

BRIDGE

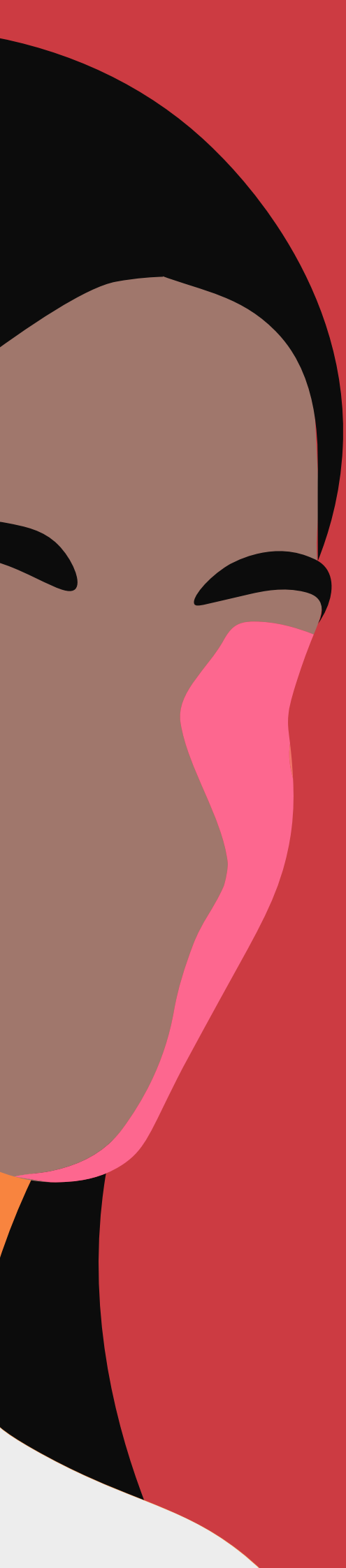
# How Did She Get There?

And what organisations can learn from these women



October 2022





## About Jane Sassienie

Our HDSGT research was led by **Jane Sassienie**, who has been a Senior Client Director at BRIDGE for 24 years. With her extensive experience in organisational psychology and psychotherapy, she has supported numerous organisations and leaders and has developed much of BRIDGE's thought leadership and transformational frameworks.

Jane has an MSc in 'Change Agent Skills and Strategies', BA in Fine Art and Art History. She is a Master Practitioner in (New Code) Neuro-Linguistics and a Practitioner in Ericksonian language patterns. Jane has training in Gestalt processes for groups, Transactional Analysis, Cybernetics and systems theory and is a qualified transpersonal psychotherapist.

## About BRIDGE Partnership

BRIDGE Partnership are a consultancy in organisational and leadership development. For nearly 30 years, they have been supporting some of the largest brands across the globe to achieve breakthrough organisational change. Their focus areas include evolving leaders, accelerating team performance and making purpose matter, developing thought leadership and pioneering practices in the field.

## In collaboration with We Are Leftfield

Leftfield, our thought partners on this study, are a design thinking studio who work with organisations to find unexpected solutions to some of their toughest challenges. They have partnered with BRIDGE on a number of projects, including several immersive digital learning journeys.

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[www.bridge-partnership.com](http://www.bridge-partnership.com)  
[hello@bridge-partnership.com](mailto:hello@bridge-partnership.com)

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# How Did She Get There?

by Jane Sassienie and We Are Leftfield

## **T**he lived reality of women and men at work is vastly different.

These differences for women show up on a sliding scale, from seemingly insignificant things such as noticing the chilly temperature of an office (set to a male temperature norm<sup>01</sup>), to being spoken over (when asked, 36% of women in senior leadership positions reported being interrupted more than others versus 15% of male senior leaders.<sup>02</sup>), to being prevented from rising up the ladder (women receive substantially lower 'potential' ratings despite receiving higher job performance ratings, and are subsequently promoted less and paid less.<sup>03</sup>)

## **And this gap is not getting smaller.**

Globally, women continue to take on 75% of the unpaid workload,<sup>04</sup> such as acting as the caregiver for children and elderly relatives. The pandemic of the past three years, in which women were increasingly more burned out than men and one in four have considered downshifting their career,<sup>05</sup> has shown that the inherent biases in organisations and society at large still persist, with divisions that are deeply entrenched.

**Despite being aware of this gap, organisations are barely any closer to closing it.** The solutions so far have done very little – if anything at all – to shift the reality for women. Many of the initiatives

that organisations have adopted over the years, such as assertiveness courses for women, have focused on **fixing the women** rather than the organisation, asking them to be more demanding, to lean in, **to be more like men.**

**We're taking a different approach.** There are women within these organisations who – despite the odds – are thriving, and **it is these women who have been our focus for the past two years.** We interviewed women in senior leadership roles, from CEOs to elected representatives to human rights lawyers, who have succeeded and continue to succeed in traditional patriarchal organisations. We chose women that we believe represent an *exception* – succeeding without changing themselves to fit the prevailing paradigm. These women aren't thriving by becoming 'honorary men,' rather, they've done it *on their own terms.*

Our intention was to gain an understanding of their common experiences, to surface patterns that emerge from their stories, and **to glean how women can reach the top whilst remaining themselves.** From our conversations, we identified five key patterns that these women had in common, and from these patterns we were inspired to put forward suggestions and ideas

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<sup>01</sup> Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men, Caroline Criado-Perez, March 2019, Preface

<sup>02</sup> Women in the Workplace 2021 Report, McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org, 2021

<sup>03</sup> Potential" and the Gender Promotion Gap, Alan Benson, Univ. of Minnesota, Danielle Li, MIT & NBER, and Kelly Shue, Yale & NBER, October 2021

<sup>04</sup> COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects, Anu Madgavkar, Olivia White, Mekala Krishnan, Deepa Mahajan, and Xavier Azcue, McKinsey Global Institute, July 2020

<sup>05</sup> Seven charts that show COVID-19's impact on women's employment article, McKinsey & Company, March 2021





## Why are we having these conversations?

that we hope will act as a starting point for organisations to spark real change, not just for women but for everyone in an organisation.

If the status quo remained, what would the consequences be? For those working on Diversity, Equality & Inclusion (DE&I), it is already obvious that **doing something to shift the current reality is not an act of benevolence for underrepresented groups, it's a form of survival, for organisations and for all of us.**

Put simply, **diversity wins. The business case for gender diversity is clear – diverse teams perform better.** McKinsey reported in 2020 that teams who were most gender diverse outperformed those who were the least by 48%.<sup>06</sup> FTSE350 companies where women make up more than a third of their most senior jobs have a net profit margin over ten times greater than companies with no women at this level.<sup>07</sup>

Our conversations with women revealed an even greater need for organisations to act. As many of us know, the challenges that organisations are facing today are becoming increasingly complex and unpredictable. What we uncovered during our interviews was that the skills that are required to solve these challenges are in fact the very qualities that these women excel at. This may go some way to explaining why they are thriving. **It is therefore extraordinary to consider that organisations have an untapped resource**

**that can give them an edge**, but most of them are failing to effectively harness it.

**The women we interviewed demonstrated skills that are being highlighted by several studies as the 'skills of the future'.** These skills have traditionally been undervalued within a business context, but they are needed today more than ever. Our interviewees built a culture of partnership, collaboration and inclusion around them, which was central to their success. In short, our conversations revealed that organisations should not be trying to **fix women**, rather they should be **learning from them** and creating the conditions for them and others to thrive.

