

## **Leadership Is for You: Growing Together, Leading Together**

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Good afternoon, everyone.

It is truly an honor to be with you, today. To those I've had the pleasure of meeting before, and to those I met for the first time today, thank you so much for the warm welcome. It is a privilege to be among such purposeful and inspiring women.

Both your branch and my husband were born in 1965, and turn into diamonds this year! Congratulations on turning 60!!!

I already feel close to your branch. We're in sister cities, and some members /have dual membership, like my Friday Writers sister, Janet Espersen – here today. Janet, it is always such a joy to share space and stories with you.

Over the years, I personally have many fond memories with co-presidents Sandra and Makela. The Santa Clara County Interbranch Council, rallies at San Jose City Hall, Tech Trek ice-cream socials, virtual programs, and marching together at the Morgan Hill 4<sup>th</sup> of July Parade, both branch banners, side by side.

Today, I come to you not as an expert, but as a fellow traveler - someone who like you, has experienced the magic and momentum of AAUW firsthand, and witnessed how AAUW transforms lives, fosters leadership, and builds a community where every woman's voice matters.

And yet, like so many branches across the country, we find ourselves asking the same questions:

- How do we stay vibrant and strong?
- How do we grow our membership?
- And most importantly—how do we inspire our members to step into leadership joyfully, and not see it as something to be dreaded?

I would love to share a few stories and ideas—thoughts on how we can grow and reimagine leadership as a gift we give each other, rather than a weight we carry alone.

It isn't about what one person can do but what we can do together. This is in alignment with the new 2025 National Strategic plan of harnessing our collective impact and ensuring that together, we are a force for lasting change.

Because the truth is, it has never been about what one person can do.

It is about what we can do—together.

...and just as at the national level we synergize the power of individual branches, / at the branch level, we synergize the power of individual members. The power of WE.

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## **PERSONAL STORY - 1**

As past president of AAUW Morgan Hill and current leadership development chair, I've been immersed in many kinds of leadership roles over the years. But, if I'm honest, when I first moved to Morgan Hill after 15 years of leading and volunteering in the Cupertino school district, I thought I was done.

Volunteering has always been a magical source of meaning and purpose, and there is always such a need everywhere. My intention was to just engage in a little low-key volunteering for a good cause - a simple way to give back in my new hometown.

Wikipedia had assured us that Morgan Hill was known for its strong volunteer culture, and that had sealed our decision to move there. But when I arrived, after a few missteps, I wondered: Where were all the opportunities? I guess it is typical for the new kid in town to be blinded by the light and not be able to see anything. Meanwhile, I joined the gym and the BookSmart bookstore book club.

Then one day, I attended an author talk at the library, co-hosted by an organization I had never heard of before—The American Association of University Women, Morgan Hill Branch. It sounded SO impressive... and even a little intimidating. But after learning that they welcomed university graduates from India too, I joyfully accepted their invitation to join them. And then became us. Almost immediately, a layout editor for our newsletter was urgently needed. WELL - all I had ever done before was design programs for high-school foundation crab feed events and my daughter's dance studio yearbooks. So I

hesitated. But everyone was so encouraging, and welcoming that I said yes, a little nervously -and I landed straight onto the board. My learning curve wasn't as steep as I feared, and ...

That's where I learned that leadership in AAUW isn't about being perfect—it's about saying yes, showing up, and growing alongside others – getting and giving help.

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"So, let's talk about where we stand today. AAUW's mission is more urgent than ever. Now is the time to fight for our voices, our choices, and a future where every woman's worth is honoured, and her potential protected. AAUW has always risen to meet the moment. We can't falter now.

But—who will carry that torch forward? Most of us know that the average age in AAUW is rising. Branches around the country are seeing shrinking rosters and increasing burnout. Some branches may not survive the next decade if we don't actively reimagine leadership.

Here's the delicate truth: many new members join for social reasons—but they don't always see themselves as leaders. That's not criticism. It's a challenge, and an opportunity.

We don't need everyone to be president. What we need is everyone to believe they can contribute meaningfully. That their voice matters. That leadership is shared.

What if leadership didn't feel like a burden... but like an invitation to belong more deeply?

