the ladies listed above.)

Has being a woman been an asset or liability (or neither) when working with funders, asking for financial support?

“I think donors, particularly female donors, might relate to me when I ‘sell’ the mission and tell the difficult stories related to this mission. At least, I often get a stronger response typically from female donors than from male donors.”

“A few times I’ve experienced a degree of sexual harassment from the occasional donor, and once, from a board member, in the form of suggestive comments and/or sexual innuendo.”

“I would guess that men speaking with men might have an advantage. I firmly believe that you have to be a strong assertive female to ask for money or you don’t get anywhere.”

“Being the Executive Director of a nonprofit organization that serves victims of crime can be gratifying. It’s a responsibility that I take very seriously because I know that my effectiveness as a leader has a direct impact on our organization’s ability to change lives, and often save them. The stress of the job, combined with personal life challenges that every leader encounters, takes its toll.”

“I must say that it has been my personal life that has suffered, not the organization I worked for. First, let me say that I could have NEVER been the head of a nonprofit if my children were still at home.”

“It is amazing to me that throughout my career, when I have made the decision to put my family first, it always resulted in a better position with more responsibility rather than a loss. In work and in life, I have never been hurt by putting my family first.”

“If you asked me if I would do it all again, I don’t know what I would say. While this work is tremendously gratifying, it is also extremely hard on you.”

“As the female (especially right after my daughter was born), I felt more of an obligation to be the one to come home over my husband. Luckily, my husband and I have found a good balance and I am thankful for two things:

1. My husband respects my role as a leader and my need to work in the evenings/on the weekends, so we rarely have disagreements over work/life balance

2. We have an incredibly supportive extended family (that) all live in Springfield and have agreed to support my decision to keep my role... Without those two things I don’t think I would be able to successfully keep my role as a female leader.”

How have the demands of your own family/personal life affected your ability to keep up with the demands of running the organization?

“1. Build relationships. Wherever you are right now in your work life, be willing to help others, be a mentor, say ‘yes’ as much as you can.

2. Learn as much as you can about all aspects of your business. As CEO, I had to both fix the toilet and meet with President Obama!

3. Stay current - Read as much as you can. If someone suggests a book to you try to read it. I try to read or re-read at least one book or study every month.

4. Along with the general skills, abilities and behaviors of a CEO, I think you also need these:
   a. Always assume the best.
   b. Have integrity, tell the truth, be kind.
   c. Be kind.
   d. Stay calm.

As CEO you will be faced with many situations, some will be more than you think you can handle. You will need to take a breath, steady yourself and lead in those situations.”

What advice would you give women who aspire to be a CEO/Executive Director of a nonprofit organization? Specific traits or behaviors that might help her advance?

“1. My advice to ‘younger’ female leaders would be to hone their strategic skills so that they can be more competitive in the workforce as they move into leadership positions. Effective leaders exhibit both male and female characteristics of leadership while staying true to themselves and learning to highlight their own strengths. I would also encourage them to ask for what they’re worth! If their board values and appreciates the work they do, they will respond appropriately.

2. ‘Traits: willing to work long hours, can successfully ask people for money, be able to inspire others to your way of thinking, empathy - lots of empathy, not have to work for a large salary, stay healthy, put others first.”

“Find a mentor. Learn the emotionalsoft skills of the trade, along with the social media. Be humble enough to work well with others; get your hands dirty and listen, yet confident enough to take risks; speak up; and go outside your comfort zone.”

“Your kids have to be grown. You must have the complete support of your spouse or significant other. The nonprofit must be financially sound. The nonprofit has to have sufficient staff to get the job done; you can’t do it all yourself. The Board must have 100% buy-in; they must donate, show up for meetings and help with fundraisers. You must be able to read and understand financial reports; if this is going to be the organization you head, you have to know where you are financially.”

“2. Always assume the best.

3. Have integrity, tell the truth, be kind.

4. Be kind.

5. Stay calm.

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For more information on nonprofit leadership, visit www.Drury.edu/Nonprofit