The advantages of creating a diverse workforce are huge, not just for organisations and women, but also for men. **One might assume that men lose something when we rebalance the scales.** But, on the contrary, "men also see strong and significant gains in life satisfaction when the sexes are more equal."<sup>08</sup> A report by the World Health Organization demonstrated that gender equality had a positive impact on men's health.<sup>09</sup> The report focused on how gender norms and notions of masculinity are shaping health outcomes for men and women. Øystein Gullvåg Holter conducted a study that shows that men are half as likely to be depressed in countries that are more gender-equal.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the 'be more like

<sup>06</sup> Diversity wins, How inclusion matters, McKinsey & Company, May 2020

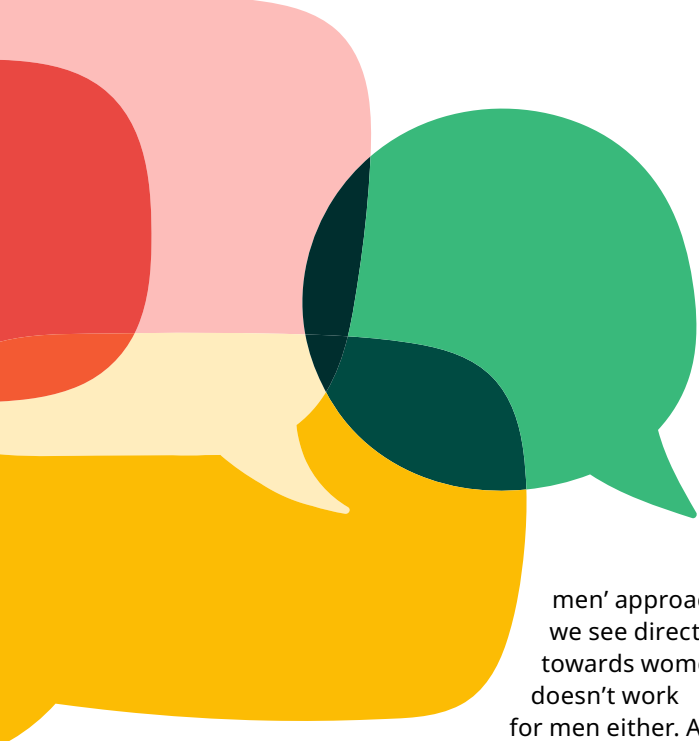
<sup>07</sup> The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021, P78 from WOMENCOUNT 2020, Margaret McDonagh and Lorna Fitzsimons

<sup>08</sup> (E)Quality of Life: A Cross-National Analysis of the Effect of Gender Equality on Life Satisfaction, Andre P. Audette, Sean Lam, Haley O'Connor, and Benjamin Radcliff, October 2018

<sup>09</sup> The health and well-being of men in the WHO European Region: better health through a gender approach, World Health Organization, 2018

<sup>10</sup> "What's in it for Men?": Old Question, New Data, Øystein Gullvåg Holter, November 2014





men' approach we see directed towards women, doesn't work for men either. As

Michelle P. King, author of *The Fix* puts it, "it's easy to assume that there are no downsides for men... But when men put the cape of masculinity on, they lose themselves."<sup>11</sup> Breaking up with 'Don Draper', and redefining what it is to be a man at work is remarkably beneficial to all genders.<sup>12</sup> (NB. Don Draper is a fictional character in the television series, *Mad Men*, which in this instance is used as shorthand to describe a deeply ingrained 'ideal' worker prototype: white, male, heterosexual, willing to commit most of their time to the organisation, promote their own achievements, take action and tell others what to do, be extroverted and dominant in social situations, assert themselves, speak up, ask for what they want, be decisive even if it means going it alone. Michelle asked 735 men and women in a professional services firm to find out what they thought the ideal worker standard was in their organisation. 70% came back with that response).<sup>13</sup>

The gains are significant for all involved. This is why it's crucial for organisations to shift their current reality and rethink their approach. Whilst Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In, Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*<sup>14</sup> was a breakthrough for some, it has to some extent fed this approach of training women

to be more like men in order for them to get on in largely male contexts. As Mary Ann Sieghart points out, this doesn't work for a myriad of reasons, one being that women are held to different standards. Research has shown that women *do* ask for a pay rise just as often as men. They are just not given it. Moreover, they are punished for being as assertive as men. They don't get the pay rise because women, unlike men, are rewarded for being likeable as opposed to showing agency.<sup>15</sup> **Most importantly, asking women to be more like men fails because it throttles the very qualities that make these women unique and enables them to succeed.**

Our conversations revealed patterns that are in line with a **new wave of thinking** that is emerging from thought leaders such as Michelle P. King (*The Fix*<sup>16</sup>), Mary Ann Sieghart (*The Authority Gap*<sup>17</sup>) and Caroline Criado Perez (*Invisible Women*<sup>18</sup>) who highlight the unseen barriers in the workplace and the desire within organisations to 'fix' the women (you shall hear more from these thought leaders throughout this piece). Organisations need to raise their levels of consciousness and listen to the women who are succeeding whilst remaining true to their natural way of leading. Understanding how they are succeeding can hopefully help us create the conditions for others to thrive, which in turn can address the diversity imbalance, and set organisations up for a bright future.

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<sup>11</sup> The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work, Michelle P. King, P224 "What's in it for Men?": Old Question, New Data - Øystein Gullvåg Holter, 2014  
<sup>12</sup> The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work, Michelle P. King, Chapter 8  
<sup>13</sup> The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work, Michelle P. King, P25  
<sup>14</sup> *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, Sheryl Sandberg, 2015  
<sup>15</sup> *The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It*, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021, P96 from "Determinants and Consequences of Salary Negotiations by Graduating Male and Female MBAs", Barry Gerhart and Sara Rynes, 1991  
<sup>16</sup> The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work, Michelle P. King  
<sup>17</sup> *The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It*, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021  
<sup>18</sup> *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Caroline Criado-Perez, March 2019

# Our Methodology

In our work as leadership and organisational development consultants, we at BRIDGE, have time and time again seen solutions that focus on fixing women. In 2019, having been asked to create a leadership programme for women in a global bank, we realised that most of the literature on the subject was about how women fail. But we were curious about how women have succeeded and we wanted to dig deeper.

## Phase 1: Interviews with 40 women

Jane Sassienie, Client Director, at BRIDGE, led our research, interviewing 40 women to date. These conversations started in 2019 and continued throughout the pandemic. The list of women being interviewed continues to grow. The women Jane and colleagues interviewed were kind enough to share detailed stories of their journey. Jane chose women that she believed represented an *exception* – succeeding without changing themselves to fit the prevailing paradigm. These women came from a variety of sectors and backgrounds.

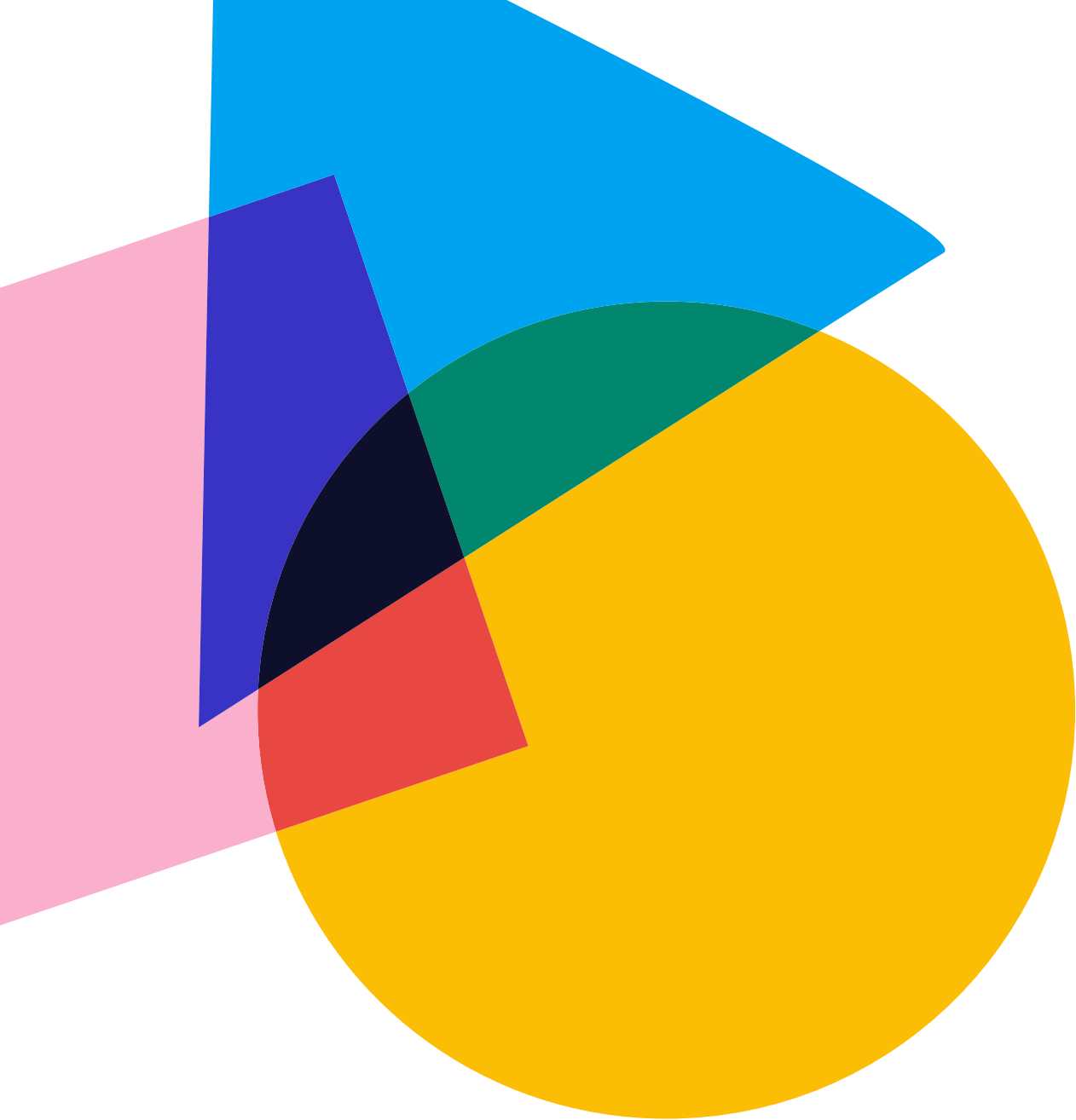
## Phase 2: Online survey

After these interviews, we surfaced initial observations and hunches that were emerging from their stories. These were sense-checked by releasing a survey that was answered by 128 women. Women self-selected for the survey – they were asked to complete it if they felt they had been successful without compromising who they were or without trying to be more like the men around them.