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The new AAUW 2025 Strategic Plan centers around three goals:

1. Fund higher education - our fellowships, scholarships, and leadership training.
2. Remove barriers to success in education and the workplace - our Title 9 work.
3. Strengthen AAUW's Reach – and Support local state and branch efforts

To meet these goals, we must do more than recruit. We must mentor, invite, and support new members into becoming leaders—even those who don't see themselves that way. And we have to talk about leadership differently.

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Most people think leadership means a title, holding office or having a full calendar of responsibilities. But let's reframe that.

Leadership is:

- Co-hosting an event.
  - Designing a flyer.
  - Offering one idea that shifts how we do things.
  - Asking "how can I help?"
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## **MEMBER STORY – 2**

I remember a member who told me flat-out: "I'm not a leader." We invited her to co-chair one small event. Low pressure, right? She said yes—and did a beautiful job. Today, she is one of our most committed leaders. The Spark of the First Ask is a powerful catalyst! Don't underestimate it. And don't wait until people feel "ready." People don't need to feel ready—they need to feel seen, supported, and surrounded by a community that believes in them.

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## **BRANCH STORY OF ADAPTING & EVOLVING - 3**

During the Pandemic—We Saw What's Possible

Back in 2020, like every branch, Morgan Hill faced an existential moment. But we leaned in and made a collective decision to go virtual. And not just barely—we went big.

- The Wildflower Run went virtual.
- Monthly programs drew thousands of viewers online. We harnessed the power of social media and livestreaming...
- Board and committee meetings, and even parties and interest groups went virtual.

We didn't just survive—we thrived. Because we shared the work. Because we supported each other. Because we believed in our mission and adapted.

That was collective leadership in action—and proof that our branches are stronger than we think. When We Lead Together, We Thrive!

So what do we do now? How do we nurture new leaders—and make AAUW irresistible to the next generation?

Let me offer 7 possibilities:

1. Make Leadership Joyful and Doable

- Break roles into bite-sized tasks.
- Co-chair everything!
- Let people shadow before they step in.
- Offer trial roles—“try it and see!”

2. Lead with Stories, Not Structures

- Every one of us is here because of a personal story - a spark that drew us to AAUW. When we share those stories—in meetings, newsletters, & casual conversations—we inspire others to see themselves as part of our mission.

3. Create clear, welcoming ways to contribute

- Don't wait for vacancies. Give them a taste of what it feels like to contribute—and grow.

4. Match Passion to Purpose

- Ask people what lights them up.

- Then show them where their energy meets AAUW's mission.

## 5. Be Visible and Welcoming

- Host open houses. Show up at community events. Speak at schools and libraries. And when someone new walks through the door, welcome them with open hearts. Because every new face is a new spark, a new voice, a new beginning.

## 6. Celebrate Everything

- A thank-you note, a spotlight in the newsletter, a round of applause.
- Gratitude builds belonging. And belonging builds commitment. Whether someone chairs a committee or brings cookies to a meeting—thank them. Out loud. Often. Publicly.

## 7. Reflect the Future

- Let's make sure our speakers, our images, our committees represent *the full richness of our community*. Across race, gender identity, age, experience & personality.

That's the beauty of AAUW—leadership happens everywhere. Some lead with vision. Some with calm presence. Some with joyful energy. We need them all. The way we lead is not always through titles or formal roles. Often, we lead by listening. We lead by learning. And we lead by showing up.

I've been thinking about what makes leadership in AAUW different. For one, it's shared. It's shaped by members with decades of experience and by members who are still finding their way in. We don't wait for someone else to act - we act. And more importantly, we create space for others to join in.

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Because in the end, it's not just about filling roles.  
It's about lighting sparks.  
Creating space.

Collective impact

And building a culture where leadership feels like a shared joy—not a solitary task.

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In closing, I want to leave you with this:

We are stewards of something beautiful—a legacy of members advocating for equity, education, and inclusion. But legacies aren’t preserved by looking back. They are built by growing forward.

And that means asking:

- Who do we want at our table?
- How do we help them feel they belong?
- And how can we lead together—so that leadership is not a burden, but a joy?

Because the future of AAUW doesn’t rest on one president, one board, or one idea.

It rests on all of us.

It rests on YOU.