



Alice Goff

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“You have to come up through the ranks.”

Union president reflects on her rise to leadership as a single mom
and charting a pathway to success for other working mothers

Alice Goff represents 5,000 clerical and support service employees in Los Angeles and the Greater Los Angeles region. She also represents 22,000 workers in Southern California’s public sector in her role as president of AFSCME’s District Council 36. In that position, she recommends which political candidates and ballot initiatives the union should endorse.

Under her leadership, Local 3090 has worked to safeguard the rights of victims of domestic violence in the workplace and to pass local policies on pay equity and family leave that helped ensure women’s equal treatment under the law.

Goff remembers the challenges of raising a child as a single mother and balancing that against her talent and desire to be an agent for change for women in the workplace and the broader community. That is why she is so committed to understanding the needs of her members—and their roles in their families—and finding the best ways to develop them as leaders.

Irose through the ranks. I held many different offices in the local before I became president in 1994. I started out as an active member, then a union steward, an area representative, vice president and finally president.

As a rank-and-file member, I started out as a clerk typist. I didn't even know what a union was. But slowly I became more aware and active. Later, I was part of the city's first attempt to turn police officers' jobs—accepting calls from citizens—into civilian jobs. The department didn't have

and challenge and be the President. It doesn't work that way. You have to have some point of reference, some base of experience in order to really be effective. I don't believe you can be an effective leader if you don't know what you're talking about.

You have to have been there and understand the needs and the feelings of the worker—the members in the workplace. You have to understand what their challenges are, what their needs are, and why they make some of

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confidence that civilians would be able to take a call, properly identify what type of crime was in progress, and determine what police service was necessary.

There were 200 of us brought in on the first day. So you can imagine, it was chaotic and there were just a lot of problems in the unit. A friend of mine was very active in the union. She had been part of the drive that organized the clerical unit into AFSCME. Her prodding and encouragement, and giving me assignments here and there, got me started. And once I was in it, I was in it.

If you're going to be in the union, you have to learn all the aspects of it. You don't come in,

the requests that they do. And, similarly, why they don't participate in the union. A person needs to have a full appreciation for the needs of the members and what you may be able to do to bring about changes and make things better.

Members want the local to be responsive to their needs. That's what encourages growth. We have so many challenges. In the public sector we have done well for a long time. But in the last few years, we've been taking the brunt of the criticisms. We're getting the blame for the problems.

Sometimes our members think that we're able to do more than we are able to do because we've been able to do well for such a long time. They

need to have a full appreciation for the union. I think when you can convey that, you get the buy-in, you get the support, and you get the activism.

There has to be openness and encouragement, providing the kinds of training that would make someone feel comfortable to take on the challenge. You can't be effective just by having the title. There's a lot of work to be done, and you have to be willing to do the work.

Then you also have to be equipped to do the work. Training opportunities, those that are specifically for women or are inclusive, can build encouragement and give workers the technical knowledge to function in a position.

We're looking for women of color who don't shy away from responsibility. A lot of black women don't have any problem with taking charge and being the responsible person because of the culture and because their family structure requires it. So I think all of that is there already. We just need to let it out.

Black women just have to be willing to step up. And again, you get there by having a certain confidence level. You get to that level by having been offered the opportunity to train, to learn, and to be mentored.

For some of our members who really have a lot of potential, it really wouldn't take that much work to get those people ready. They in turn, reciprocate. They also want to bring others along. They want to grow the movement.

The only other thing that would stand in their way are personal responsibilities. I am a single parent. My son has come with me to union meetings since he was six months old. And a lot of times, during his adolescent years, he did a lot of homework in the back of the meeting rooms. He was always around the office because I wanted him to be involved. I drove him to all those places. For some kids it works, for some it doesn't. It rubbed off in a good way for him.

Because women tend to be the nurturers in the home environment, our personal responsibilities may hold us back. So we also have to find a way to help our members through that. Not so much now, because our demographics have changed, but we used to sort of have babysitters at the membership meetings so that wouldn't inhibit parents from participating. We have to always look for ways in which we can really get members to be active, to participate.

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