
Experiencing Leadership in the Workplace – A Female Perspective on Realizing the Potential

— *A Study on Women Charting a Course in Leadership at ABCO FIRE*

White Paper © Probizwriters, LLC and Live Safe Foundation, October 2015



*"I really think we need more women to **lean into** their careers. The more women help one another, the more we help ourselves. Acting like a coalition truly does produce results."*

- Sheryl Sandberg

About This Document

Why did we create this document? What is it for?

This paper, co-developed by Probizwriters and the Live Safe Foundation, focuses on learning leadership in the workplace from a female perspective, and, more importantly, on actually experiencing leadership in multiple, meaningful business contexts. Its objective is to build a case for lasting action and ongoing women's leadership programming.

We've assembled facts and ideas from the experiences of a women's leadership program. And they illuminate opportunities for leadership in the workplace—beyond the gender gap. We illustrate that implementing such a program can create the following key benefits:



1. **Enormous engagement opportunity:** increased commitment to company mission.
2. **Financial benefits:** less staff turnover and customer attrition, and positive impact on gross margin.
3. **Brand strength:** a culture that outperforms the competition is a real competitive advantage.
4. **Increased succession planning:** by creating a talent pipeline and advancement opportunities for individuals who otherwise may not have that opportunity in flat organizations.

Anyone involved in workplace management, no matter the level, should consider this document a practical leadership-building resource, a utility to help assess and embrace leadership programming, understand its effectiveness, and support its intended outcomes. It aims to answer key questions on women in leadership:

- How will women benefit from a leadership program?
- What are the development skills important to an executive team for all employees?
- A problem for women in industry is not ambition, but the opportunity to lead outside their normal job duties and add concrete value to the day-to-day operations or even bottom line.
- What unique challenges do women face in the industry?

Key audiences include:

- C-suite executives.
- Leadership enthusiasts in the workplace.
- Outside companies looking for useful leadership programming ideas.

Companies of all sizes are scrutinizing their training budgets and ways to improve teamwork, leadership and women’s initiatives, and this white paper objectively assesses a pilot program to help other organizations understand the importance of “hands-on” leadership experience, influence and decision making at higher levels, along with more traditional leadership development approaches.

The ideas and conclusions presented here are drawn from participants in a women’s leadership program piloted at ABCO Fire, solicited feedback and survey data from company executives, interviews with professional development experts, and conversations with program facilitators.

Findings from these various sources, by Probizwriters and Live Safe, are presented in this white paper, which identifies four lessons that substantively impact leadership:

- Leadership is enabling others to “see,” understand, and navigate on their own, which requires effective **communication**. **Communication** is the **tool** that creates **understanding**.
- Leadership is **relational and collaborative**.
- Leadership involves the ability to recognize when **change** is necessary.
- Leadership requires **courageous action**.

These four elements work together to produce effective leadership. If any single element is absent or insufficient, leadership is impacted.

This paper ends with a call to action to give women the wherewithal to be successful in business. Because everyone benefits, our families, communities, and businesses are better off.

Most programs are finite. This document represents a lot of work, but it establishes a framework for continued leadership information development, and lays the foundation for building strategic plans for leadership long into the future. The goal is to see lasting action and strategies to propel ongoing leadership.

— Jill Marcinick, Live Safe Foundation

Promoting U – Challenges Women to Take Courageous Action!

“Courageous Action is like the Cowardly Lion from the Wizard of Oz, we all have a little bit of that guy in us, feeling scared or hesitant to take action to move forward, but we all have it in us to be brave – rise to the occasion when it matters most.”

— Tonya Tigget, Learning Consultant who founded Promoting University, LLC

Background

Founded in 1975, ABCO Fire Protection, headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio, is one of the region's largest and oldest privately owned providers of fire-protection products and services, code compliance, insurance requirements, local inspection compliance, fire-related education and training, and many other safety-related needs. ABCO Fire Protection's leadership team is differentiated by their years of experience and superior commitment to quality and integrity. They offer *extensive backgrounds in managing fire protection and services within the fire-protection industry*.

Being a female leader in a male-dominated industry presents many challenges. ABCO Fire, through the support of a newly developed women's leadership program, aspired to develop a culture in which the traditional system of power or titles isn't needed to bring change to the organization; all that's needed is the ability to influence. As phrased by the organization, a "strengthening culture happens through you."

John Maxwell explains, "Most people think of leaders as the people who are in charge – supervisors, division heads, vice-presidents, CEOs. That's simply not true. Ultimately, leaders are only in charge of themselves. What's different about them – the reason they have been ostensibly put "in charge" – is that they understand how to influence others. Anyone can do this."

