******Des Moines Downtown Chamber**

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The inaugural year of the Des Moines Downtown Chamber’s *Leadership Education and Advancement Pipeline (LEAP)* program was 2015. The series was created to address Iowa’s last in the nation ranking for women-owned businesses and their economic impact. Through a strategic design of speakers, topics, and resourceful organizations, LEAP was intended to stimulate new women-owned businesses and encourage growth of existing businesses. After registration opened, we experienced an eagerness from corporate leadership to grow within their organizations as well, and we were pleased to see a range of ages, experience levels, and both women and men attending LEAP workshops. We initially estimated 25-40 attendees at each event, and with 50-80 actual attendees per event, it became clear that LEAP was meeting a need in our community.

The LEAP program was unique to the local chamber community when it was created, and during the course of 2015, we watched similar programs emerge at the Altoona and West Des Moines chambers. It is our hope that LEAP will continue to stimulate additional chamber programming in the region to address the issue, and it is evident from early registration numbers that this year’s LEAP attendance will be even larger.

Below are results of a survey of 2015 LEAP participants, conducted after the series conclusion:

* 59 Full-Series Attendees
* 15-35 additional individual registrations/workshop
* Most common age range was 30-39
* Male and Female participants

**As a direct result of attending LEAP, some participants reported that they:**

* Started a business plan
* Accessed local resource organizations for information on starting a business
* Explored how to expand their business
* Sought a Mentor
* Many reported joining a board or committee
* And at least one participant started a business as a result of LEAP!

**On another survey question, participants reported that as a result of LEAP, they:**

* Experienced an increase in confidence
* Took new risks
* Manage work and life together better
* Have greater resilience
* Are more assertive
* Became a mentor to someone

**When asked to describe the LEAP program, attendee responses included:**

*“An empowering place to be as a woman business leader.”*

*“LEAP acted as not only an educational vehicle for a potential business owner, but I also found it to be a safety net of people who would support me in my journey. I felt like I couldn’t fail now because so many people are there for me, and they want me to succeed.”*

*“A great event where you can network with strong women leaders in the community, learn from them about leading a business or department as a woman, and how to combat the stereotypes that women in the workplace are put into, as well as the negative thoughts we have ourselves that stand in our way of success.”*

*“A women’s leadership program that is focused on supporting, celebrating and improving women in the workforce through strong education and mentoring.”*

**The series highlighted 9 topic areas, plus a celebration. The favorite topics were:**

1. Work/Life Balance
2. Self-Investment
3. Political Equality
4. Entrepreneurism
5. Presenting with Confidence

**When asked how the program benefited them personally, attendees responded:**

*“I have become more comfortable with being assertive and being able to balance my work and personal life.”*

*“It made me realize that I am not the only one that has experienced significant work/life balance problems. Also made me want to invest more in myself, whether it be learning a new language, running for an executive position on a board, or not feeling guilty going into work later so I can actually sleep occasionally!”*

*“It gave me knowledge of the different resources in the community I could utilize as I thought about starting my business. It made something that seemed so complicated appear much less complicated, and now I have a clear map of where to go and how.”*

We also asked participants to contribute personal testimonials:

**LEAP Testimonials**

Every time I was able to fit LEAP attendance into my busy schedule, it proved to be the most meaningful point of my week. Thank You! – Susan Judkins

Every Program had gems but meeting other current and future leaders was the best part of all! – The Introvert ☺

LEAP has given me the opportunity to grow both personally and professionally. After each session I have found a confidence in myself through the learning and comradery provided. I look forward to attending more LEAP events in the future! – April Woosley

I love how the Downtown Chamber is purposely trying to impact our community and the women specifically. LEAP has done so much good for our ladies by encouraging them to reach higher and take a chance rather than play it safe. LEAP created daring women – and we need more of them!

This program has been wonderful! I look forward to it every month as I know I will have the opportunity to meet amazing and inspiring women while growing my skills and confidence as a female leader. I leave every meeting feeling incredibly inspired and with a fire of passion to inspire others and make changes for the better. I can’t wait for LEAP in 216!