## Phase 3: Digging deeper

In collaboration with LeftField, our thought partners, we dug deeper into the interviews to reveal several key patterns and insights. Many observations emerged that may go some way to explaining how these women were able to reach the top whilst remaining true to themselves. Together, we explored the current thinking in the field, highlighting and building on the discoveries, solutions and stories (which we share throughout this piece) by thought leaders such as Mary Portas, Vivienne Ming, Mary Ann Sieghart, Michelle P. King, Caroline Criado Perez, Karen Ellis, The Dialogue Group, Margaret Heffernan, Riane Eisler, as well as studies conducted by consultancies such as McKinsey, and by global universities and institutions such as the World Health Organization and MIT (a full list can be found in our Reference section). In partnership, we combined all the threads to uncover, make sense of and then distil the essence of our findings as well as solutions.

We have put forward suggestions and ideas for organisations that will hopefully enable a broader range of people to rise, and more organisations to thrive. The solutions we share are intentionally directed at organisations as opposed to individuals. We often see a heavy burden of responsibility being placed on the individual to initiate change. Although everyone must play their part for change to happen, we believe that the overall responsibility and ownership must lie with the organisation, or in other words, with those who design the system.



Our solutions are presented as conversation starters and food for thought. The challenges that organisations face, as many thought leaders have stated before us, are systemic. There are no quick fixes. The solutions we share have come from the collective intelligence of our network and our 30 years' experience supporting organisations and leaders (we are grateful to everyone who contributed to these solutions – you can find their names in our Acknowledgements section). We have also built on the ideas of thought leaders specialising in organisational development, psychology, gender studies and more.

We are extremely grateful to all the women who shared their stories with us and contributed to this paper (their names can be found in the [Acknowledgements section](#)). Although we spoke to women

from different walks of life, we are aware that our research does not cover the whole spectrum of voices and experiences. For this study, we focused on the experiences of senior leaders who identified as women and who have worked in organisations that one could argue are traditional and patriarchal. Our scope did not extend beyond these parameters. We did not proactively hone in on the additional difficulties and complexities that certain populations face, such as non-binary or transgender people, or women of colour. Neither did we interview men. Our research is still ongoing and expanding and we hope to capture more and more voices and insights as we continue. This piece was always intended to be an initial exploration, with the hope that it would spark a conversation. We hope that the insights we share are helpful to everyone.



**Watch Out For:**  
“Isn’t it just...?”

The challenge of reading – and indeed of researching and writing – about any topic is the fact that we are likely to come with a certain degree of conditioning. In order to make quick decisions in a timely manner, our minds often unconsciously take mental shortcuts (heuristics) to avoid being overloaded with information. This can be helpful in our day-to-day lives, but it can also result in shortcuts that are no longer nuanced, which in turn can lead to biases being formed. This is especially challenging when dealing with complex issues. While writing this piece, we have had to actively remind ourselves to stay open to avoid jumping to conclusions. We invite you to remain open as you read what follows, letting go of assumptions and allowing your imagination to freely consider new possibilities.

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A couple of example comments we heard from readers during the beginning of our research:

**Q / “Aren’t the qualities that you’re describing, just qualities found in all good leaders, not just women leaders? Isn’t this study just about broad personality traits, skills and developmental levels rather than specifically women-issues?”**

A/ It is important to stress that we are by no means suggesting that it is *only* the women who possess certain qualities that have enabled them to lead effectively. We did not interview men for this study, only women. Our research was intended to see if there were any common experiences among women leaders who are thriving. And we noticed a pattern: many of these women possess similar qualities to one another – qualities that are considered by numerous studies (detailed in the piece) to be ‘skills of the future’ – and yet these qualities are, in our experience, often overlooked by organisations. With this observation we are posing a question to organisations – why is this the case?

**Q / “Haven’t we already covered the women? Isn’t it time to move on now?”**

A/ We sometimes hear this comment from the DE&I department within organisations – a desire to move on to other challenges, with the assumption that this box has already been ticked having implemented some initiatives for women. A certain amount of fatigue has set in. The insights we share, however, show that organisations are very far from closing the gap and resolving the significant issues that women face at work. If anything, looking at how the recent pandemic has disproportionately affected more women than men when it comes to their working lives, one could argue we are even going backwards. In this study, we demonstrate how business-critical this challenge is for organisations.

None of the insights we share are being presented as indisputable truths. Rather it is our intention to share our observations from the stories of our interviewees, to join the dots, and to put forward what we have learnt in order to open up a dialogue for everyone to contribute to and to explore.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To combat the gender gap at work, organisations have too often focused on ‘fixing’ the women, asking them to be more demanding, to lean in, to be more like men. Put simply, this doesn’t work.

We wanted to take a different approach. Instead of focusing on why women are “failing”, we interviewed 40 women in senior roles who, despite the odds, are thriving. We honed in on the women who are succeeding without changing themselves to fit the prevailing paradigm. These women are thriving on their own terms.

Our intention was to gain an understanding of their common experiences and to glean how women can reach the top whilst remaining themselves. This research revealed several unexpected patterns which we share below, along with several solutions intended to help organisations dismantle institutionalised behaviour and practices so that they, and their entire workforce, can thrive.



## 1 Parental Power

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The upbringing of many of these women played a critical role in their success. Their childhood instilled in them a strong belief in themselves that stood the test of time and carried into adulthood. They often formed this self-belief as a result of the presence of role models, but women who had a less fortunate upbringing and an absence of parenting also developed a belief in their abilities because their call to leadership came early. Both these paths resulted in women sidestepping the ‘Brilliance Bias’.<sup>19</sup> Organisations have amazing potential to pick up where family, education and society have left off. Places of work can in fact be a latent treasure trove. We’ll explore this further in chapter one.



## 2 A Different Path Up The Mountain

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Rather than these women knowing exactly what they wanted from an early age and embarking on a meticulously planned career, they instead took a winding path up the mountain to success. There was no master plan. Instead of having a clear vision, their journey was led by four guiding principles: purpose and values, following curiosity, taking risks, and putting in the hard work. We share ideas on how organisations can avoid losing top talent by supporting people to go up the mountain in their own unique way.



## 3 If You Are A Unicorn Don't Try To Be A Horse

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Several of these women started their careers by trying to fit into the prevailing paradigm. Later on, however, they reclaimed themselves, embraced their differences, and learnt to lead authentically. In short, authenticity was key to their success. Instead of 'fixing' the women, our research shows that it is the institutionalised behaviour and practices that need to shift. We explore how organisations can dismantle the alpha male culture that is stifling authenticity and forcing men and women to change their natural way of leading in order to fit in. We share solutions on how to embrace diversity. Taking diversity seriously is not an act of benevolence, it is an act of organisational survival. Those who don't, run the risk of becoming irrelevant.



## 4 Lead Like These Women

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Our interviews revealed that the women who are thriving are relying on skills that studies have heralded as the 'skills of the future,' such as empathy, facilitation, intuition and design-thinking. These abilities put these women in a perfect position to solve complex, disruptive and volatile challenges that organisations are increasingly feeling overwhelmed by. Rather than trying to 'fix' the women, we propose that organisations should be encouraging more people to lead like these women.



