



GENDER DIVERSITY

AMPLIFYING WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE WORKPLACE

By Lisa Donovan

The third time is the charm! That phrase was never more true than when applied to Frances McMullan. After years in local government, including three stints as interim city manager, she now holds the top spot as Ypsilanti's city manager. She's the first woman to hold that position as well as the first Black woman.

"This time I decided I've done this work, I'm ready, I can handle it," said McMullan, who was offered the city manager position in 2019.

McMullan's success represents what numerous studies have shown about the benefits of striving for gender diversity in the workplace. Encouraging women to join your organization opens the talent pool to the skills and abilities of nearly half the population. Adding women to the team brings in different viewpoints and approaches, which can spark creativity and innovation. Group collaboration gets a boost when women are involved, as does morale and opportunity. A more gender diverse workforce better represents the make-up of your stakeholders. And, having an inclusive workplace enhances your organization's recruitment and reputation.

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-Frances McMullan, Ypsilanti City Manager

"Women bring great communication skills," said McMullan. "We're perceptive and able to read between the lines. We're also creative thinkers and bring color and zest to an organization."



Ongoing Challenge of Gender Diversity

Despite all these advantages, gender diversity continues to be a challenge in modern workplaces, particularly in upper management. White men hold 68 percent of executive-level manager positions compared with 19 percent for white women, according to the Women in the Workplace 2018 report by Leanin.org, a nonprofit group dedicated to fighting workplace gender bias, and consulting firm McKinsey & Co. The statistics are even more stark for people of color, with only nine percent of men and four percent of women holding those posts.

Photo Caption: Frances McMullan gets involved in a variety of community-minded activities, including the Black Women in Michigan Politics event.

A similar situation exists in local government. Although women make up over 50 percent of Michigan's general population, only 16 percent of Michigan municipal managers are women. This deficit led the Michigan Municipal League to develop the aptly named 16/50 Project. The aim of the project is to advance and prepare women for greater responsibilities in the local government realm.



Cultivating Women Leaders

The Women's Municipal Leadership Program (WMLP) is one of the project's key tools to accomplish that goal.

WMLP prepares women to make bold moves forward in their careers by offering a comprehensive curriculum on topics including municipal budgeting and finance, economic development, council-manager relations, and interviewing and negotiating. The program also develops leadership skills through coaching and mentoring.

McMullan was elated when she read about the League's new WMLP. "I've got to be in that class," she said. "I need something to put me over the line, to help crash the glass ceiling."

After a very competitive application process, McMullan became part of the first WMLP class in 2018. Since its inception, 84 women have now completed the WMLP and eight, including McMullan, have gone on to obtain top positions in local government.

By the time she was accepted into the WMLP, McMullan had worked in local government for almost 30 years. After graduating from Eastern Michigan University with a bachelor's degree in public administration, she worked for the City of Ann Arbor for 13 years in a variety of departments including transportation, building, and treasury. Eighteen years ago, she made the move to the City of Ypsilanti, where she primarily served as city clerk.

On three occasions during her tenure, she served as interim manager. The first time, she chose not to apply for the city manager position. The second time, she was one of two finalists but withdrew her name from consideration because she didn't feel adequately prepared. The third time—after completing the WMLP—she was ready and eagerly accepted when the Ypsilanti City Council offered her the city manager position.

"I can now say I've been exposed to valuable training with the credibility of the League behind it," said McMullan. "That carries a lot of weight with other managers and city officials who make those hiring decisions. It was exactly what I needed."

Seeking Out Mentors

Along her career path, McMullan was fortunate to have several mentors to help guide her.

Winifred Norcross, former city clerk in the City of Ann Arbor, gave McMullan her first opportunity in the city clerk's office and provided her with a lot of insight into how things work in city government.

Willie Powell, former executive director of Ann Arbor's pension system, helped McMullan understand the principles of accounting and government finance.

Another mentor is Ypsilanti Mayor Lois Allen-Richardson, who was also a long-time Ypsilanti councilmember.

Allen-Richardson saw in McMullan a person who was diligent and worked well with council, staff, and residents. She invited McMullan to a variety of events to expose her to the broader world of local government and encouraged her to prepare to become city manager.

"Sometimes we don't see the potential in ourselves that others see," said Allen-Richardson. "I saw her potential."

Joyce Parker has also been instrumental in McMullan's career. As an executive recruiter for the Michigan Municipal League, Parker had the opportunity to work with her on a couple occasions in the process of filling the



Photo Caption: Frances (far left) joins in on a groundbreaking ceremony for a new basketball court and play equipment at Parkridge Park.

WOMEN'S MUNICIPAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

PRESENTED BY THE 16/50 PROJECT




Ypsilanti city manager position. McMullan views Parker as a role model and a great source of information when she has questions.

"Frances was able to come into the position not only with an understanding of how the city operates, but with relationships that help her do a much better job in the community," said Parker, who is now the deputy state treasurer for the Michigan Department of Treasury. "She's a consensus builder and has taken the time to build the relationships that are necessary to work at that capacity."

McMullan is very appreciative of the people who have guided her along her career journey and tries to do the same thing for other women in the profession. She shares the knowledge she has acquired over the years and encourages them to get involved in clerk's or manager's associations.

"Sharpen your skillset so you're more confident," she advises. "Reach out to experts in different areas and pick their brain. You can learn a lot from other people's experience."

McMullan also gives kudos to her staff for helping her be successful in Ypsilanti. She was an outsider when she joined the team and needed to learn about the Ypsilanti way of doing things. From the clerk's office to the city manager's office, McMullan's staff has always been willing to share their knowledge and help acclimate her to the job.

"They embraced me and brought me up to speed on city and organizational culture," said McMullan. "They have been a very important asset." 

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