We observed that what ABCO has done with their leadership team and empowering women is the opposite of this quote. Maxwell basically says you have an opportunity to influence when you are put in charge.

Here's the catch: women are not always put in charge and that's the problem. Women have the ability, but they either don't ask to be "in charge" or they aren't viewed as a person who should be put in charge. So while Maxwell's quote is true, it's not applicable to women because women actually need to be put in charge of something so their skills, acumen, and ability to influence and lead are actually seen! As identified in this document, the proof is in the pudding.

As a company, ABCO Fire greatly values diversity and inclusion. ABCO's clients represent many different industries and it serves thousands of diverse consumers. ABCO realizes that its solutions and services must reflect its customers' needs and challenges, which best occurs through an engaged, trained and empowered workforce.

The challenge, expressed by ABCO CEO Bob Titmas, is "the future is unknown. All we can be certain of is that things will change. The market we compete in will fluctuate. The overall economy will evolve. The world will keep spinning. Our success depends on our ability to flow positively with these external changes."

Bob Titmas believes that "changing policies, procedures and company structure isn't going to be enough to thrive in the future. We also need to change ourselves. When we increase our personal capacity we raise the impact and influence of everything else. Sustainable positive improvements start inside and then cascade outward."

Hence, Titmas expresses passionately, that "over the years we've been conscious of change and have become resilient. But we haven't yet made it personal. We've focused on the outward actions without first doing the hard work of opening our hearts and minds."

Strategically, Bob Titmas identified the transformational potential of highlighting women's abilities (the heart-beat of the organization as he has called them) and coming up with valuable ways to elevate women to the next level.

ABCO's Leadership Challenge: Charting a Course for Women Leaders

History of Program at ABCO

In August 2014, after a two-year flurry of acquisition activity, ABCO Fire Protection launched a broad internal educational platform designed in part to improve leadership at all levels while consistently expanding ABCO's management culture within the organization. The overall program was announced to ABCO employees as "ABCO University¹." ABCO University is an ongoing long-term enterprise within the company for professional development training focused on developing self-awareness, communication, relationships, collaboration and high-functioning teams through structured workshops and curriculums. ABCO's recent growth through acquisition made the educational programs essential to organizational efficiency, competitiveness, customer service, product quality, and success going forward.

Long before August 2014, Jill Marcinick and Patti Aquino, both ABCO executives, interacted regularly with outside women's leadership and business groups in Ohio, which fueled their interest in shepherding women's leadership training within ABCO. As a byproduct of these experiences—combined with ideas discussed with CEO Bob Titmas on empowering women and getting them to work together instead of against each other—the ABCO's Women's Leadership Group (WLG) concept emerged. The vision was this: share the program in a way that elevated the women of ABCO *and* the entire organization.

After introducing Tonya Tiggett (a learning professional from Promoting University, LLC) to Titmas in August 2014, the WLG and other leadership programs were born, financial support was committed, and development and implementation quickly followed. With Tiggett's assistance, and under Titmas' direction, Program Directors designed and implemented a formal six- to nine-month curriculum of activities, which included a weekly leadership lesson with CEO Bob Titmas.

The WLG vision and concept was formalized in less than a month and announced as one of ABCO University's first initiatives—the CEO selected six ABCO women from four branch locations to participate in the pilot program. As described, this is a program with "more work with no guarantee of more pay. Participants in this program are making a commitment to personal growth." All you need to succeed in the program, Bob said "is a willingness to learn and an attitude of gratitude." ABCO's "Women's Leadership Group" (WLG) launched in October 2014.

The WLG program's objective was to unlock potential by empowering and elevating the leadership abilities of ABCO's high-capacity employees—advancing them and enabling them to serve as effective leaders—while

According to Catalyst Research Center, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to expand opportunities for women and business, "High-potential women advance more slowly than their male peers, in terms of both career progression and pay, even though they employ career management strategies similar to men's. Organizations that neglect this critical talent-management issue risk lagging their competitors in attracting, developing, and retaining the best candidates to serve as the next generation of leaders."

"By elevating women as a group, ABCO is itself elevated."

—Bob Titmas, ABCO CEO

¹ ABCO University is a platform for Employee Resource Groups ("ERGs") at ABCO that drives business, engagement, development and customer insights. ABCO U is a formal way to address leadership development. The fundamental tenet is building a "strengths" culture.

allowing the company to better discern leadership qualities and talent among employees. WLG connects the participating ABCO female professionals with peers and colleagues in other industries, and prepares them for leadership on a host of challenging and critical issues.