## 5 Partnership Not Dominance

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Partnership was key to these women's success. They were not afraid to ask for help, to rise together, to focus on collaborating as opposed to competing, and to favour purpose over position/personal success. They forged partnerships that lasted a lifetime and were keen to pay it forwards by mentoring the next generation. We share how organisations can shift their culture to one of partnership, not just for their employees, but also for their customers and communities.







## STORY

A couple of years ago, Jane spoke with a large investment bank who were looking to transform their organisation's culture:

"They explained to me that "we need leaders who will collaborate, work out complex issues together, listen to each other and their people, show empathy, and be resilient." They added that "we need leaders who can navigate the change and take people through it sensitively." The Senior HR Director, a man, said "I mean, where do we find these people? Who leads like that?" I thought for a moment and responded with what was really a question: "women?"

This led to a tiny tumbleweed moment. First silence, then they all began to laugh and nod."



# 1

## Chapter One

# Parental Power

*“Childhood was the most instrumental in who I am and what I do.”  
— Cathy Gilman*

**Vasiliki Petrou**, Group CEO at Unilever Prestige, was raised on an island in Greece and has vivid memories of her childhood: “My vision and outlook on life I really owe to my father. When I was either seven or eight years old, he gave me a book to read, which had the title ‘You Can’ and it was one of the early philosophers on positive thinking. It was really a book about confidence, taking risks, trying things and not to worry about failure. He told me, “you can take risks and I’m behind you, there is always the safety blanket, which is the house, the family.” This thinking that happened in early childhood was key to me always being quite confident in taking risks.”

**Maria-Pia De Caro**, has a similarly inspiring story. When she was still in the womb, her engineer father wrote his pregnant wife a letter. In it, he said, “I hope our baby is a girl, and I will teach her everything I know about engineering.” Fast forward 35 years and Maria is an accomplished engineer and a strong advocate for women in STEM subjects.



**Pamela Klyn**, Senior Vice President - Corporate Relations & Sustainability at Whirlpool Corporation

Our conversations with women over the past couple of years have crossed into early life as much as they've focused on adult life. When we asked these women whether they thought anything in their childhood had helped with their success later in organisational life, they were rarely hesitant.

Several of them cited one or both of their parents or other family members as role models. These role models instilled in them strong values that they carried through to adulthood. A **belief in themselves and the possibilities in front of them** were key themes: "My parents never said I couldn't do something...they just told me to work hard and good things would happen and they were behind me 100%" ([Pamela Klyn](#)) "He instilled in us that we could do whatever we wanted." ([Louisa Gregory](#)) "They instilled in me a self-belief, an inner confidence." ([Sophie Neary](#))

Other recurring values that surfaced were **kindness, hard work and humility**: "The way I was brought up was to work hard and to have values around, truth, integrity, treating everyone the same, keep to those values, you won't go wrong...I feel I have an inner strength in my core that runs through me that is grounded in these strong values, my parents would not tolerate any sense of arrogance." ([Elaine Lorimer](#))

Some women highlighted how their **parents were equals** and there was no division of responsibilities: "There was no gender stereotyping... My mother was always my dad's equal intellectually and in all financial and other decisions." ([Pamela Klyn](#)) Others commented on **the strong women** in their family: "I am imbued with the idea of women being able to do stuff... They are fierce South African women. The women were always the more vivid people in the family." ([Leonie Foster](#))

**Not all the women we interviewed had role models in their childhood, however. There was a subset of women whose call to leadership came at an early age as a result of challenging and sometimes traumatic experiences.** These experiences resulted in an absence of parenting. Some women found themselves in leadership roles from a young age, holding the mantle of responsibility for themselves and/or their family out of necessity. For them, leadership was born out of crisis. What sprung from these experiences, however, was **a strong self-belief in themselves - in their own agency, capability and leadership.**



**Elaine Lorimer**, Chief Executive at Revenue Scotland

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“Schools are teaching little girls that brilliance doesn’t belong to them.”

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**Many of the women we interviewed over the course of two years, had sidestepped ‘Brilliance Bias,’** a phrase coined by Caroline Criado Perez. What is Brilliance Bias? “When girls start primary school at the age of five, they are as likely as five-year-old boys to think women could be ‘really, really smart’. But by the time they turn six, something changes. They start doubting their gender.” When presented with a game intended for ‘really, really smart children,’ five-year-old girls are as likely to want to play it as boys, but six-year-old girls are suddenly uninterested. **“Schools are teaching little girls that brilliance doesn’t belong to them.”<sup>20</sup>**

The women we interviewed who had role models and support in childhood, and the women who had an absence of parenting, all side-stepped this Brilliance Bias. For the women who had role models, the beliefs and values instilled in them led them to see their own potential. Those who had leadership thrust upon them, sidestepped the Brilliance Bias because they demonstrated (to themselves and others) their capability and competence from an early age.

Many women we spoke to had to overcome significant difficulties over the course

of their adult life, but they believed in their own agency to do this. **This sense of possibility was supported and kept intact, in part, due to what they had learnt in childhood.**

The pattern we noticed in the childhoods of the women we interviewed may raise complex emotions in some of us. Not everyone had an inspiring role model to look up to and not all of us had childhoods as traumatic as some. Many of us may be somewhere in between. Certainly, none of us can go back in time and change our past. **There is, however, a vast possibility for us to re-parent ourselves as individuals, to explore and overcome the things that may be holding us back and to put in place the support we need.** Almost all the women leaders we conversed with spoke about how coaching, mentoring and therapy enabled them to work through some of the darker corners of their minds. Furthermore, there are many opportunities for organisations to pick up where family, education or society may have failed. We’ll explore more during the solutions section of this chapter.

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<sup>20</sup> Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men, Caroline Criado-Perez, March 2019, P101, from “Gender stereotypes about intellectual ability emerge early and influence children’s interests”, Lin Bian, Sarah-Jane Leslie and Andrei Cimpian, 2017



## STORY

Organisations have amazing potential to pick up where family, education and society have failed. Places of work can in fact be a latent treasure trove. The store managers Jane met when she worked with retail companies are worthy examples to follow:

“I’ve worked with a lot of retail businesses over the years and many young staff members, some of whom had challenging backgrounds, had incredible support from some of their store managers. With this support, they were able to value the impact they had and to see the possibilities that lay in front of them. Their potential and their talent were pointed out to them, their confidence was built up. These store managers, who genuinely believed in their staff, acted in some ways as the parent that some of these staff members never had. Many of these employees went on to surpass their store managers and reach senior corporate positions in the company, much to the delight and pride of their managers.

What struck me was how proud these store managers were when they saw their reportees thrive, in one case the part he had played in the journey of the current CEO. It was as if they took it upon themselves as a personal goal to see the people in their team overtake them and flourish. What if we all could have managers as supportive as these? With this kind of support, how far could everyone go?”

# Solutions for the organisation



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What if therapy wasn't seen as a last resort, but rather as a necessary, healthy and regular practice for everyone?

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## Solutions for the organisation

Many of us have had moments in our childhood that were less than ideal. Few of us have made it through childhood without some tender areas. Clearly a person cannot go back in time and change their past, but there are ways of supporting them in the present so that they can resolve the snagging that occurred from past experiences and enable them to fulfil their potential. This support not only applies to women but to everyone.

Organisations have an enormous opportunity to enable their people to reach their potential and to pick up where others may have failed in places. Here are some starter thoughts:

### Take the stigma away from therapy

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As mentioned, **none of the women leaders we interviewed got to where they were without help along the way in some form** whether that be through coaching, mentoring or therapy, in order to unpick some of the thinking and patterns they developed over time. Many of these women have been in therapy for many years and see it as a healthy part of what can be a difficult life.

**Karen Ellis**, a Senior Executive and consultant in organisational change, explains that we often picture our own personal development as if we were climbing up a mountain. But, in fact, it's perhaps more accurate to think of it as floating downriver. Karen asks us to **imagine ourselves as a bundle of**

**riverweed – there will be elements of our development that will develop faster than others** (imagine a few of the tendrils of the riverweed uncurling in parts, whilst remaining closed in others). As we float downstream, one of our tendrils might get caught on a rock, possibly due to events from our past where something is holding us back, and even if our other tendrils try to stretch out as far as they can and continue to develop, we are unable to move as a whole and to continue our journey unless we un snag ourselves. This is where therapy can help.

