

Thank you to the Alliance for inviting me to speak today. I'm so grateful for the work you do in our community to support economic development of all kinds – large and small. And thank you to United Way and Women United. The work you're doing to lift families out of poverty is vitally important for our community.

I'm honored to speak to a room of women in business. I didn't start my career in business and never expected to be a business owner. Yet here I am. I own a consulting practice. The primary driver behind it was to have more autonomy with my schedule. My oldest daughter was starting high school, and I didn't want to miss my last four years with her. My main goal was to earn enough money to stay afloat. I started it 7 years ago on Leap Day. A friend had given me a quote that said Leap and the net will appear. I was terrified to move from being an employee to being a business owner, especially as I was the sole income provider for my family. So I filed to start the business on leap day. Two weeks ago I celebrated my 7 year anniversary by hosting a group of 8 sub-contractors who all work for my company. We've served more than 50 different organizations. Never in a million years would I have dreamed that was possible. And it never would have happened if other women leaders hadn't believed in me.

As part of my consulting practice, I offer executive coaching and leadership development services. I've noticed over the past several years a change in the leaders I work with. They are weary. These leaders are navigating massive, complex issues with no easy answers. They survived covid, but not without battle wounds. Their employees are often tired and hurting – if they can even hire them at all. And most of them are caring for others in their personal lives. Just yesterday one of the people I coach, who leads a large organization in Texas, called me. He said, Kelly, send me a zoom link. I need to see your face for this conversation. We got on zoom, and he starts telling me about a massive work issue he's been sorting out that's taken hours and days. A college friend was severely ill and he was arranging travel to be there. His daughter is struggling in school. A key employee was out sick. He's worried, exhausted and wanting to serve his organization well. I see this over and over and over in my work. This story plays out across agencies, sectors and demographics. And it is playing out in this room right now.

We are living through an exceptional time. We are facing big issues, personally and at a community level. Leading is never easy, but right now leaders are being asked to do exceptional lifts when stamina is low. We can sum up the difficulties by identifying them as three divides: we are disconnected from our self and

others – this is a social divide. We are disconnected from our self and nature – an ecological divide. And finally, many of us are disconnected from our self and our spirit. We are worn down, drained and feeling less than whole.

As women in business, I truly believe we are called to lead during this time. The business sector is a powerful force in any community, and that includes Lewis County. Jobs create dignity and worth and value for people. When we lead people and treat them as whole human beings, we are creating employees who are better parents, partners and community members. Here locally, our business community – this community in the room – is a powerful force for good in shaping our future through sharing time, talent and financial resources. We have a responsibility to our employees, our organizations and to our community to create a mindset of success and prosperity. We can't leave people behind. We must create the conditions for a culture of prosperity that helps and enhances all of our lives. We can bridge these divides and show other people the way. We need to be hope bringers and healers. We can offer hope, healing and connection within our community. That will create prosperity.

To do this, we must first heal the divides within ourselves. We can't lead when we're disconnected from our own authentic self. I value failure, I value brokenness. In my own life, my failures have led to some of my greatest moments

of truth. I've always said my divorce made me a better person – I had failed so miserably that it created compassion in me for myself and others. I used to say that I was going to write a book called the year of my divorce and other weight loss stories. But healing myself – reconnecting myself after that – required me to forgive myself. How many of you are familiar with the classic Japanese ceramic technique called Kintsugi? They take broken pottery and piece it back together using gold filigree. The end result is often more beautiful than the original, unmarred piece. This is what it means to heal the divides within ourselves: we must take the broken pieces and put them back together, filling the cracks with pieces of beauty. And this is a constant effort for us as leaders – to continually break, forgive, and repair ourselves – and see the beauty in the messiness of life. This is never easy – when we're divided internally it takes a significant toll. I stand before you today with a pit in my stomach that I have failed yet again. Most of you by now know that I took a stand on my facebook page last week. I tend to be an extremely cautious, thoughtful person, and that post represents the opposite of that – it was an incredibly human moment of action before thought. A true professional politician would probably have been able to be much more calculating in that situation, but I am not a professional politician. I have some very personal reasons why the situation engendered such a strong reaction in me.

While I don't regret my stance, I can see how putting it on my mayor page gave the impression that I did not support free speech or that I intended for government to regulate someone else's beliefs. As a community leader I can take a stance, but your local government must protect free speech even when it is speech we oppose. If we had redo's in life I would use one of mine to express my concerns differently and do a better job of honoring that nuance. As a leader, I have sincere intention to bring connection and belonging to any place I am in, and in this case I wish I had found a way to live that intention out. While I have pride in having integrity to my values, I have shame and embarrassment that I may have handled it poorly. This is what it means to be divided within yourself. And I have work to do to face that and forgive myself for not being the person I want to be. I share this partially as a public acknowledgement of the elephant in the room. I also share this because I know some of you right here, right now, are also experiencing that sense of shame, embarrassment, or desire for a redo. As leaders we're going to fail. And often times, the people around us will be quick to reach out with support. But until we look deep inside of ourselves, really face the fear that we're not who we want to be and forgive ourselves, we won't be able to lead. We have to heal the divides within ourselves if we want to lead in a meaningful way. So know that if you're struggling with that, I am too. I

understand the pain and anguish it creates. Offer yourself forgiveness for those times you haven't been who you wanted to be.

