

Angela Braly

Angela Braly led one of the largest health insurance companies in the U.S. Now she's taking her leadership experience "full circle" by helping women find their voices as policy leaders.

Across the country, groups of women are meeting to have substantive conversations about policy — on issues ranging from economics, education and healthcare to immigration and poverty. These women — more than 2,600 of them across 36 states — are part of The Policy Circle, an organization that equips women to share their views and take leadership roles in public policy dialogue.

The Policy Circle is the brainchild of 2008 Woman of Achievement Angela Braly, *Texas Tech*, and co-founders, Kathryn Hubbard and Sylvie Legere. The three met at a public policy forum and came up with the idea of The Policy Circle after noticing that women weren't well-represented in leadership roles and policy discussions.

As the CEO of WellPoint (now Anthem) during the debate around the Affordable Care Act, Angela was involved in many public policy discussions and forums. At one public policy conference





More than 100 women gathered in Chicago for The Policy Circle Leadership Summit.



in particular, Angela remembers looking around the room and wondering, “Where are the women?” Often, Angela was one of only a few women at the table.

“When we began The Policy Circle, we asked a few foundational questions,” says Angela. “Are women being invited? And when they’re invited, are they attending? We quickly realized that one of the reasons women may say no to these opportunities is that they don’t feel confident talking about public policy.”

So Angela and her co-founders set out to help women prepare for getting involved in the public policy space. The idea of The Policy Circle is to give women a place to have thoughtful conversations about policy and to practice voicing their insights and opinions.

The Path to Leadership

“Women are wonderful leaders, but they don’t always think of themselves as leaders,” says Angela.

In fact, early on, Angela didn’t view herself as a leader. For her entire life, she’d planned on being a lawyer. She

joined Tri Delta at Texas Tech and graduated early with her sights set on law school.

After graduating from law school at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Angela moved to St. Louis and began practicing law. One of her clients was a company that was acquired by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Missouri, and Angela was approached about becoming General Counsel. At first she hesitated because she had just become a partner at her law firm. But, she accepted the offer, leaned in and earned opportunities to take on new and different leadership roles. Eventually, she became President of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Missouri. After the company was acquired by WellPoint, Angela relocated to Indianapolis with her family and served as Executive Vice President, General Counsel and Chief Public Affairs Officer, and then, in 2007, she was asked to take on the role of Chief Executive Officer of WellPoint.

At the time, Angela was the only woman serving as the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. There were only 13 female CEOs of Fortune 500 companies and only 26 leading Fortune 1000 companies. And while the Fortune 500

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reached an all-time high of CEOs who were women in 2017, it dipped back down in 2018 to only 24.

Says Angela, "This is why organizations like The Policy Circle are so important. The Policy Circle is more than just group discussions on policy. It helps women build their confidence and develop their leadership skills, in addition to offering women a way to connect with others interested in learning about and engaging in policy."

It only takes two women to start a circle. From there, each of the two people can invite their friends, and those friends can invite friends, to build the circle. Before each meeting, the group is assigned a policy brief provided by The Policy Circle. The meeting itself is designed in a way that all members are offered the opportunity to practice voicing their opinions in the group discussion.

Frequently, after meeting and discussing issues, many are inspired to take action by directly engaging in their communities to inspire change. In one instance, a Policy Circle from Chicago chartered a bus to Springfield, Illinois, to visit the State House of Representatives. Members of the Indianapolis Policy Circle met with the Governor of Indiana at his residence.

Angela draws many parallels between her Tri Delta experience and the concept for The Policy Circle. As a member of Tri Delta, Angela remembers coming together with her sisters, not just socially, but to collaborate on projects and to work together to make sure everyone had a voice.

"Women love the opportunity to come together around conversation," she says. "When women are only with

other women, there's some ease and safety in the experience. When we talk about public policy in Policy Circles, it's a safe place for women to express their opinions. We respectfully facilitate the conversation so that everyone gets called upon to practice their voice. Those are the things you learn subconsciously in a sorority."

Looking to the Future

In addition to The Policy Circle, which Angela describes as her "passion project," she also serves on several Boards and believes strongly in bringing more women and more women of color into these roles.

"A move toward greater inclusion at the Board level will help improve businesses, strategies and Board oversight and decisions."

When asked what leadership advice she would offer to other women, Angela says: "Be yourself. Take action with confidence. Push yourself to be a leader in whatever context you're in. You can be exactly who you are and be a leader."

As for the future of women in leadership, she says, "I'm optimistic that women will continue to forge a path into leadership. There are more women than ever before in the senior ranks of companies, nonprofits and community organizations. I hope my daughter's generation will have the opportunity to bring their perspective to leadership positions with greater ease."

If you're interested in starting a Policy Circle with your friends or sisters, visit www.thepolicycircle.org. 🌟