

Recruiting the Next Generation of Local Elected Officials

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Local government officials focus their time, thoughts, and energy on creating a better future for their communities. Every two years, identifying the next generation of leaders takes center stage as municipal officials and constituents alike think about who could assume leadership roles. Elected officials want to have confidence that when they are ready to leave office there will be qualified candidates willing to step up and take on the role. Officials directly involved in local government, because of their recognized roles as leaders and influentials, find themselves in the best positions to recruit that next generation of leadership.

Recruiting candidates who will lead local government into the future may not be as simple as it first appears. Research tells us that diverse governing bodies make better decisions. In fact, research from the private sector indicates, “Corporations that embrace diversity are more open to thinking in a broad way about their mission, more connected to their customers and more open to new approaches to how and why they operate.” Yet, local elected boards in Wisconsin do not necessarily reflect a community’s diversity.

According to a recent Wisconsin Women’s Council report, of the 13,000 elected offices in Wisconsin, women held only 23% of the seats overall and 14% of leadership positions. Only about 23% of city council and 22% of village board members statewide are women.¹ Systematically encouraging more women to run for office may be part of the solution to identifying the next generation of leaders, electing more diverse governing bodies, and giving voice to citizens otherwise lacking advocates.

According to the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), when women serve, they provide a different perspective, more likely raising concerns about safety in the community, gender equity issues, education, and economic issues related to children and families. Women in office are also more likely to involve the public in decision-making processes, and they are typically more persistent in following through on constituent concerns.

For the past three years, the University of Wisconsin-Extension Local Government Center has undertaken research to determine why relatively few women run for local office in Wisconsin and to identify approaches that recruiters can utilize to encourage more women to run.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies have been developed from focus groups of women who have successfully run for and served in local elected office in Wisconsin. Focus group participants were asked about their experiences and perspectives on what effectively and successfully got them interested in running and serving in office.

- ✓ **STRATEGY 1: Identify the position and be clear on why you are recruiting for that particular position.**

¹ <http://bit.ly/WIWomenInGov2015>

- Consider starting with a vacant position. Women expressed more concerns about running against an incumbent.
 - It may be easier to recruit women to boards/councils where there is already one woman serving.
- ✓ **STRATEGY 2: Build trust with the candidate.**
- Make “the ask” comfortable, face to face, and informal.
 - Find someone to help you who has a previous relationship with the recruit.
 - Include different kinds of people in the recruitment process—local elected officials, friends, influential people, and/or family members. It may be beneficial to find other women to help you recruit women.
 - Conduct a one-on-one with the possible candidate without any kind of request. This is an opportunity to get to know someone better—what their interests are, what their concerns are, where their passions lie. This could take the form of asking them for what they would look for in a good candidate for the position you are targeting.
- ✓ **STRATEGY 3: Be persistent.**
- The candidate may never have considered running for an office. The recruitment process may be similar to planting and nurturing a seed. You will likely need to give them time to internalize the idea of running and seeing themselves in the position.
 - Ask multiple times in multiple ways. Consider a step-by-step approach, including encouraging different people to make “the ask.”
- ✓ **STRATEGY 4: Make it clear that you believe in them.**
- Candidates need to hear that they are viewed as leaders; that they are competent, that they have the necessary skills, that they will do a good job, and that they are respected in the community.
 - Successful candidates have indicated that it means a great deal to them be asked to run.
 - Convey that you are interested in them as a candidate because you believe in their strengths and what they would bring to elected office – it’s not just about filling a position.
- ✓ **STRATEGY 5: Emphasize the candidate’s ability to make a real difference.**
- Focus group participants indicated that they want to make a positive difference in their communities. They are less interested in simply holding a particular position. For this reason, it’s important to know what their priorities are.
 - Many women in our focus groups referred to themselves as advocates. This can be a selling point in recruiting women; they can be an advocate for a cause, a group, and their community.
 - Emphasize the potential for reshaping the current position to address neglected concerns and issues in the jurisdiction.
- ✓ **STRATEGY 6: Assure the candidate that she can learn on the job.**
- Assure her that she is already qualified to begin the job.
 - Focus on the candidate’s strengths and not on what the candidate does not know – parliamentary procedure, zoning codes, curb and gutter dimensions, etc.
 - There is plenty to learn, but that comes with time in the position and many resources exist to help support elected officials.