This leadership program tailored for ABCO's women was also thought appropriate to shore up some weaknesses identified in the ranks. Managers weren't taking ample time to train women on staff, and didn't take leadership seriously as a tool to help all employees work better *together as a team*. For example, like many organizations, employees often don't work together well, or, they actually work *against* each other, whether intentionally or not. As the mechanism to encourage women to work together, communicate better, and to leverage the power of teams, the WLG program also taught ABCO's women how to recognize not only each other's strengths, but also their limitations. Moreover, before WLG, ABCO did not offer formal avenues toward promotion for women, so the enterprise really needed a formal instrument for elevating women in the company, stirring them to action, and developing key leadership capabilities.

The idea behind the WLG program is that businesses can both proactively build strong leadership in women and in that process diffuse or eliminate staff propensities for communication breakdown. This means that investing in women's leadership strengthens the overall organization and is therefore vital to the enterprise's future. Businesses are enhanced and improved when they commit to and invest in their women. It's good for the business, and good for women, for culture, for society, and for communities. It breeds value and success even outside the organization's walls. Both the business and society benefit from the active involvement of strong women providing perspective, experience, and influence to strengthen and improve policy decisions and processes that stir positive outcomes internally, externally, and economically.

WLG Program Curriculum

The Women's Leadership Group spent six months participating in multifaceted leadership development programs, mentorships, and educational training on financial analysis and emotional intelligence. The curriculum and activities were designed to support a specific vision (ABCO as a company of choice for women), mission (advance development for women at ABCO), strategic priorities, and challenges.

Curriculum details are presented in Appendix "A."

Early Outcomes

After its October 2014 launch, the WLG program unfolded according to plan for several months.

One big key was the decision to do *more than talk about* women's leadership within the organization, but to instead implement a structured program designed to nurture, encourage, produce *real, capable* leaders among women employees. This required determination, effort, focus, resources, commitment on the part of existing management, and women in the organization. For the program to work, everybody had to play ball, seriously and supportively. Clear objectives were established, not titles, but the active development of substantive leadership skills and their effective deployment in the business environment.

"Our society benefits from having strong women at the table providing valuable perspective and influence that can shape and mold policy decisions, create economic change and develop programs for the betterment of everyone."

— Joyce A. Beatty, Senior Vice President for Outreach and Engagement, The Ohio State University

All of which happened, for the most part, especially within WLG. But, one thing wasn't noticed or tended to, namely, the question "how much of the Women's Leadership Group activity detail was shared by top management with the executive team?" How tuned in were they? As it turned out, parts of the executive team were not fully "in the loop" on key aspects of the WLG (especially its long-term organizational value), and this disconnect spawned problems. The executive team didn't "get" how the women were spending their time and what the return on the "education" investment was. They perceived that too much time was spent for too little observable return. This perception—and a lack of clarity on what was being accomplished—generated some misunderstanding and a "we-versus-them" attitude. Concerns for productivity and time out of the office started to rumble as pressure built to scale down the WLG program.

This Executive Team disconnect created a barrier of sorts and WLG participants perceived a "lack of support" and "fear of long-term commitment."

Once Underway, Program Accelerated to a Different Leadership Level The Original "Group Challenge" Moved into a Specific Context—the ABCO Leadership Council

Three months into the WLG leadership curriculum and forums, on "My Way Day" (February 17, 2015), a tipping point in momentum occurred. It was linked to "curriculum overload," internal understanding and support of the program, and a need to see more tangible program results.

The level of classroom study and homework involved in the WLG program reached a point at which some (including the CEO and other C-suite executives) perceived it was taking too much time, and delaying a logical or normal transition to the team's assumption of "hands-on" leadership functions, tasks, experience. If the WLG team was ever to take on a BHAG (a **Big Hairy Audacious Goal**²) it couldn't *both* keep itself consumed in the classroom study of leadership (drilling down into leadership theory) and *also* have time to undertake a serious, hands-on leadership project—which is what the C-suite and some of the WLG women were yearning for. It became necessary to decide between devoting time to learning in "class" through "curriculum" or investing time in learning by the trials of experience. The lessons of leadership are also and perhaps most effectively learned by "doing" leadership. This required resetting priorities.

The time for transition had arrived. ABCO's CEO wanted to stop talking about leadership and instead put the women into an actual leadership role or challenge them to *be* leaders. This was driven in part by the impatience of the executive team. The point of the Feb. 17th meeting was to accelerate the pace of transition from classroom to real world.

Carefully considering these sentiments (and despite what would for some be an uncomfortable interruption of the WLG programming and its momentum), ABCO's CEO stopped ongoing curriculum activities before the scheduled six months of programming was completed, except his weekly Friday topical conversations with the WLG.

"We're going to lose trust, momentum and the support of the rest of ABCO if we don't transition."

