



Developing and supporting unity champions within municipal government



Jennifer Ladouceur is the President of Women Leadership Nation, a company committed to helping close the gender gap and create unified workplaces that attract, develop, engage, and retain women leaders. She can be reached at 647-449-8511 or jennifer@WomenLeadershipNation.com.

For many municipalities, when it comes to closing the gender gap and increasing unity in the workplace, they don't know where to start and fall into the trap of doing disjointed initiatives or tie it purely to culture.

Why not begin by empowering unity champions? This article offers a guide to identifying, engaging, and supporting champions within your organization to create sustainable change throughout the entire organization.

Need for Change

Despite the gains women have made in the workforce, they remain underrepresented at all levels of political leadership in this country. According to the Canadian Women's Foundation: "Although Canada's federal cabinet achieved gender parity in 2015, only 26 percent of the seats in the House of Commons, and provincial and municipal governments are filled by women."

Municipalities represent the closest form of government to the public and municipal leaders have impact and influence that can positively affect communities. The time has come for municipalities to join the movement toward gender equality and emerge as a role model for other local governments, not-for-profits, and businesses.

FCM's study "Diverse Voices for Change," identifies systemic barriers, stereotypes, and biases, as well as a lack of encouragement by authorities, as major barriers to women's participation in municipal government. The study also states, "To achieve gender parity and open doors for women across all diversities, we need women in leadership roles. We need women and men willing to champion women

running for office and to support them while they remain in office."

The United Nations believes gender champions are such an integral part of reaching gender parity that in Geneva in 2015 they announced the International Gender Champions initiative and created a platform for senior international leaders to unite in building a world where gender differences do not prevent individuals from achieving their potential.

What is a unity champion?

The actual definition of a champion is "a person who fights or argues for a cause or on behalf of someone else."

The primary goal of a unity champion is to promote awareness of equality and diversity in day-to-day operations. This can be achieved by authentically communicating and increasing the visibility of gender initiatives. Those efforts can be supported by motivating, providing direction, and implementing core values and corporate culture that reflect diversity, helping to ensure the municipality moves toward a more gender-balanced and inclusive government.

Unity champions need to have the knowledge of the diverse culture that already exists within their municipality internally across all lines of business and externally among strategic operational partners.

The unity champions should include both men and women from all levels across the organization and must be inclusive and encourage radical collaboration. These champions must demonstrate their commitment not only through words, but also through tangible actions.

Empowering and supporting unity champions solidifies a municipality's commitment to achieving a unified government and community.

Some of the benefits of having unity champions include:

- improved awareness;
- improved performance;
- stronger relationships;
- improved collaboration;
- higher levels of engagement; and
- increase in meeting unity initiatives.

Four Phases of Empowering Gender Champions within Municipalities

Unity champions are essential to creating a unified workplace.

There are four critical phases to embracing and clearly defining the specific roles for unity champions. The need for support in creating a unified workplace will vary, depending on which of the four phases you are currently in. The four phases include:

1. Discover Phase
2. Strategy Phase
3. Launching and Building Phase
4. Measurement and Recognition Phase

Phase One: Unity Discovery

Now is the time to achieve greater awareness of your current diversity landscape. The unity discovery phase relates to exploring the identification, attraction, preparation, and support of unity champions. Having a clear understanding and being aware of the current climate and workplace strengths, challenges, opportunities, and overall unity strategy is essential to becoming a successful unity champion.

This phase involves:

- defining the specific role of a unity champion;
- building the business case for increasing unity within the organization and across the community;
- exploring the organization's existing corporate culture and vision for the future;
- identifying conscious and unconscious bias within the organization;
- uncovering opportunities across departments for growth and leadership development;
- increasing employee's self-awareness and connection to purpose;

- embracing training and experiential learning;
- developing specific and measurable unity skills that represent behaviours and habits you would like to see employees and leaders demonstrate; and
- creating a corporate culture that embraces unity, which involves diversity, inclusion, and collaboration.

Phase Two: Unity Strategy

Closing the gender gap and increasing unity in the workplace requires all initiatives and activities to be based on a strong foundation. Creation of a unity strategy that is rooted and deeply connected to the overall corporate strategy is a critical document that helps guide the activities of elected officials, senior leaders, champions, employees, and other key stakeholders. A unity strategy should clearly identify goals, objectives, and realistic action plans with key milestones.

This phase involves:

- defining outcomes and expectations;
- identifying roles and responsibilities;
- setting unity goals and objectives;
- creating an action plan;
- identifying and engaging role models; and
- branding and embracing unity as a deeper corporate culture paradigm shift.

Phase Three: Launching and Building

Champions are key to the success of creating the ideal environment and corporate culture that supports unity. This is an exciting time. It is time for your champions to be seen and heard. Having a dedicated kick off information session that focuses on diversity and inclusion goals and strategies, introduces unity champions and answers questions and concerns critical to raising awareness and generating excitement throughout the entire organization. It is crucial that communication and interactions between unity champions, departments, and employees be delivered clearly, objectively, and frequently.

This phase involves:

- launching the new unity initiatives;
- introducing unity champions within your organization;
- ongoing champion support;
- inspiring grassroots unity initiatives; and

- demonstrating support from mayor, council, and the senior leadership team.

Phase Four: Measurement and Recognition

Measurement tools and ongoing support are essential to success. Having the proper measurement tools will allow you to determine what the most successful strategies are and give you the opportunity to highlight and share the successes across the organization.

