



# Mastering the leadership labyrinth within local government



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Women have broken through the “glass ceiling” by succeeding in holding top positions of authority in senior leadership. The top leadership roles in municipal government include the elected mayor and, within the operational senior management team, the city manager or chief administrative officer (CAO). Progress has been made in local government with respect to women becoming mayors of some of Canada’s largest municipalities. In 2018, for example, Valérie Plante made history by becoming the first-ever woman mayor of Montréal – 375 years after the city’s founding. Many women have also achieved the level of city manager or CAO, so a route to the top does exist.

In *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders* (2007), authors Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli explain how “the glass ceiling metaphor conveys a rigid, impenetrable barrier; but, barriers to women’s advancement are now more permeable, as women have gained access to a wide range of leadership roles.” This is certainly the case in municipalities, particularly as we look at the director and manager levels of leadership.

Although the authors of *Through the Labyrinth* focused on the experiences of women in the private

sector, their observations also relate to the public sector. We can no longer adequately depict the gender gap in municipal government as an impenetrable glass ceiling – since a path to leadership *does* exist for women. That is not to say it is an easy journey, however, or to imply that we are anywhere close to reaching parity.

## Time for a New Metaphor

*“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.” – Richard Buckminster Fuller*

Although women have broken through the glass ceiling by holding senior level leadership positions, they still find themselves having to navigate numerous obstacles, roadblocks, and dead-ends on their path to leadership. In many cases, such obstacles are not solvable by leadership training alone, and require fundamental changes to the corporate culture and how women leaders are supported.

The time has come for a new perspective – one that will help us advance women leaders. It’s time for a new metaphor ... It’s time to look at the journey toward leadership as a complex labyrinth that

must be navigated in order to reach new career levels.

In *Through the Labyrinth*, the authors introduce the metaphor of the labyrinth, which “captures the varied challenges confronting women as they travel, often on indirect paths, sometimes through alien territory, on their way to leadership.”

It is important to recognize that the leadership journey will look and feel different for every individual. For instance, the journey for men is typically more direct, whereas women face more obstacles, roadblocks, and blind spots.

The journey is also influenced greatly by the type of leadership goals and work environment. In local government, due to the complexity and wide scope of diverse service lines (i.e., operations, planning, public works, economic development, parks and recreation, fire, police, etc.), the municipal leadership labyrinth presents very real challenges for women striving to grow to the next level. However, the opportunity to succeed does exist.

As Eagly and Carli write, “Because all labyrinths have a viable route to their centre, it is understood that goals are attainable. But, passing through a labyrinth is more demanding than traveling a straight path. Thus, the labyrinth provides an encouraging metaphor for aspiring women and recognition of the challenges that these women face.”

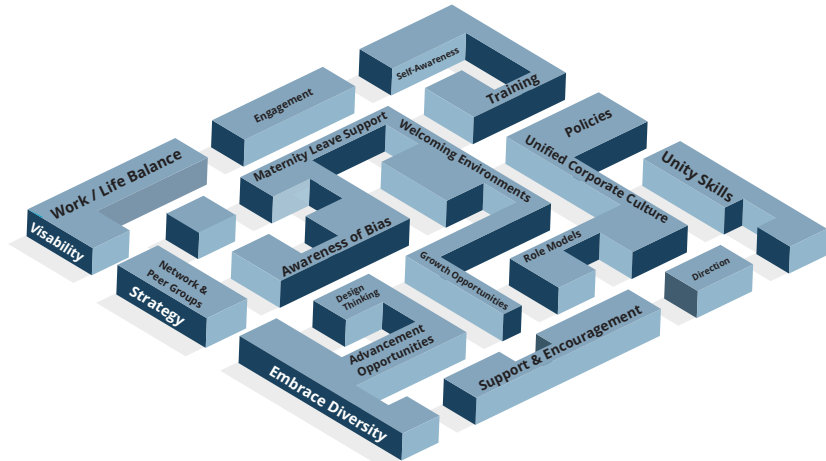
Today, if you look at the top 20 municipalities in Canada, based on population size (i.e., Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver, Calgary, etc.), only two local governments currently have women holding the top executive position of city manager or CAO.