—Bob Titmas, ABCO CEO

² A **Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG)** is a strategic business statement similar to a vision statement that is created to focus an organization on a single medium-to-long-term organization-wide goal that is audacious, likely to be questioned by outsiders, but not regarded as impossible by those within the organization.

*"We know from the Gallup research that employees who use their strengths every day are **six times** more likely to be engaged on the job." Furthermore, "teams that focus on their strengths are **12.5% more productive.**" With that as a backdrop, we set out to explore how to build a culture within ABCO where strengths thrive. While our time together exploring strengths was brief, I felt the impact was intense and made an indelible impression on the women. Exploring strengths empowered them to begin to share a common language to describe how they could each be a contribution to one another, to the group and to ABCO as a whole. In addition, it allowed each woman to think through where she could be a 'voice' on the team and make a contribution based on her unique talents. These women will be a critical component to the ABCO as they endeavor to become a strengths-based organization."*

— Donna Musilli, Business Owner, Strengths Advocate

Instead, with a sense of urgency to change course, the six WGL participants were asked to organize a governing leadership council based on an initial vision of managing from the middle.

Bob Titmas speaks of his previous multilevel vision. He learned that there is power in attacking the middle of the company's culture—there are more "ah-ha" moments and more ability to be creative in that middle spot. Bob challenged the group to establish themselves as a governing unit with shared responsibility for leadership with the goal of impacting the company's branches— thus taking the group to an entirely different level. He explained that leadership needed a shift to the middle—the "heartbeat of the organization"—and that he envisioned development of a unique and creative leadership structure. Bob challenged these women to lead from a different place—making the middle "the top."

Through teachings in the book, "Grandmothers Counsel the World," Titmas explains the powerful lessons of indigenous grandmothers who provided prayer, peacemaking, and healing—all of which are vitally needed today. Bob's vision for the ABCO Council stemmed from reading about the "The Grandmothers Council"—these extraordinary spiritual women who addressed the essential elements in creating a healthy future. Titmas suggested that the women of the ABCO leadership team have the power to nurture, educate and train the different "households of ABCO across the region."

Further, Titmas challenged the group to become champions and guardians of the ABCO mission, a challenge he would know was working as he saw the group empower and elevate others.

The Council was a big, abrupt and somewhat disruptive step, which itself tested participants' leadership propensities. They were challenged to take what they had already learned about leadership and actually do something with it—on their own, and on the spot. They were challenged to lead—to undertake leadership activities now using what they know.

The success of the WLG program evolved into a council with a goal to strengthen the foundation of ABCO's culture and business model by incorporating leadership development. The council, as conceived, would handle projects, one at a time, assigned by the executive team. Depending on what it did with the opportunity/challenge, the council would have opportunities to actively/formally participate in company policy-making processes.

Though the directive was general, and the council members didn't fully understand the scope of their authority, they quickly used knowledge gained from their leadership programming, identified roles and, assigned each a different function based on their strengths (Gallup strengths coaching

To quote President Theodore Roosevelt:
"In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing."

methodologies are time-tested³), and developed a mission, objectives, and an operating model for the council. The council was ready for action.

The mission developed by the leadership council is this: “strengthen ABCO by analyzing current structure, processes, and procedures and determining what is missing, what needs improvement, and how to adapt for growth.” Its focus is on creating team-based collaborative work environments and effective communication processes for employees at all ABCO branches that recognize and take advantage of each branch’s unique positive attributes.

The council’s first project, as a pilot challenge, was to conduct a focused analysis of operational shortcomings at ABCO’s Columbus branch. The council conducted the analysis, documented its findings, and submitted a report/proposal to ABCO’s CEO identifying the problems and suggesting step-by-step solutions (fixes), including resolution of accountability issues. Council members met with ABCO’s executive team to review project status throughout the process under established communication guidelines.

Council Outcomes — The council was a byproduct of interrupting the WLG educational programming, and recognizing that WLG members were ready to be challenged with real leadership roles—and a heightened level of respect. The council’s six women participants rose to the pilot project’s challenge, took on the first task and did a solid job. They executed their task as team, and led each other through the process successfully. They deployed an actionable solution-oriented plan.

After completing its first assigned task, the council demonstrated its capacity and utility to the executive team. The C-suite recognized the Council as a good thing for ABCO, its employees and others. The council has emerged as a new and powerful tool for ABCO’s executive team—it is now a resource for the executive team to use to help make decisions more quickly and thoroughly.