This phase involves:

- measuring goals;
- recognizing and celebrating progress made;
- sharing stories of success;
- promoting new grassroots initiatives;
- offering ongoing unity and leadership training and access to resources; and
- adjusting your unity strategy as required.

Characteristics of a Unity Champion

Unity champions help empower women as leaders and decision makers, help implement gender inclusive policies and supports, inspire a shift in perspectives, and create safe and participatory environments.

Champions in your municipal government may include colleagues, elected officials, managers, union representatives, and members of boards and advisory committees. Champions from communities may include project partners, leaders from equity groups, women's organizations, multi-cultural media outlets, religious leaders, and youth groups.

Champions push for equity and inclusion and they bring people and resources together. The more support you can get from champions in all areas of the municipality and its various communities, the greater your chances of success. Champions come with different strengths and approaches but here are some key values, characteristics, and actions of a successful unity champion.

Characteristics of a successful unity champion include:

- has strong influencing, engagement, and unity skills/behaviours/habits;
- is willing to acquire knowledge and gain a deep insight into their organization;

CHAMPIONS, cont'd on p. 44

It is advisable to consult externally and internally before council reconciles on its priorities. An independent external expert with no vested interest in specific outcomes should facilitate the consultation process. Independent assistance will foster trust among stakeholders and help ensure feedback received is recorded accurately.

It is important to avoid falling into the trap of only seeking input from the management team. All levels of the municipality's workforce possess invaluable hands-on experience and expertise. Their collective feedback and engagement can pay dividends. External outreach should include professionally facilitated sessions with a range of demographics, including youth, seniors, adults, service clubs, Chambers of Commerce, business improvement areas, employers, investors, and land developers.

There are many different methods and opportunities to consult. From surveys to working sessions with real-time data collection using specialized software, the options are endless. Council represents everyone in a municipality, not just special interest groups or the ones with political influence. No matter how you choose to inform your plan, make sure you collect your ideas from as many potential stakeholders as possible.

Basic Elements of a Strategic Plan

This topic could fill the pages of an epic novel. Stripping it down, a strategic plan requires the following.

Mission statement – A mission statement is a clear declaration about what the municipality does. Mission statements can be one of the most challenging elements of the strategic planning process to determine. The tendency is to try to say too much. This can water down the message and lead to confusion. Remember, you are seeking buy-in to the plan, not bewilderment. Keep it succinct.

Vision statement or visions? – You can go with a singular vision statement or shortlist of your municipality's visions for the future. I prefer the latter, as it allows for more flexibility. Regardless of the option you choose, a vision is an affirmation of your municipality's goals

and objectives. It sets the stage for what you will do and how you will do it.

Core values – Core values are the municipality's beliefs and are what guides your actions. Core values are a confirmation of who you are as a council, staff, and organization. It reminds us all how we will administer our affairs, deal with issues, or respond to the people. They will take the form of a word or two, but they may also be further defined. Core values tend to be universal rather than unique. We often see core values such as honesty, integrity, or responsiveness. It is important to keep core values prominent in a strategic plan and also throughout any organization wherever the opportunity presents itself.

Key priorities and action items – These are where the rubber hits the road. They are the actual things we will do to realize our goals and objectives. They should be accompanied with timelines and should be measurable. This allows us to report back to council on the key priorities and action items. For example, we will complete a project or study as a key priority within 18 months.

Reporting – Reporting is essential. As in the example above, it is where many plans fail. Absence of regular monitoring and reporting guarantees your plan will lose its relevance. When a plan becomes irrelevant, it loses momentum. Loss of momentum is the beginning of the end. Status of strategic plan key priorities and action items should be standing elements on staff and management meeting agendas. They should be linked to departmental work plans and should ultimately be included in an annual strategic plan report card. This is where the champions must engage and re-engage to keep the plan alive and well.

Keeping it Top of Mind

While it is important to document your plan in sufficient detail to preserve why and how you arrived at the outcomes, it is rare to find staff regularly reading it cover to cover. An "at-a-glance" document is a one-page synopsis of your plan. It is a quick tool kept within reach at all times for easy reference. This will keep the fundamental elements of the plan "top of mind," helping it retain its relevance and maintain its momentum. **MW**

- understands and articulates the business case for diversity;
- is visible and takes the time to understand their role in making a change;
- has a strong level of confidence in relation to gender diversity;
- demonstrates the core values associated with unity (diverse, inclusive, collaborative);
- is an effective networker and has a desire to learn and adapt best practices; and
- is skilled at answering difficult questions and having courageous conversations.

Actions of a Unity Champion

Actions of a unity champion include:

- starts difficult conversations;
- asks tough questions;
- speaks passionately and openly about gender diversity;
- challenges the status quo;
- creates an inclusive environment to allow employees to be their authentic selves;
- shares their stories and their personal journey;
- acts as a role model and a mentor;
- teaches by example ("walk the walk");
- encourages and supports inclusive practices;
- hosts meetings and raises awareness for gender diversity, both internally and externally; and
- encourages others to become unity champions.

Municipalities Can Lead the Way Forward

If you asked most municipalities what they are doing to close the gender gap and create more unified workplaces, you would find many are unsure where to start. An incredible starting point is to begin by creating unity champions.

The road to unity, diversity, inclusion, and collaboration is one with many challenges, and exciting opportunities for growth, development, and innovation. This journey is an opportunity to transform your local government through new habit formation, skills development, and new knowledge acquisition. And, collaborating and supporting unity champions is a pivotal step to advancing gender equality and inclusion in municipalities and unifying local government. **MW**