

# Women in Leadership Advancing Women

When I began interviewing women for my book on female leadership, the first question I asked them was ‘what is the difference between male and female leaders?’ After all, the core skills required for a leader to be successful in today’s world, such as self-awareness, are typically identified as female rather than male traits.

Their answers surprised me; most women felt that there wasn’t a difference based on gender – instead differences in leadership styles between male and female were attributed to factors such as culture, background and temperament. The real difference, I learned, was not in leadership behaviours – it was the experience of the leadership journey.

The 2017 McKinsey *Women in the Workplace* survey concludes that inequality starts at the very first promotion. Women fall behind early and continue to lose ground with every step’. In *Women in Management – The Leadership Pipeline 2017*, published by The 30% Club, Ireland, we learn that the lowest level in the management hierarchy is almost evenly split between men and women, but that as management levels increase in seniority, their representation falls significantly at each subsequent stage of the career ladder. Less than one third of Executive Director roles are held by women and the percentage of women holding CEO positions stands at 19%.

While these figures represent small gains for women since data collection began in 2015, progress is too slow. The issue is far too important to be left to organisations to resolve, it requires input from all stakeholders and women must be prepared to use every interaction and conversation with others to influence the dynamic.

Research regularly implies that women limit themselves through a lack of self-confidence, which manifests as a reluctance to ask for sponsors, seek mentors, ask for access to senior leadership and pursue a job opportunity beyond their experience.

Suggesting that confidence is the problem is not particularly helpful as it supposes that the problem is exclusively a female one, whereas in fact it is much more nuanced. The women I work with are not short of confidence in their abilities and have a strong desire to add strategic value to their organisations. It might be more useful to consider instead what creates this confidence crisis.

From my experience of working with female senior executives, I see it somewhat differently. The issues many women face are context specific, at times women can be unclear about how to contribute and concerned about how their contribution will be received when they put themselves out there.

Research among female leaders has found that what happens in women’s early career phase can be significant. Specifically, opportunities to handle key projects or gain valuable work experience are critical, although often women may not realise this until later in their career.

Help from others is important, sources include their manager, coach, colleague or mentor. When senior women were asked to list the people who supported them in achieving their goals, their manager topped the list and a high proportion cited family and friends. In general, women utilise a variety of supports, rather than focusing on a single one.

The need to be intentionally ambitious and aim high was also identified as important in the early career phase. Many of the women interviewed said that they wish they had been more focused with their career plans.



Dawn Leane specialises in leadership development through coaching, training and consulting with a particular focus on diversity. She is Principal Consultant at Leane Leaders.

In my experience, these factors are underpinned by four crucial behaviours which, when practised at an early stage of a woman's career will impact her career trajectory significantly. They are, of course, beneficial to women at any stage of their leadership journey.

### **Promote your personal brand**

One common trait among women I have coached, is that they don't self-promote. When an important task or project is complete, all too often they simply move on to the next challenge. Women regularly underestimate the importance of recognition, seeing it as narcissistic and uncomfortable. Even when recognition is given, all too often women dismiss it out of hand.

A personal brand is about how you build relationships, respond to situations and how you make people feel.

When building a personal brand, it's no good being the best at what you do if nobody knows about it, or worse still someone else is given credit for your contribution.

### **Build valuable connections**

Creating and maintaining a network of influential people is essential for success in business. Yet, for many women, networking is a challenge. It's not the activity of networking itself – where research shows that women have an advantage – but the concept of intentional, strategic networking that women find uncomfortable. Women often see it as, at best, a waste of time or, at worst, self-serving.

Yet networking is one of the best ways to gain a competitive edge, whether seeking new opportunities or gaining access to information.

The most important thing about networking is to build your network before you need it. Decide who you want to know, be intentional about meeting them and follow up afterwards. It's also important to think about what you can contribute to the relationship and how you can create value for the other party.



### **Get comfortable exercising power**

The word 'power' holds many negative connotations; accordingly, women are often uncomfortable being seen to pursue and retain power.

This is particularly true in the context of the 'double-bind' that is, if a woman displays what we perceive as traditional feminine qualities, she may be liked, but not be respected. Conversely, if a woman displays what we call masculine qualities, such as being direct or competitive, she may be respected but she will almost certainly be disliked. In fact, she will be judged to a much higher standard than her male counterparts regarding leadership style and behaviour.

In reality, the Oxford English Dictionary defines power as 'the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events'. Isn't that the responsibility of every leader? One of the most important determinants of managerial effectiveness is success in influencing people. Without power, issues such as motivating and rewarding team members, driving change and having input to strategic decisions, becomes extremely difficult.

### **Get a good coach**

As reported earlier, women often utilise friends and family as supports. While this has its advantages, it also has disadvantages; firstly, they will have opinions and won't be able to refrain from offering advice, they may be invested in a particular outcome or they may not

understand the context or environmental issues at play. In short, it is much more difficult for them to be objective.

In business, executive coaching is often misunderstood as a remedial intervention, used to address performance or behavioural shortcomings. Whereas in sports, coaching is an essential component of success.

A good executive coach is an enabler, they don't tell the client what to do or how to do it. They provide a framework for the client to generate options and find their own solutions. They listen, they feedback what they have heard and they challenge. Most importantly, coaching is an organic form of personal development.

Serena Williams describes the value of coaching as ensuring consistency in her performance – bringing it all together. In her own words 'I have the game, but it's about elevating and reaching higher potential'.

The good news is that these four behaviours simply require attitudinal or perceptual shifts, therefore they are within each woman's command.

Neuroplasticity – the ability of our brain to reorganize itself throughout our life, due to our experiences – suggests our behaviours and attitudes are far more malleable than we imagine. While some of these concepts may feel uncomfortable at first, the more they are implemented the more natural they become, it's like building a muscle.