The six council participants feel good about the Council. They think it is a positive outcome. They feel happier about their jobs, see new opportunities, and feel more relevant. They have a direct, regular connection to the Chairman. They’re more engaged. As a result they’re actually *being* leaders to a certain extent. Now they’re being challenged to be a relevant part of the businesses executive decision-making processes. They’re leading, taking risks, recognizing issues, accepting challenges, devising new strategies, new policies and procedures. As members of the Council they’re called on to, and do, lead.

The hard stop imposed by the CEO on the WLG curriculum created some problems and shifted momentum. There were awkward moments. But, it required the women’s group to quickly react and take on a new challenge directly related to the leadership skills they had learned. The group landed on their feet and clearly demonstrated the utility of the council. That’s the bottom line.

“By providing women in their Leadership Program the ability to have hands-on learning and senior management’s actively support, ABCO didn’t just talk about women’s leadership, they actually provided the opportunity for them to lead, regardless of title or tenure.”

—Tonya Tiggett, CEO,
Promoting University, LLC

³ Rath, Tom (2007). *Strengths finder 2.0*. New York: Gallup Press.

Council Trouble Spots —

As a cautionary tale, empowering any group creates certain risks. Without a range of leadership experience the power that goes with some leadership roles can be misinterpreted by those holding the power. Effective leadership requires skills, demeanor, appropriate tone, and an understanding of *how* their exercise of any authority granted *affects* coworkers and others. For some leaders, exercising leadership authority prudently and effectively comes naturally. For others, not so much. In less experienced hands, the authority of leadership roles can easily get to people’s heads and rub others in the organization the wrong way.

Leadership first needs to serve organizational transparency and foster open communication—otherwise management objectives aren’t well served. In the case of a council empowered with certain leadership authority, the council must serve the objectives of leadership *and* accomplish the assigned functions.

Benefits of Women’s Leadership Programming:

“Fortune 500 companies with the highest representation of women board directors attained significantly higher financial performance, on average, than those with the lowest representation of women board directors, according to Catalyst’s most recent report, [The Bottom Line: Corporate Performance and Women’s Representation on Boards](#). In addition, the report points out, on average, notably stronger-than-average performance at companies with three or more women board directors.”

The report found higher financial performance for companies with higher representation of women board directors in three important measures:

- **Return on Equity:** On average, companies with the highest percentages of women board directors outperformed those with the least by 53 percent.
- **Return on Sales:** On average, companies with the highest percentages of women board directors outperformed those with the least by 42 percent.
- **Return on Invested Capital:** On average, companies with the highest percentages of women board directors outperformed those with the least by 66 percent.

* <http://www.catalyst.org/media/companies-more-women-board-directors-experience-higher-financial-performance-according-latest>

What Distinguishes ABCO’s Women’s Leadership Program?

Unlike most corporate leadership programs—which are formatted like a management rotation—ABCO’s fundamental program difference is this: it went *beyond* professional-development and mentoring opportunities to *implementing* a challenging (and revealing) stretch assignment. A real-world leadership challenge with measurable consequences to the company—an acid test of sorts that yielded a lot of useful information about leadership challenges, capabilities, and the impact of WLG programming.

Hard-working women serving the company for several years, each with ambition to grow and advance, but unsure how to navigate within the company structure, are selected for a women’s leadership program and given carte blanche (along with guidance and support) to identify an area of the business needing improvement—and are tasked with developing effective solutions. The group is put in charge of the project from end-to-end, and program participants are also the decision makers on implementation, project support, and how the project will be sustained.

ABCO’s senior management took its Women’s Leadership Program, and, once an educational base—and self-awareness—were accomplished through classroom work, opened a door for the women to lead, to make decisions, and ultimately to impact ABCO’s business hands-on.

As an apt analogy, let’s consider flying an airplane. ABCO not only instructed WLG participants on how to fly a plane, it allowed them to collaborate on picking the right type of plane,

let them choose the runway on which to depart, then put them on the plane, handed them the controls and *required them to fly!* ABCO senior management simply served as air traffic control from that point on.

This is not typical. Other organizations just educate women on plane parts and function, and tell them that a runway *may* be ready for them to take off on at some point. But they don't actually provide the runway for their female employees, or allow them to operate the actual plane. They never let them pull away from the gate.

Getting career advice and access to certain levels of support and networks is essential—and many companies successfully provide it—but they drop the ball by not inviting women to actually “operate the plane.” They don't give them the chance to step up and outside their current pay grade.

Tonya Tigget, CEO, Promoting University, LLC, and a consultant to ABCO on women's leadership, made this pertinent observation about the ABCO experience: “In the past ten years of working with women's leadership initiatives and programs, I have yet to see this level of responsibility and autonomy bestowed on employees outside their job level or daily duties. The ABCO Women's Leadership Program is proof that talented, driven women—properly supported—can excel, and that *allowing* them to excel is a win-win. ABCO equipped its female employees to better lead, and they, in turn, developed others around them, created excitement about the business, and fueled employee loyalty and superb customer experiences.”