From the first session on mentorship, LEAP has provided new perspectives on familiar concepts. The emphatic delivery of programming throughout the series energized me even further. I’m truly excited to see what LEAP 2016 brings. I’d like to commend the Downtown Chamber for continuously developing fresh and compelling programming like LEAP. – Matt Moore

This year's LEAP program has been wonderful. I look forward to each event. The speakers and subject material have been insightful and interesting. Making new business contacts and establishing new friendships has been very rewarding. Thank you for these opportunities. – Joan Ellis

LEAP has provided me a resource for personal and professional development. A place to turn to when I need advice or examples of how to succeed as a women and as a leader in our community.

LEAP is a great place to spend a morning or lunch each month. I enjoy the networking opportunities with high profile women in the community as well as the learning enrichment that the speakers have brought to my work life. It is a great place to get inspired to try something new, learning about launching a business and create great professional relationships that will not only help you advance your career but your personal life as well.

LEAP 2015 was an inspiring and informative program that motivated me to take my career to the next level. I took away a large amount of insight from the speakers and organizations that were highlighted at the events. I have become more comfortable with being assertive and being able to balance my work and personal life. Since participating in LEAP, I was also reminded that it is ok to say "no" without feeling guilty and to look out for myself. I am working on the "art" of being able to say "no" to things that sound like "fun", but aren't necessarily the best use of my time. Overall it was a very beneficial program and I look forward to participating in 2016!

This course really gave me the “nudge” I need to start investing in my career again and take the next step. Now, I’m still deciding what that will look like but going through LEAP really gave me the confidence to start looking.

I wasn’t sure what to expect when I signed up for the entire LEAP series in March, but I have really enjoyed it! I’ve attended every session during the year and can’t believe how fast the past several months have flown by! Every single LEAP session has offered a tremendous amount of information, encouragement, and wonderful support network at our disposal. Because of this course I have gained so much more confidence in myself and my capabilities as a strong and outgoing individual, as a dedicated employee at my full time job, and also as an aspiring new small business owner. I’ve learned to never doubt yourself. You’re stronger than you think. Know that any goal you set for yourself is achievable with the right mindset, confidence and determination. Don’t think you can’t do it, because you can! Before attending the LEAP courses, I foolishly used to doubt my self-worth and didn’t think I could do what others around me kept telling me I could. I had always taken what was given and was thankful for whatever I got. But during the course of the past several months, I realized that I was worth more, I deserved more, and I was the only one holding myself back. At my annual at work review I was given a raise – but because of the confidence I had gained through the LEAP course, I stood up for myself and submitted a counter offer for a higher raise – Which my superiors happily agreed to. “Of course! – Absolutely! – No problem!” Now I can’t tell you that my heart wasn’t a split second from beating out of my chest, and my palms weren’t a sweaty/shaky mess when I submitted that counter offer, but I got out of my very comfortable comfort zone, took action and was able to obtain something I deserved and worked hard for. I truly believe that we put up more barriers for our own selves than we realize, and the LEAP series has drastically helped me see how much I was holding myself back – in both my personal and professional lives. It has also helped me realize that owning my own photography business is a very real possibility that I fully intend to pursue. We all have some sort of great un-tapped potential – we owe it to ourselves to nurture it and let it grow. And LEAP has gotten me one step closer to reaching mine, and I’m sure it has for you as well. – Anonymous

Connecting with other women. Loved the panel on presenting! – Anonymous

Thank you so much for creating this LEAP program. I have looked forward to this event every month. AWESOME! – Traci S.

LEAP was a great opportunity for networking, building relationships, and learning. The passion, excitement, and energy in the room each month was truly inspiring! – Tabby H.

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As you can see from the testimonials and survey responses, LEAP had a meaningful impact. The Downtown Chamber is proud to have played a role in stimulating conversation and action resulting in awareness and greater opportunity emerging for women leaders. It is in the best interest of the business community to continue the program series, and we look forward to offering connections, curriculum, and an advancement pipeline for attendees.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Chittenden

Jennifer Chittenden, Executive Director

Des Moines Downtown Chamber of Commerce