It is becoming more acceptable to talk about mental health within organisations. But the subject of *therapy* is still seen as a taboo and an embarrassment for some. Why is it that telling people we are seeing a mentor or a coach feels different to telling people we are seeing a therapist? What if we shifted this perception? **What if therapy wasn't seen as a last resort, but rather as a necessary, healthy and regular practice for everyone?**

It's time to normalise therapy. What if it was straightforward to simply say "I've noticed an old belief holding me back. I'm seeing a therapist to work through this"? Organisations have come some way in accepting sick leave on account of mental health, and although we certainly encourage sick leave to be made available, more support should have been offered before people reached that stage. More effort needs to be made in enabling people to find earlier interventions and



**Stills**

longer-term solutions to the behaviours and beliefs that are holding them back. And this can come in the form of therapy. Enabling people within organisations to freely discuss and have a dialogue about therapy will help normalise it.

We mentioned earlier that it's impossible to change our past, but, in fact, that's not entirely true. In the world of NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) there are a series of practices, one of them is Tad James's **Time Line Therapy, which helps us revisit our history**<sup>21</sup> and release negative emotions and beliefs connected with past experiences. There is much to be explored within professional therapy.

### Ensure that managers prioritise the development of their teams

Michelle P. King in *The Fix* comments that the definition of leadership is "empowering all women and men to meaningfully contribute to their organisation by enabling them to use their different talents and capabilities, and valuing them for this."<sup>22</sup>

**Too often managers prioritise targets such as revenue and productivity.** As a result, they are motivated in very specific ways and not always in the development of others. What if we shifted the target? For example, what if a manager's reportee scored their manager on how much they've evolved as a result of their manager's leadership? What if the attitude and pride displayed by the retail store managers (in the story above) could be used as an inspiration to redesign some of the targets and processes currently in place?

For managers to enable their staff to see their own potential, it's **crucial that managers themselves avoid perpetuating the same patterns** that many have experienced from society, schooling and their families, (e.g. biases such as the Brilliance Bias we explored earlier in the chapter). In other words, it's crucial that managers are able to see

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<sup>21</sup> Time Line Therapy and the Basis of Personality, Tad James and Wyatt Woodsmall, October 2017

<sup>22</sup> *The Fix*, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work, Michelle P. King, P249





the talents of others without themselves falling into habitual traps. This is easier said than done, especially since biases – conscious and unconscious – are pervasive and systemic, particularly when it comes to assessing the potential of women. Continuous support for managers would be needed so that they can regularly check their thinking patterns and blocks and ensure they have the capacity to see the full potential of each person in their team.

### **Make mentoring accessible**

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It is unlikely that managers are able to provide *all* the support needed for their employees. This is where mentors and coaches can be helpful. As we'll see in later chapters, many of the women we interviewed recalled the vital support they received from mentors throughout their life. They also spoke of their own willingness to be mentors, putting in the time and energy to help others, describing the gratification they received from this.

It seems as though both the appetite and the need are there. Making mentoring accessible, valued and actively encouraged within the organisation will enable more people to receive support. Some organisations provide new hires with access to a mentor. Mentors are also sometimes available to people stepping up into leadership positions. But what if *everyone at any stage* in their career could have access to a mentor, not just the people who have been deemed to have high potential? What if we normalised and democratised mentorships? We would encourage organisations to invest time and budget in this endeavour. Perhaps these mentors could be colleagues within the organisation. Other people may benefit from having an external mentor. A mentor doesn't always have to be someone more senior in the company. Some people may also benefit from peer mentoring or group mentoring. There are many different shapes this could take. The key point is to provide access to a mentor for those who are seeking support.

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Horizontal Development is equivalent to adding apps to your smartphone whereas Vertical Development is akin to upgrading one's entire operating system.

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### Mentors as cheerleaders

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In her book, *Every Family Has A Story*,<sup>23</sup> Julia Samuel says "it takes only one person in our life to be a vital and protective factor in our outcome – a teacher, a boss, a mentor believing in us. More is better but one is enough."

We would argue that this **'believing in us' factor** is one of the most profound gifts a mentor can give their mentee, beyond the performance-management support that a manager provides, or the knowledge-sharing and advising that is often associated with teaching and mentoring (in a more traditional sense). We would put it to the organisations: how much of this encouragement and championing for individuals happens in organisations? Do your people feel they have someone who believes in them?

In previous explorations at BRIDGE, (which resulted in the creation of our 'Leading in Partnership' frameworks), we discovered that a key factor in a team's success is having a leader who truly believes in themselves and their team. Sometimes the fear of the leader can lead to undermining behaviour, and in a team being unsuccessful. On a similar note, as part of his 'The Hole In The Wall' experiments to explore the possibility of self-teaching, Sugata Mitra placed computers with internet access in walls around the world,

providing self-supervised access to the web to children. As part of the experiment he used what he called 'The Method Of The Grandmother.' He enlisted a local woman in India to encourage the children, cheering them on (without providing any additional knowledge of the particular subject they were studying). Children's scores on a particular subject improved after just two months of encouragement. He subsequently expanded the experiment by enrolling 200 grandmothers in the UK.<sup>24</sup> We have successfully used his methods in leadership programmes and applied them to adults.

We encourage organisations to explore what their people need from mentors and to take this opportunity seriously. If it is this 'believing in' support, new habits may need to be developed in their existing mentors.

### Invest in Vertical Development

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Much of our work at BRIDGE focuses on Vertical Development. This is because Horizontal Development, as important as it is, is not enough on its own to support people in their organisational life, especially since the challenges people are now facing are increasingly complex.

To clarify, Vertical Development involves learning about how we think, feel and make sense of the world. It's about developing both our mental and emotional complexity

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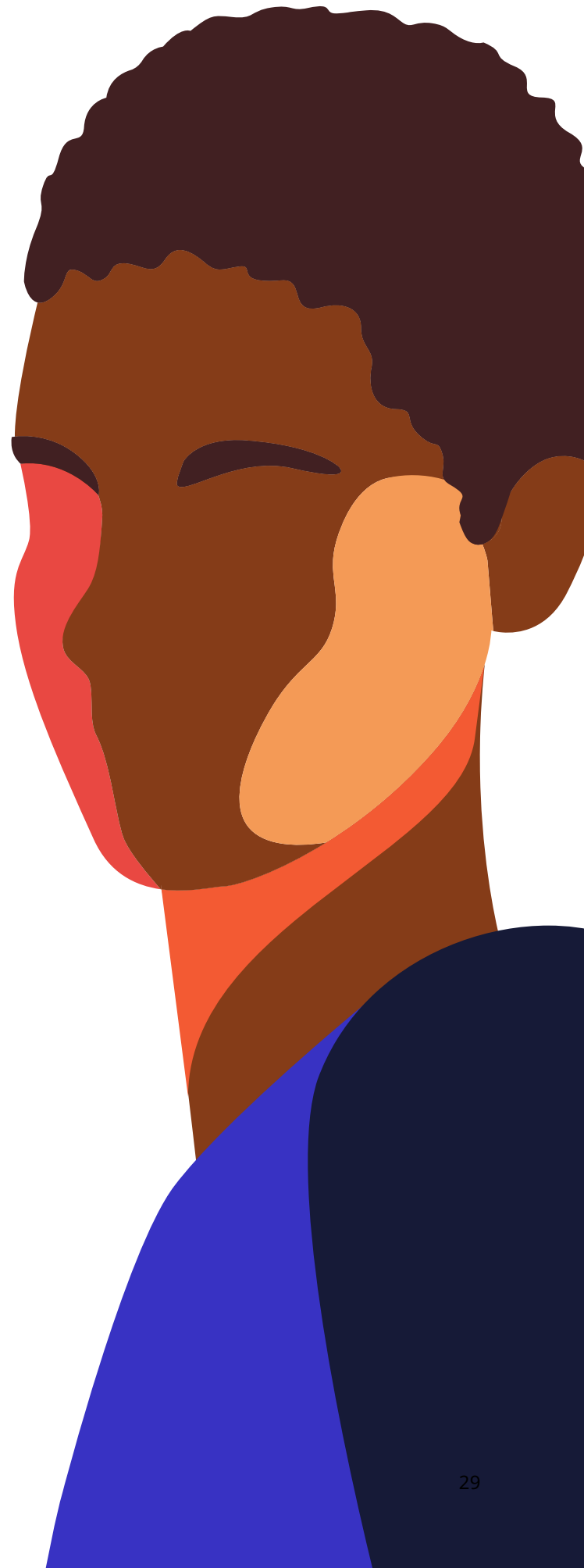
<sup>23</sup> *Every Family Has A Story: How we inherit love and loss*, Julia Samuel, March 2022

<sup>24</sup> New experiments in self-teaching, Sugata Mitra, TED Talk, September 2010

and our capacity to engage with the world. This includes building greater levels of self-awareness and an understanding of our own responses and agency, as well as the capacity to relate to others and engage with diverse and interconnecting groups of people. Vertical Development focuses on developing our capacity for more complex thinking, taking in and making sense of more and more data.