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

— George Bernard Shaw

ABCO's leadership trial dramatically affected outcomes, personal growth, and how participants perceived the WLG experience.

Program Lessons and Accomplishments

ABCO's management teams witnessed many unplanned and unique successes through the piloted WLG program. Participants also acquired vital business acumen.

A primary lesson is that implementing a leadership program isn't so much about the individual participants, but is instead—regardless of the ups and downs—a real catalyst for positive organization change!

The program's many experiences will ultimately help each participant, facilitator and person touched by the process be a better leader. Here are a few of the important lessons learned:

1. Leadership is enabling others to “see,” understand, and navigate on their own, which requires effective **communication**. Leadership is much more than just “directing” others or exercising power and authority.

People want to understand “purpose,” “plans,” and their “part.” **Communication** is the **tool** that creates **understanding**. When communication is deficient, employees and coworkers are isolated and left out of decisions—and they feel it. When communication is open and clear, they feel connected and engaged.

“Communication starts with the understanding that there is my point of view (my truth) and someone else's point of view (his truth). Rarely is there one absolute truth, so people who believe that they speak the truth are very silencing of others.”

— Sheryl Sandberg

To create real change, communication has to be simple, memorable and sufficiently repetitive. Leading is the ability to share.

Another lesson: those not participating in the program were not well informed about it, which led to unanswered questions and concerns about the group and its purpose. This is a critical point that impacts culture and creates fear. It became clear that new programs need to be fully “revealed” to the organization in ways sufficient to ensure clarity and avoid confusion—e.g., through email announcements, small group or branch meetings, and progress updates. Moreover, a key part of effectively communicating about a project or program is projecting unified support from the top down. Communication from C-suite and management levels is what *credibly* gets the word out, answers questions, and demonstrates program support and advocacy.

ABCO also noticed an “isn’t-it-obvious” communication caveat: masculine and feminine traits affect communication. Women often present ways to visualize and understand expectations, while men communicate with a different tone—confidence. *Confident articulation* is an important aspect of successful communication and thus a big part of leadership. Coworkers may not always like you or want to hear what you have to say, but leaders don’t let that get in their way.

2. Leadership is **relational and collaborative**. It involves a network of relationships with many people—all the time. Influence without other people is a meaningless concept. Growth occurs in us and through us when we are *relating with others*. Two heads are better than one. Realizing and leveraging strengths is essential to any team’s collaborative success. You can’t deny those you’re trying to train in leadership the opportunity to engage in real hands-on, interactive leadership functions and expect them to become leaders.

Leaders are born at least in part through experience; you have to give them training *and* experience. And you have to strike the right balance.

3. The challenge of **change**. Leaders are those who take action.

Leadership involves the ability to recognize when a change is necessary. Sometimes circumstances outside one’s control cause change. Leadership requires asking uncomfortable questions to better understand the change. A redirection in course requires a spirit of cooperation and trust. It’s a time when leaders seek wise counsel.

The WLG learned that—at any time—a leader could reverse a decision and call for redirection and recalibration. The dynamics of change (especially when it’s unexpected) can make some feel awkward, self-conscious, and alone. Coworkers are at different levels of readiness. To alleviate anxieties associated with change, and in alignment with effective communication principles, ABCO learned the importance of providing clarity of process, expected commitment, and expected progress checkpoints.

Editorial Director of Entrepreneur Magazine Raymond Hennessey writes, “It all comes down to how you approach decisions. Leadership is about bringing order to chaos, fighting ambiguity and staying true to your company’s—and your own—principles.”

“There is little downside when men negotiate for themselves. People expect men to advocate on their own behalf, point out their contributions, and be recognized and rewarded for them.

For men, there is truly no harm in asking. But since women are expected to be concerned with others, when they advocate for themselves or point to their own value, both men and women react unfavorably.

— Sheryl Sandberg

4. Leadership requires **courage**.

ABCO's CEO pinpointed six women as participants because they exhibited strong leadership qualities and a commitment to excellence. Expectations for the program included time management and a commitment to doing something "extra," like reading a few books and coming prepared for discussions. Since WLG was a spur-of-the-moment pilot program, defined selection criteria were not announced to the entire company until two months into the program. The delay in program announcement created some anxiety and misperceptions among nonparticipant co-workers. When the environment or circumstances aren't well defined or easy to navigate, learning to name it, claim it and aim it takes leadership courage.