✓ **STRATEGY 7: Be prepared to commit to supporting the candidate.**

- Help with figuring out the nuts and bolts of getting on the ballot, campaigning, building a support network, fundraising, etc. As an example, door-to-door campaigning, while enjoyed by many women candidates, can be an intimidating thought for some.
- Remember that support will be needed before, during, and after the campaign. Placing your name on the ballot puts you in a vulnerable position; candidates need to feel supported. Yet, many candidates say that their sense of responsibility overtook their sense of vulnerability and trepidation.

REFRAMING CONCERNS

Women likely have a very different understanding of the process of campaigning and holding office. Their different understanding often creates barriers to participation. The goal is to provide different perspectives on campaigning and holding office, i.e. to reframe the questions and barriers.

If potential candidate says...	You might say or do...
She lacks an interest or willingness to ask for campaign funds AND/OR she has concerns about a negative impact on her personal finances.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let the candidate know that for this election she would not have to raise funds (most local elections require little, if any, campaign expenditure). • For campaigns that require funding, you and others will help with/take care of fund raising. • Be honest and realistic about the financial commitment.
She is concerned about the amount of time it will take from family and home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure that the candidate has a realistic understanding of the time commitment—it may be less than she thinks. • In the case of mothers, some women stated that this could be a win-win with the children getting a better appreciation of local government. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Chance to get the children involved. ○ Chance to set an example for the children.
She lacks a willingness to meet voters door-to-door	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell candidates that many women who dreaded this later report that this was their favorite part of running for office (though there are “moments”). • Offer to find people to accompany her. • Do not go door-to-door when the Packers are playing.
She fears a negative political atmosphere.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell candidate that she has the interpersonal skills to change that atmosphere. • May not be what she thinks; often local situation looks nothing like the state and federal.

<p>She has concerns about criticism.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissent is a sign of respect. Disagreement indicates that your ideas have merit that have earned a response.
<p>She perceives a lack of support for her candidacy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test the waters, find out what others think of her as a possible candidate. • Reiterate her strengths that are important to the job—listening, communication, problem-solving, conflict resolution, collaborative approach to tackling issues, respectful dialogue, wisdom, etc. • Challenge her right then and there to write down the names of two dozen people who would support her. You do the same. Now you have nearly 50 people you can call for support.
<p>She does not think she would do a good job</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize that no one starts in these positions knowing all there is to know. • Everyone engages in on-the-job training. • Reiterate her strengths • Talk about the cross-over skills (from business or non-profit to government) that the candidate has
<p>She fears losing the election</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research shows that women and men win elections at the same rate. • Losing is always a possibility. But, talk about her strengths. • Focus on the difference the candidate can make; “it’s worth the risk.” • Running for office is a good learning experience for the next time you run.
<p>She does not want to run against the incumbent.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many incumbents want to step down but keep running because no one else will run. • Emphasize the idea that this is not an athletic competition, it is about providing choices to the voters. • Emphasize the public service aspect of running and impact she can have. • Find a position that is vacant to run for.

OTHER AVENUES

Increase women’s engagement in local government by getting women appointed to local commissions and boards for which they do not need to campaign. Previous involvement in local government was cited by many of the women in our focus groups.

Conclusion

Local government decisions influence everyone. Women in elected office provide representation to women in the community that they otherwise would not have received. Additionally, research shows that more diverse groups make better decisions. Having more women on local boards could change the

dynamics of how things operate for the better by having more balanced conversations and decisions, by challenging tradition and conventions, and by obtaining outcomes that are different than they otherwise would have been. To increase diversity on local boards, candidate recruiters will likely need to take a strategic approach that includes more systematic efforts targeted at qualified female candidates who might not otherwise consider running.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Some of the main findings from our initial work include ...

- Women perceive many more barriers to running for office than do men.
- While both men and women who have never run for local elected office view many of the same barriers as a challenge, women are more likely than men to view the barrier as significant.
- Women cite a number of confidence and perception barriers that do not seem as troublesome to men.
- In general, people (both men and women) who have never run for office view the process of running and holding office as more daunting than those who ran and were elected. In other words, elected officials view the process quite differently from those who have never run.

For more information about the barriers to women running for local office, please see the article entitled “Political Ambition: Why Don’t More Women Run?” in [the February 2016 edition of *The Municipality*](#).