The second divide is from each other. We have so many tools and mechanisms at our fingertips right now to continue to break, divide and hurt one another. It is so easy to view anyone outside of your circle as wrong, and our circles are getting smaller and smaller. I share this perspective not as a role model or an exemplar in this arena, but as a fellow traveler in this journey of life. I get this one wrong a lot. I have created canyons of divide between me and others at times. I am seeking ways to create an ever-larger circle and find the commonalities and shared good with my fellow travelers. This is where the message of hope matters deeply. Hope is the number one predictor of whether or not we flourish in life. A person with high hope believes the future will be better than the present and that we have the power to make it so. We have agency in this thing called life, and we can be captains of our own journeys. But high hope people know that while there are many paths to get there, no path is free from obstacles. Hope takes work, and there will be barriers. If we want to heal the divide between ourselves and others, we need to act as hope-bringers. We need to paint the vision of the future and help people see how they can be a part of it. This is true whether you're leading a team of employees, a whole organization, a service group in the community or

your family. Invite people to join you in creating a shared future that is better than today. Build hope. There is far more that unites us than divides us. And when it doesn't go well, practice grace. Grace is defined as unmerited forgiveness. We need to practice that more. Finally, we are called as leaders to be both the builders of hope and the holders of hope. When we encounter people who cannot, for whatever reason, practice hope for themselves – who cannot envision a better future or see their own agency in creating it – we can hold hope – hold that vision for them. Heather story. Some day, they will take the hope you've been holding for them and make it their own. Being hope bringers, hope builders and hope holders is how we heal the divide between ourselves and others. It is some of the most important work we can do as leaders.

The last divide is from ourselves and nature. This ecological divide is playing out in many ways. One of the most significant is being untethered from the natural rhythms and cycles in life. And this is where I will speak specifically to us as women in the room. We are working in an environment that demands burnout. Success is equaled with achievement. Achievement is based on activity. And we're expected to excel in all arenas – in business, in our personal lives, in our appearance, health and even in fun and joy. (How many of us have watched someone else's social media and thought they were living their best life and what

was wrong with me?) While winter is vital in nature, we don't allow ourselves to lie fallow and heal. This is true for everyone, but in many ways women experience it more because the caregiving work often falls disproportionately on us. I was recently hired to do strategy mapping with a small company in CA owned by three female leaders. They reached out to me because they were struggling to find their way forward after a period of tremendous growth and success. What had always been a close working relationship was suddenly strained, and they felt they couldn't talk to each other. During our second mapping session, I had them identify what was working well and what was not working well within their company. Their responses pointed to the three elements of burnout. When I gently asked about it, two of the women had tears in their eyes. They had been going and going and didn't even realize how burned out they were. They were trying to stay strong, but in reality covering that level of burnout was exactly what was inhibiting their relationship. We need to create natural rhythms in our working lives, time for bursts of energy and times for quiet and reflection. We're hurting a generation of workers right now. To be a leader, you don't have to be everything. You can't be. The antidote to burnout is both rest and play. Like the blossoms of spring that are a riot of color and beauty, play creates healing and lowers stress. So do the things that bring you joy. Rest, recover. Walk in nature.



Create little pockets of green space around your work area for yourself and others. Help others rediscover their joy. You will be a more effective leader for longer when you do.

As Women United likes to say, empowered women empower women. My business exists because other people believed in me and empowered me. I took the leap, and my net appeared. Some of that was very tangible support – client leads, or a gig early on. Some of that has been intangible encouragement, holding hope for me when I didn't have it, or even grace – undeserved, unmerited forgiveness. And some of you who have done that for me are in this room right now. Thank you for believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself. I have broken many times, sometimes by my own doing and even quite recently, but thanks to women in this room and others, I have broken open to growth, learning, humility and service.

Being a business leader carries responsibility – to your team, your company, and yes, to this community. I am grateful for this room of women in business. You are creating the future in every moment. Here in Lewis County, we are building a culture of prosperity, a mindset of success. My daughter ran track, and I've always loved running as a sport. Who here has been to a track meet? What happens when that very last person comes across the finish line, sometimes a looooong

way back from the rest of the pack? That's right, the stadium cheers. Together, we'll make Lewis County a track meet, where we celebrate the winners of the race and admire their strength and skill, while cheering on the last person across the finish line, embracing the hard work and determination it took them to get there. Willa Cather once said, the voice is a wild thing and cannot be bred in captivity. As women in business, use your voice. Let your inner voice be bold, strong and compassionate, reminding you that failure can have beauty, risks are where learning is, and you can heal from failure. Let your voice be proud and determined as you build hope and connection with others. Create that vision for the future. Invite others to be a part of it. And let your voice be joyful and silly in rest and play. Above all else, let it be yours and yours alone. Take the leap. The net will appear.