Lessons were learned about how new programs should be introduced and rolled out in the future, e.g., having formal participation protocols requiring a referral or application process to determine members/attendees, providing training and coaching on how participants should handle information learned and shared, and helping participants navigate the additional time commitment.

Bottom line: Take risks! Be courageous. Focus on the heart. Capture engagement through an alignment of values. You have to start somewhere and expect some success and some failure.

Program Benefits

1. Empowerment to Lead — A byproduct of empowerment was development of the Leadership Council. The executive team released the six women to the challenges at hand and gave them power and authority to make a difference. The WLG converted the goals (BHAG) presented by the executive team and turned them into processes and action plans.

To address questions on the council's effectiveness, **benchmarks**⁴ for progress should be established and articulated, as should protocols for moving individuals in and out of the council.

2. Embody Transformational Company Values — The council clearly exemplifies the company's values and has been released to be the voice clarifying the vision—for those who will listen. It is exciting when team members begin to truly catch the vision and mission—and own it.

3. Elevate the Leadership Mission — Multiply the development of leadership and raise it up by empowering more individuals to lead and communicate the mission to others.

⁴ Benchmarking is a management approach for implementing best practices at best cost. Companies use benchmarking as a way to become more competitive. It is a general planning and evaluation tool to measure progress regarding major indicators of performance, as well as looking at how other companies are doing. Change is accelerated because there are models from other companies in the industry to help guide the change.

The Association for Talent Development's (ATD) 2014 *State of the Industry* report, in 2013, organizations on average spent \$1,208 per employee on training and development. This is a small 1 percent increase over last year (an additional \$13 more per employee). The number of learning hours used per employee also slightly increased to 31.5 hours from 30.3 hours.



4. Risks, Rewards, and Incentives — ABCO learned that when implementing a leadership training program it's important to consider and be prepared for the costs program participation imposes. One of the lessons of this experience is "how much time can reasonably be invested in curriculum activities and training on leadership before it becomes overkill or unproductive—before you have to shift gears and start actually putting group members/trainees into positions of leadership to learn 'hands-on' and test their metal." I.e., the curriculum phase of leadership training can only go on so long before it becomes a burden and its value begins diminishing.

The company realized it has to keep a careful eye on program costs vs. program benefits. Not just hard costs, but the costs associated with shifting participants away from their normal day-to-day job functions. In what way will participation reduce participants' time for and focus on their primary roles within the organization? How will it affect others, nonparticipants? What burdens will it impose on others, and how will those be addressed/accommodated?

5. Implications of New or Emerging Roles — Also, if program participants are shifted into new challenges and responsibility as part of their leadership program, how do these new roles, functions, and responsibilities impact compensation, opportunities for promotion, perks, etc.? ABCO realized that thrusting hard-working people into leadership roles and expecting great performance and dedication to the responsibilities should anticipate the need for new and incentivizing rewards (even if it's just an increase in authority and control, or a title that enhances one's CV). Otherwise, leadership program gains and momentum may be lost through the absence of a discernable (and reliable) risk/reward tradeoff (why should I put in this effort to be a leader? What's in it for me?) Sometimes, becoming a leader or being recognized as a leader is not a sufficient incentive to *be* a leader. Being a leader involves taking risks. So, there should be rewards—and this must be considered as part of the program.

The Real Payoffs

ABCO Women's Leadership Program coupled with the "live" stretch assignment (the Council) produced real payoffs. In exit interviews participants cited a number of specific positives from the experience. They:

- Gained a better understanding of ABCO's business end-to-end, including budgets and financials.
- Acquired a willingness to negotiate and delegate more, thus creating efficiencies and developing other employees.
- Learned problem-solving techniques and the perils of blaming others.
- Learned how to overcome challenges across a fast-growing enterprise footprint to provide better customer service internally and externally.
- Developed communication awareness skills and the ability to flex to others' styles.
- Established a strong network of support among ABCO women, regardless of location.

"I am so excited about the ABCO Women's Leadership Program. It is an opportunity for all of the women at ABCO to benefit from and hopefully participate in the future. As women, we need to share and be proud of our accomplishments, while at the same time encouraging and lifting others.

This initiative is a testament to Bob's vision and ABCO's mission. The potential to grow by developing leaders and better communication skills to mentoring relationships, individuals and teams, using their strengths, to increase productivity and many more possibilities deserves to be celebrated."