We've seen many Leadership Development curriculums that rely *solely* on Horizontal Development as their dominant approach (i.e. building the knowledge, skills and behaviours to strengthen key competencies, becoming subject matter experts etc.). Although this enables leaders to grow, it is missing the power and accelerated change that Vertical Development brings. One way of expressing the difference is to imagine that Horizontal Development is equivalent to adding apps to your smartphone whereas Vertical Development is akin to upgrading one's entire operating system.

We encourage organisations to seriously consider creating programmes that significantly incorporate Vertical Development. If done well, they will enable their people to build a much better awareness of themselves and their own agency; they will provide them with essential capacities such as mastering their mindset, understanding what's holding them back, rebalancing themselves when they are not at their best, and giving themselves self-care when they need to.





## 2

### Chapter Two

# A Different Path Up The Mountain

*“It was about deciding what you want out of life, and the sense of doing what matters to you. Being awesome at what you do matters more than doing something with status.”*  
— Interviewee

One of the most surprising findings in our conversations with women, all in senior positions within organisations, was the path they took to reach their position. One might expect that their path was planned and meticulously executed, where they knew exactly what they wanted from an early age, were not afraid to ask for it, and ambitiously climbed the ladder – the type of assertive ‘Lean In’ approach. This was, in fact, not at all what we discovered.

**Many of these women didn’t have a master plan or a clear direction from the get-go.** “I never had an exact path in mind, but I was always very open to see the opportunity and dive into it.” ([Vasiliki Petrou](#)) “Despite having held leadership postings in government, non-profit and for-profit companies, there are many days where I don’t even know how I got here.” ([Tanisha Carino](#)) They are surprised when they see younger women taking a more ‘Lean In’ approach – “when I hear people say I want to be a Director by 40 it is a different approach than how I looked at success.” ([Pamela Klyn](#))

## ‘How Did She Get There’ Survey

We conducted a survey alongside our interviews. 128 women participated in our survey. The questions in the survey were designed to test several hunches and patterns we’d noticed from the interviews, to see if similar patterns emerged from a broader group of women. Women self-selected for the survey – they were asked to complete it if they felt they had been successful without compromising who they were or without trying to be more like the men around them.

To the women who felt they had succeeded beyond their expectations in their careers, we asked the open text question “What makes you say this?”:

**Interestingly 50% of the responses followed the theme of having no expectations at all and are quite amazed at how far they have come.** Here are some extracts from the participants:

“

I never expected to get to the executive team, I thought others were better than me. I think I have under-recognised my talents and achievements.”

“

I never thought I would have this amazing life, job, career or live in this amazing space... I pinch myself sometimes...”

“

I am at a place today that I never imagined I would reach: aligning my passion with my profession.”



“

Perhaps I didn't have a clear picture of what I would do or where I would get despite my work ethic and ambition, I have always simply wanted to work hard, to grow and learn and be considered valuable. I am proud of the professional I have become and I am not done yet.”

“

I didn't start out as a career-driven, goal oriented person; but went on to become purpose-driven and personal growth-centric.”

“

I guess I hadn't seen myself in the role of Board Director. This wasn't an aspiration, I just enjoyed the work and worked hard.”

“

I don't think I held any expectation about what my career would be... ”

**The paths of these women were rarely a straight line.** So what patterns did we discover? If they didn't have a master plan, what guided them? Many of the women we interviewed followed a few key principles.

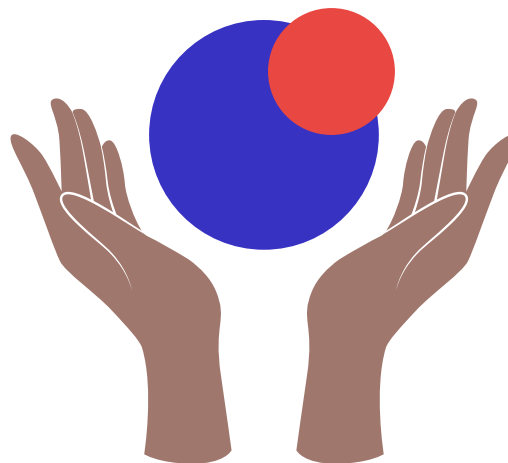
### Remaining open to possibilities:

One of the most frequently used words during our conversations was the word 'open' e.g. "I was always very open to new opportunities." These women remained open, but this doesn't mean they drifted in the wind. They didn't aimlessly meander through their careers. **They were guided by a few key principles.** They remained open to opportunities, *provided* these opportunities connected deeply to their purpose and values, and enabled them to quench their curiosity and desire to learn. Their **purpose, values and curiosity** were their anchors and their roles were, in many ways, a product of these anchors. This meant that the roles they took were often diverse and led them down surprising routes.

If we call the 'Lean In' approach an *assertive and fixed* approach i.e. having a very clear and defined vision of what you want and going after it (such as, for example, becoming a VP of a creative agency), then the path many of the women we spoke to took was a *flexible, receptive and open* one. They did not have a clear path (in fact their path was often winding) but they knew what they were passionate about and what mattered to them. They followed a set of principles and were happy to see where it took them. We are not proposing that this path is any better than the assertive and fixed approach. Rather, we are highlighting the fact that there is *more than one path* up the mountain and almost all the women we spoke to followed the receptive and flexible path. For organisations to enable more women to thrive, it is essential that they provide an environment where more than one path is supported.

As mentioned, these women remained open, but this doesn't mean they drifted in the wind. They didn't aimlessly meander through their careers. **They were guided by a few key principles:**

## The Principles:



### A. Being led by purpose & values:

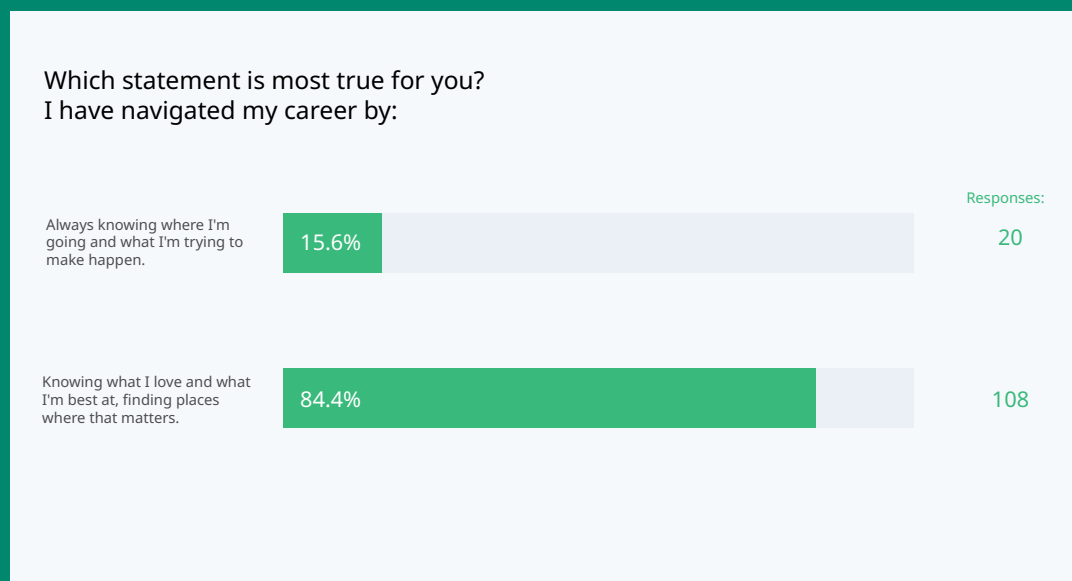
**Georgia Gould** became the youngest ever UK Council Leader when she was elected leader of Camden Council. One could easily assume this was by design, but "I never have an idea of 'this is what I'm going to do,'" she tells us emphatically. She had never "designed her moves or her career." Instead, from an early age, Georgia understood what she was passionate about.

In her own words, **Georgia Gould** was "an overly empathic child. I was a vegetarian at the age of 9. I always loved community building. During the Kosovan refugee crisis, I wrote a proposal about how I should and could give up my bedroom for a refugee... When I am happy, I'm working with a group of people, on a purpose, really hearing people... I don't need ego boosts, I organise behind the scenes... my big goal is to suppress ego and stay in touch with purpose, and community building. I'm a messenger and I'm serving."

