

# Motivation for Leadership

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"I thrive on challenge. I thrive on doing different things all of the time. I like variety. I like trying to work through and find solutions to things\$figuring out your way through issues. I like to help make things happen."

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Folks

The posting below looks at the top motivations for leading based on interviews conducted with women university presidents. It is from Chapter 9, Leadership Motivation, Styles, and Philosophies, in the book, On Becoming a Woman Leader: Learning from the Experiences of University Presidents, by Susan R. Madsen. Published by Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint. Fourth Edition. Copyright © 2008 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved. 989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 <[www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)>.

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## Motivation for Leadership

I have always been interested in why people make certain choices in their lives. The choice to lead, even during childhood and youth (directly or from behind the scenes), is of particular interest to me. I asked the women university presidents various times throughout the interviews why they accepted or sought out informal and formal leadership roles. I analyzed each woman's responses to discover the themes and then compared the multiple responses among all ten participants. The top nine motivations for leading became quite clear:

1. To accomplish and achieve. All ten presidents had strong accomplishment and achievement needs even during childhood and youth. One woman said, "I love to start new things. I like to make things happen." Another said, "I have felt driven to accomplish a lot throughout my life." A third president explained:

I had strong accomplishment needs as a youth and now throughout my life. I have constantly felt the need to do my best, learn all that I can learn, and achieve all that I can achieve.

2. To make a difference, contribution, or impact. Their desire to do things that mattered was also easily recognizable when analyzing the data. One president stated, "I wanted to make a difference." Another said:

I felt like I was making a contribution, making a difference, making some impact, and that

was very important to me.

A third explained:

I have always wanted desperately to make a difference. I believe we're put on this earth for some reason, and I believe that very strongly. We must not squander that. There are so many people who can't speak for themselves, and they must have a voice. When we can be that voice then our lives are really worth living.

3. To be involved in meaningful and important work. These women accepted or often sought out opportunities to be involved in things they believed were meaningful. In the previous quotation, under motivation #2, which is related to this one, the president who made the comment believed that being a "voice for others" is meaningful work for her. While rising through the ranks, other women spoke of the drive they felt to be involved in strategic areas in the school, college, and university. They seemed to be systems thinkers. They enjoyed the "big picture," the "breadth," and participating in the "integration" of all of the pieces into a large, effective "system." One president explained:

Although I loved the job I was in and did well at it, I often found myself looking and analyzing how things could be changed and improved at various levels on campus.

4. To have challenges and complexity. The women in this study actually smiled when they spoke of how much they enjoyed a good challenge, whether it was a new project, new responsibility or position, or even a different complex situation or dilemma. The presidents made statements such as:

I love the challenge and complexity of leadership, especially in higher education.

I thrive on challenge. I thrive on doing different things all of the time. I like variety. I like trying to work through and find solutions to things—figuring out your way through issues. I like to help make things happen.

5. To have fun and enjoyment. All of the women spoke of the enjoyment they found in leadership positions, and half of them actually used the word "fun" when speaking of why they became leaders. In fact, they used these words when speaking of many of the terms in this list of the nine top motivations for leading, for example, challenges, complexity, making a difference, accomplishing tasks, developing, and enabling others. One president explained:

I liked having a work family. I had a secretary and coworkers in the president's office. I had the president, who was a great mentor. They cared if I showed up. We really worked together. It was really different from being a faculty member, which you do by yourself (which by the way is stupid, and we shouldn't do it that way). I had fun, and I made change.

6. To do work that I knew I could do. Because these presidents had developed the confidence that they could do things successfully, they yearned for opportunities to do this. They knew they were good at tasks and projects and had the ability to make things happen. One explained, "I was good at it, people listened, and changes happened." They knew they could do the job of president well.

7. To enable others to develop and succeed. All of the presidents spoke of the satisfaction they felt when they were able to provide opportunities or assist others in some way to succeed. They spoke of the enjoyment they felt when they watched someone they had helped move into a new position and take new opportunities. One said, "I learned that I really do like making things happen for people. I like helping others be successful." One explained that this satisfaction and ability to get satisfaction from others' success is a sign she uses now in determining whether a faculty member is "made" for administration:

A litmus test I use is to determine whether a faculty member can move from being a faculty member, where all of the satisfactions are individual (activities, publications, presentations, office, and such), to being a dean where the satisfaction comes from enabling all those things to happen for others. It is never satisfying to some people. It gets even bigger at the next level. Although when you are president you get credit for a lot of things, you have to be very quick to say, "WE". Presidents can get into trouble believing they did things all by themselves.

8. To have power and influence. Eight of the presidents discussed the word power and eight admitted that they enjoyed the power that positions of influence embodied. They used the word power in the same sentence with many of the other items on this motivation list. For example, "I like the power to make things happen for others"; "I believe that power can be useful in serving others and moving efforts along that can truly make a difference." They liked the ability they had to influence, make changes, and serve others. Another argued:

I like power, and you have to be comfortable liking power. Many women leaders are not. I think power, if used well, can really advance you and your organization. I think I enjoyed it but I also wanted to do good by others. I felt leadership allowed me to do that.

9. To serve. When asked why they became leaders, a few of the presidents just said, "To serve." They had strong desires to serve the public (or mankind, as some of them termed it). They explained that it was an "honor to serve" in their various capacities. Two presidents spoke of believing that the "good Lord" has a purpose for all of us, and that "we are all meant to accomplish certain things with our lives." One stated, "I was raised to help others."

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