— Patti Aquino, WLG Co-Director,
ABCO Fire Business Development
Advisor

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- Learned to be resourceful.
 - Witnessed employee retention and motivation.
 - Established more cohesive communications between ABCO's work sites.
 - Implemented policies and procedures consistently across company footprints.
 - Increased employee and participant morale.
 - Gained confidence in their ability to lead, make decisions, and navigate office politics.
 - Increased employee engagement
 - Empowered a specific group to want more for themselves and the company.
 - Rediscovered the company mission.
 - Started discussion on many other topics: communication, culture, sharing financials, customer-service procedure.
 - Established the Council as a special-projects resource for the executive team.

Perhaps most telling are these survey findings:

Before the WLG program started only 16.66 percent of participants felt “highly included” in their work environment.

After the WLG program, 83.33 percent of participants felt “more included” in their work environment, and none felt less included.

After the WLG program and the opportunity to be decision makers, 100 percent felt “excitement for the ABCO brand, vision and mission.”

The Future of Leadership at ABCO — Building a Culture of Strengths

The experience shared here reveals that the future of leadership at ABCO is bright. Bob Titmas feels strongly about unifying talents at the top and making culture practical. He said, “ABCO's customers are our own employees. Our employees are right – if we have the right trust and engagement, then we will treat our customers right.” Pulling thinking to a higher perspective and developing strategic consensus is the ultimate goal. Titmas said he would know a program like the one developed at ABCO is working “when leadership is focused more on leadership activities versus muscle work.”

As a result of this ABCO Fire experience, a new leadership program is emerging called Leadership 2.0: Here we grow! The goal is to multiply this experience across the company base by building a strengths-based organization committed to advancing professional and personal development for all employees, by providing more training, mentorships and professional development.

The program, its outcome, and the overwhelming feedback from participants taught ABCO that *realizing and leveraging strengths* is essential to success—for individuals, teams, and enterprises. It also demonstrated that when employees have opportunity to do what they naturally do best, the effect on individual, team and enterprise performance is powerful.

ABCO supports building a strength's-based organization because realizing strengths and being our best makes our clients happy and productive—which is great for enterprise. Strengths become transformational when you give employees a platform to understand themselves, and when they help create an environment for growth and give life to others. Operating, servicing, and selling from a position of strength can have a transformational impact on people's lives.

In conclusion, we all control our own destiny. Leadership is about personal responsibility; it's not about one's age or experience. Opportunities to be a leader surround each of us—and whatever we do it's up to each of us to *recognize and grab* those opportunities. Programs focused on talent development reveal this, and so are critical to business success. Implementing a program similar to ABCO's isn't easy, but Bob Titmas showed how simple it can be, and now encourages others at ABCO to "raise your hand and step forward ... to be a leader."

We celebrate the accomplishments of this ABCO leadership program, and believe that providing an environment in which strengths are expected, encouraged, embraced, leveraged and cultivated is a very special ABCO attribute—and a helpful narrative worth spreading.

Appendix A — WLG Curriculum Details⁵

Vision	Mission	Strategic Priorities & Curriculum	Mentoring Program & Group Challenge
<p>To become the company of choice for women.</p> <p>Through the development of a women’s leadership program, the vision of the program at ABCO is to provide a high quality curriculum that educates, equips, inspires and supports women learning to lead in the workplace.</p> <p>Expected outcomes to be a more powerful YOU:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Confidence - Stronger Voice - Role Models - Promoting Communication - Trailblazing new leadership styles - Addressing business, lifestyle and community - Strong & Courageous Leaders 	<p>To advance the professional and personal development of women at ABCO.</p> <p>To provide a high quality curriculum that educates, equips, inspires and supports women learning to lead in the workplace.</p> <p>Developing people by providing professional and personal development for work/life effectiveness through instruction, networking and collaborating.</p>	<p>Curriculum:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Industry Speakers - Book studies: <i>Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead</i> by Sheryl Sandberg and <i>The 21 Laws of Irrefutable Leadership</i> by John Maxwell. - Leadership Programming - Branch Activities - Best Practices Field Trips - Weekly topical conversations with CEO. <p>Topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Intelligence • DISC/Strengths finders • Dress 4 Success • Company Finance • Accomplishments and Communication • Delegating/Crucial Conversations • Lessons in Leadership/Goal Setting • Confidence in • Speaking/Presentation Skills 	<p>The WLG Group Challenge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsible for program sustainability and evaluation of curriculum, as well as future nominations/sponsoring of new participants. • Creation of ABCO women’s mentoring program framework. • Giving Back Project, where together as a team, the WLG is to provide a solution to a current problem or develop something innovative.

⁵ Note: this is just one example of a curriculum, and each business’ curriculum needs will differ. Particular attention should be paid to a company’s unique curriculum-development requirements.

Appendix B

Contact Us

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For leadership development, we also encourage you to call Tonya Tiggett:

614.245.8482 or visit www.promotinguniversity.com.

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