Shocked by this lack of progress, I decided to continue my research and identify the number of female mayors in those same top 20 municipalities. The results were equally as disappointing and nowhere near parity, with only two of these local governments having a female mayor leading the city.

In local government, significant work still needs to be done to make progress toward achieving parity in the workplace.

The reality is, women navigate the workplace differently from men, typically experiencing indirect pathways toward achieving their desired professional and personal goals. Therefore,

## Creating the Ideal Labyrinth



the time has come to better understand how we can effectively support women leaders on their journey through the municipal leadership labyrinth.

3. Lack of Networks
4. Limited Training and Growth Support
5. Unconscious Bias

Progress in achieving parity in the workplace will only be achieved with strong leadership at the top and a clear commitment to changing the corporate culture and creating “gender champions” within the organization.

Leadership within our municipalities needs to reflect the diversity of our communities.

### Five Obstacles, Roadblocks, and Blind Spots for Women in Local Government

By looking at the leadership journey as a labyrinth, we are able to uncover and evaluate the obstacles, roadblocks, and blind spots that are making it challenging for women to progress; and, we can begin to create strategies for overcoming those obstacles, as well as a more effective roadmap toward growth.

Although every organization has its own unique labyrinth, some of the most common obstacles, roadblocks, and blind spots that make it difficult for women to reach senior level leadership positions in local government include:

1. Culture of Disunity
2. Work/Life Balance Pressures

Let’s take a closer look at each of these challenges.

#### 1. Culture of disunity

A disunified, toxic culture makes it infinitely more complicated for women – and truly all employees – to reach the levels of leadership they aspire to. Disunity makes the roadmap nearly impossible to navigate without getting lost, having to make u-turns, or deciding to leave in search of a new destination altogether.

Progress in achieving parity in the workplace will only be achieved with strong leadership at the top and a clear commitment to changing the corporate culture and creating “gender champions” within the organization. Local governments must commit to nurturing a culture of unity, which involves developing an environment that thrives on UNITY = Diversity + Inclusion + Collaboration.

## 2. Work/life balance pressures

One of the greatest challenges to women leaders reaching senior levels of leadership is the struggle between balancing work expectations and family responsibilities. Take maternity leave, for example, where the prime years for having children typically coincides with the critical years for establishing a successful career. The reality is, this timing can make it difficult to regain career momentum.

In the municipal government, particularly at manager, director, and commissioner levels, the job often creeps into personal lives, with greater demands on having to work late and, in some cases, over the weekend.

Parenting pressures and disproportionate balance of domestic work among working mothers “does add to the challenges women leaders face in negotiating the labyrinth.”<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Lack of networks

Research shows that men are much better at building networks of support, and these networks are critical to growing into top leadership positions. As Janet Kestin and Nancy Vonk note in *Darling You Can't Do Both*, “If you want to get anywhere near the top, networking can put you in the express lane. The benefits can't be overstated.”

Women also lack the mentors and sponsors necessary to help them advance in their career. Most women understand the value that mentors and sponsors bring, yet many still don't have one. These networks can provide the support, encouragement, and access to opening doors to opportunities for professional and personal growth.

## 4. Limited training and growth support

With the fiscal challenges facing municipalities today, training budgets (which, in most cases, were very limited, are further reduced) make it very difficult to support women leaders on their journey.

Growing and advancing in your career requires constant development, beginning with achieving a stronger awareness of who you are, where you want to go, and having access to the skills and knowledge necessary to get there.

In *Through the Labyrinth*, Eagly and Carli write: “Given these twists and turns in the corporate labyrinth, women, more often than men, feel that they have to leave their organizations to have opportunities to advance.” So, when training, support, and engagement opportunities are missing, it seems that women leave to find new opportunities where they feel the environment exists to support their advancement.

## 5. Unconscious bias

At some point in their lives, everyone has likely experienced unconscious bias. In a workplace, this type of bias can negatively affect hiring decisions, growth opportunities, and abilities to see the truth in critical situations.

As noted in *Through the Labyrinth*, “We all use stereotypes as shortcuts to guide our judgments, but are generally unaware of their presence.