Georgia's words reveal that she has a strong sense of purpose. What do we mean by 'purpose'? A personal purpose is the unique contribution we make with our life. Essentially it is our *why*, why we exist on this planet and what we want to contribute to it. It's a combination of our passions, our strengths/talents, and what we care about in the world. Some people develop a sense of purpose from an early age, and for others, it takes longer to discover. In Georgia's case, she understood what she

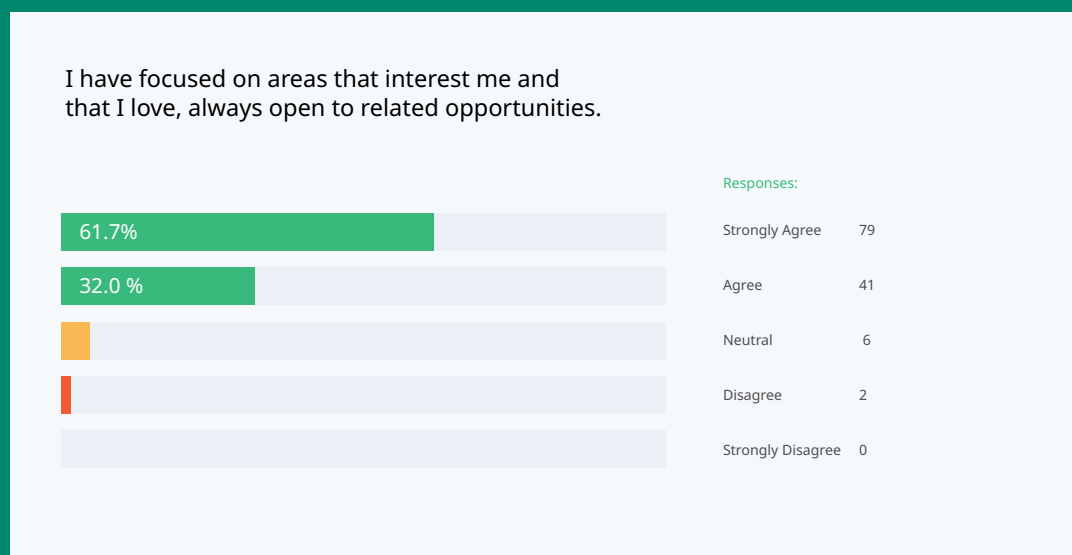
## 'How Did She Get There' Survey

We wanted to see how many women identified with the 'Lean In' approach. When participants were asked to choose which of the following two options is most true for them, here was their response:



Over 80% of participants felt that connecting to one's purpose and passions and being led by it was most true for them, as opposed to having a clear vision of where they were going.

Furthermore, we shared the following statement with participants "I have focused on areas that interest me and that I love, always open to related opportunities." We asked participants to tell us whether they agreed or disagreed with this statement:



Respondents overwhelmingly related to this statement, with 62% strongly agreeing that the statement reflected their approach.

\*128 women participated in our survey. The questions in the survey were designed to test several hunches and patterns we'd noticed from the interviews, to see if similar patterns emerged from a broader group of women. Women self-selected for the survey – they were asked to complete it if they felt they had been successful without compromising who they were or without trying to be more like the men around them.

wanted to change in the world, in her formative years.

The concept of having a purpose isn't new. It has been around for millennia. But more recently, organisations have begun to understand the impact a more deeply meaningful purpose can have. A purpose is powerful – through its depths of meaning it acts as a guiding star. It provides us with much-needed meaning and clarity. Several women mentioned they **use purpose to make decisions, enabling them to navigate complex challenges.** [Tanisha Carino](#), who is a Partner at Brunswick Group, a global critical issues firm, and who has held a wide variety of senior roles including Visiting Fellow to the White House, recalls the time when the company she was working for had to make a tough decision. She comments "I kept coming back to the question – what's the mission? The mission is to help as many people as we can as fast as possible... whether it's small things or big things, I always come back to the question – what is the purpose?" Tanisha's response chimes with Georgia's words about **suppressing ego** i.e. it is not about **her**, it is about the **purpose at hand**.

Not all the women we spoke to had a purpose as defined as Georgia's, but what they did have was **an understanding of what mattered to them and what they were passionate about**. They made decisions – such as which projects they wanted to take on, or which company culture they wanted to be surrounded by – based on these values.



Tracy Garrad  
CEO at AXA Health

## B. Going where your curiosity takes you:

[Thea Roberts](#), an Executive Coach who has had a long career in retail and FMCG working for brands such as Marks and Spencer and Mars, lit up when she discussed her thirst for learning and her constant curiosity. "What I know now is that I like to be competent. People perceive this as competitiveness but I see it as wanting to have a go and do it well. It's less about winning. Now I can see that I love to learn and try new things. I learned to ski at 46, for example. I feel the fear and do it anyway. I've always wanted to stretch myself further and see where my limits lie."

This burning desire to get under the hood, to join the dots, was a strong pattern that emerged from the conversations we had with women. The word 'curiosity' frequently appeared. These women were hungry to get below the surface and explore new terrain: "I'm curious-natured and interested in not just *what* happened but *why*." ([Janine Osborn](#)) "I like figuring things out, I'm comfortable with the unknown." ([Karina Wilsher](#)) "I did not seek promotion. It was always about what am I going to learn here. How will I grow?" ([Pamela Klyn](#))

These women took on a new role or new project based on their curiosity. [Tracy Garrad](#), CEO at AXA Health, explained how she "moved around and broadened my skills. My husband says it's nosiness but it's my curiosity and I want to know how things work. I wanted to do the General Manager role as I liked the idea of joining the dots."

At other times, a fear of boredom led them to change direction, "I was propelled by not wanting to be bored. I was and am curious. I'm interested. I like doing things, I like completing things. So if I was bored then I would ask for something else because I'd just be getting restless." ([Gail Rebeck](#)) "I've moved jobs a lot. That's because once I fix a problem, sort of my work there is done... and I don't like being bored." ([Sophie Neary](#))

These women were open to new possibilities provided these possibilities enabled them to grow. Curiosity was a key consideration in their decision-making.

### **C. Being willing to take a risk:**

Make no mistake about it, it takes courage to remain open and flexible and to go where your purpose and passion take you. For the women who followed this route, it meant they sometimes took risks and made unexpected decisions that other people simply couldn't understand. Taking a risk doesn't just mean stepping up. It can also mean moving on, staying put or turning something down. Here are a few examples of the risks and choices these women took in order to follow their passion, values and curiosity:

#### **Staying put when the work feels meaningful**

[Elaine Lorimer](#) decided to go against the advice of her peers: "I've never been somebody who has been interested in getting to the top... Instead, what I have been interested in has been doing work that I find intellectually stimulating and working in an environment where I feel I am adding value." After spending nearly six years in the same organisation, people told her to move. "I'm thinking well if I'm enjoying doing what I'm doing, and I can really see it making a difference, why do I need to move on?" She took a risk by going against the grain and staying where she felt she was making a difference.

#### **Moving on or making a career change when the context no longer matches your values or passion**

[Cathy Gilman](#) was successfully transforming a retail business. Despite this success, she felt the organisation had deviated from its initial purpose. At the same time, her cousin

was struggling with leukaemia. In this moment, something crystallised for her. She decided she wanted to help leukaemia patients. She became a corporate fundraiser and took a huge salary drop but she was exactly where she wanted to be. Fast forward a few years and she became CEO of the charity, raising huge funds and making a difference. Sometimes taking that leap of faith is what is needed in order to follow your passion.