Although these stereotypes can be helpful in daily life, they easily lead us astray. They bias the way we process information, because we interpret or assimilate new information to fit our stereotypes.”

One of the biggest problems facing municipalities today is that they are unaware of the unconscious biases that exist within their organization. And, they are unsure of how to identify them and how to create a more conscious organization.

## Five Strategies for Finding Your Path Through the Municipal Leadership Labyrinth

In *Through the Labyrinth*, authors Eagly and Carli write: “Women can't tear down the labyrinth on their own.” A solution requires both men and women creating a supportive environment where women can successfully navigate the municipal leadership labyrinth, and thrive professionally and personally.

When looking at some possible solutions for helping women successfully navigate their career labyrinth, recommendations include the following.

### 1. Creating a culture of unity

It all begins with a sincere commitment from the mayor, council, and the senior management team to create a culture of unity. Taking the steps necessary to better understand the current situation and set measurable goals for moving closer to parity.

As identified in the Rockefeller Foundations 2017 study *Women in Leadership: Tackling Corporate Culture for the Top*, “Company culture and leadership attitudes are perceived as major hurdles to leadership roles.” To address this issue, local governments need to have “gender champions” within the organization that include both men and women who are committed to achieving the organization's unity goals.

### 2. Work/life balance

Municipalities should be open to exploring new, flexible work environments to accommodate family responsibilities. Employees also need to be offered tools and resources necessary to help them manage stress, balance work/life responsibilities, and thrive over the long term.

### 3. Create networks of support

Formal mentorship and sponsorship programs need to become commonplace within local governments at all levels, including the employee, management, director, and commissioner levels. Peer-to-peer networks should also be created in an effort to breakdown silos and encourage higher levels of collaboration.

### 4. Provide engaging training and development solutions

Lifelong learning is essential for career growth. Access to authentic leadership training, unity training, and professional skill development is a commitment governments must make to help women successfully navigate their careers.

Organizations also need to learn how to embrace their strengths and leverage women leaders' innate skills. In her book, *Own It: The Power of Women at Work*, Sallie Krawcheck writes: “The ability to see problems holistically, emotional intelligence, communication – are all skills females excel at. The

1 Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli (2007), *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders*, Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.



workplace is changing in ways that, research shows, play to women's innate skills.”

Providing opportunities for cross-discipline training or shadowing is also another excellent strategy for helping prepare women to rise to new levels.

5. Recognize and address unconscious bias

According to Kristen Pressner, Global Head of HR for Roche Diagnostics, “The thing about unconscious bias that makes it so hard is the fact that it’s unconscious.” In her TEDx Talk, she describes the “flip it to test it” concept – which involves mentally flipping or swapping the person in any given scenario with his or her opposite, to see if it sounds strange. For example, think about the traditional characteristics that rightly or wrongly subconsciously associated with male and female employees:

Male Employees	Female Employees
Leader	Supportive
Provider	Emotional
Assertive	Helpful
Strong	Sensitive
Driven	Fragile

Now, how does it feel when you simply flip those characteristics? How does it feel to think of a male employee as

“emotional or sensitive”? If it feels strange or out of place, then you have identified an unconscious bias.

The “flip it to test it” trick is a quick and easy way for everyone in the organization to check themselves and the decisions they make.

Unlocking the Potential of the Future

With a high level of uncertainty and complexity, the public sector organizational environment is constantly changing, shifting the traditional bureaucratic administration toward a more adaptive and visionary mode of public leadership.

Still, as noted in the 2017 report by McKinsey Global Institute (*The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Canada*), “We can't unlock the full potential of our workplace until we see how far from equality we really are.”

Creating a more unified workplace is necessary for creating the local government of the future. This approach will make it possible to embrace leadership that values nurturing new ideas, innovating, and discovering win-win collaborative strategies.

As Krawcheck observes in *Own It*, “The power of diversity is so great that more diverse teams outperform ‘smarter’ ones.” Just imagine what’s possible with a fully engaged workforce! **MW**

*Municipal Insider and Executive Members:* You can find a recommended reading list and resources to accompany this article in the research library on [municipal-world.com](http://municipal-world.com). Access it from inside your membership area! Just search for “Ladouceur.”