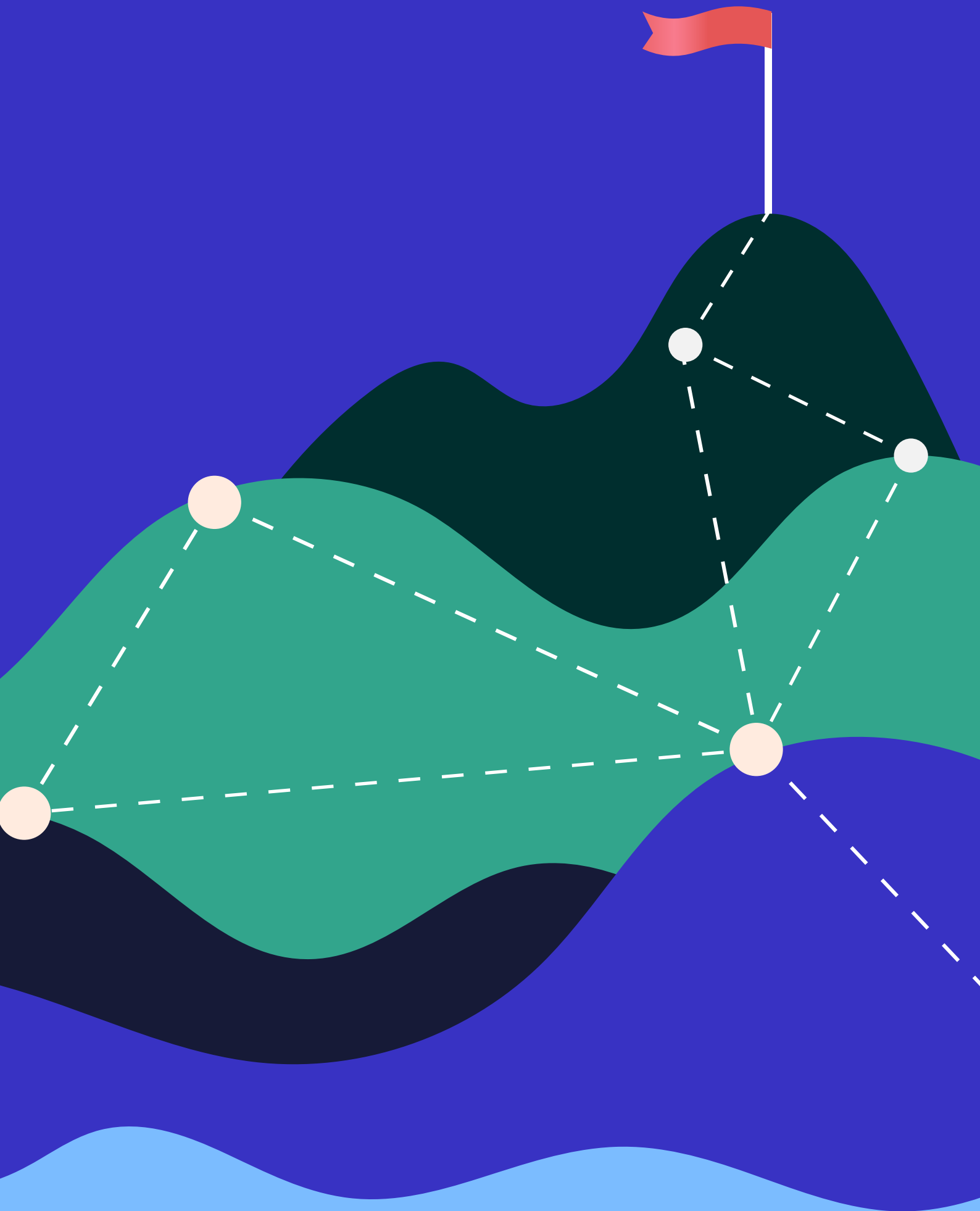
### **Saying no**

Stepping away from an opportunity also takes conviction. Perhaps the opportunity doesn't match your values/passion or maybe you don't feel you're going to be able to contribute. [Pamela Klyn](#) surprised her leadership when she turned down a prestigious role: "I was very aware of what I was good or not good at. I turned down a VP role because I was not ready. People were shocked that I would turn it down. I was more focused on whether I could add value in that role. It was always about my value add and growth."

There was a chapter in [Keshini Jayawardena's](#) life where she decided to reprioritise: "So this decision to put my kids first, guided the next chapter... Being a CEO would not have made a positive difference to my life so I turned it down several times and I do not regret this."



[Keshini Jayawardena](#),  
Director at Sampath Bank



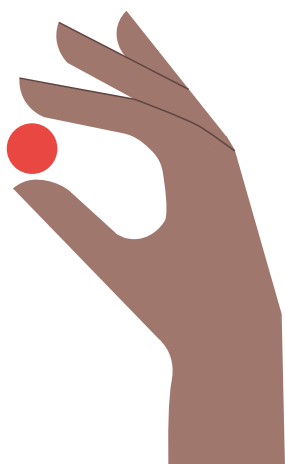
**Elaine Lorimer,**  
Chief Executive at Revenue  
Scotland



## Jumping up

Sometimes the risk involves grabbing an opportunity when you see it no matter how daunting it looks. Many of these women were talent spotted. When they were offered something that matched their passion, they embraced it with both hands. "He wanted to nurture me so he gave me an opportunity, but I was catapulted into a leadership role where I was the only woman in the room... It was really tough. I had to build my credibility with people who were entirely different." (Elaine Lorimer)

All of the above examples involved women taking a risk, a leap of faith, at times going against the grain, in order to follow what mattered to them most. And they willingly did so, without regret.



## D. Putting in the hard graft every time:

Putting in the hard work in order to excel was a recurring theme. As a result, these women achieved amazing things. **Several women said they never actively applied for roles.** Instead, the opportunities happened organically by being talent spotted as a result of their stellar performance: "I never applied for a job. They have always come from relationships and opportunities." (Claire Camara) "I never had an idea of 'this is what I'm going to do.'" Others have always asked me... I was always invited or put forward." (Georgina Gould)

**Some learnt this value of hard work from an early age.** Claire Camara, Global Chief People Officer at EssenceMediacom, comments that "at about 14, I started a Saturday job. I decided I would get a series of different Saturday jobs in different retail outlets." She learnt that "if you work really hard, you will get on. Regardless of who you were and where you were. I saw that in my mum." Sophie Neary, Group Director UK&I at Meta, recalls her father revealing some hard truths to her as a child "it's harder for girls. They need to be better than boys to be viewed as the same. You have to work twice as hard to be viewed as doing the same amount of work."

Outstanding work also **provided a certain licence to freedom.** "In a sense, my delivery in business results was always important. People may say that she is different but she delivers. I would always gain my independence and my freedom because my results were always there even if people could not put me in a box." (Vasiliki Petrou)

**Going the extra mile is a reality for many women.** Mary Ann Sieghart comments that "a superb record may indeed function as a buffer for gender bias when making promotional decisions. That explains why outstanding women sometimes do manage to make it to the top in real life albeit in smaller proportions than men do."<sup>25</sup> She goes on to share how Mike Rann, former Premier of South Australia says, "women read their briefs, they don't just read the summary of their Cabinet papers, they've actually done the homework, often much more diligently." He explains that this is partly because they are judged more harshly, under different standards to men. Rann adds, "**I think men have a lot to learn from women** and I don't understand

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<sup>25</sup> The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021, P25



Lorna Davis, Board Member at B Lab



why they're so scared."<sup>26</sup>

It's worth noting that **the level of commitment and care** that women gave, meant **they delivered outstanding results**. As Rann points out, "women often outperform men. For instance, houses listed by female estate agents sell for higher prices, female lawyers are less likely to behave unethically, and patients treated by female doctors are less likely to die or be readmitted to hospital."<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the learning here is that men need to step up and work just as hard as these women.

We are not proposing that women should accept the status quo and have to work twice as hard as men at any given time. Later in this chapter, and in subsequent chapters, we explore the cultural changes that organisations can implement in order to shift the reality for women.

**There was also a strong sense of pragmatism and resilience** in the women we spoke to. Time and time again when these women were faced with a challenge, rather than complain, they found practical solutions to get the job done. "I made it work, I recruited a team." (Kari Daniels) "I start from the position that you can resolve anything if you put skin into it and really care." (Jenny Rowlands) "There is always a way of getting something done." (Janine Osborn). "My manager told me there is

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"I think men have a lot to learn from women and I don't understand why they're so scared."

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never a problem I can't find my way out of." (Lorna Davis) "I have this ability to create calm amongst the chaos... and to be able to find the signal in all the noise... to apply common sense." (Sophie Neary)

They demonstrated a natural resilience when a crisis emerged: "I think women are a little bit more prepared to just deal with it when it lands, and when it shows itself. They are a little bit more courageous; they'll own their mistakes, and they'll step up and speak out if necessary." (Tracey Woodward) "The universe never brings to you anything that you cannot tackle." (Vasiliki Petrou)

To conclude, taking a 'Lean In' approach is not the only way up the mountain. There are other routes. As these women have shown, it is entirely possible to rise through a more flexible, open and adaptive pathway, guided by a sense of purpose, a curiosity to learn, a willingness to take risks and a commitment to putting in the time and the energy.

Kari Daniels, Former CEO at Tesco Ireland, NED at Topps Tiles



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<sup>26</sup> The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021, P78

<sup>27</sup> The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021, P78, from "Are Women Held to Higher Standards? Evidence from Peer Review", Erin Hengel



# Solutions for the organisation



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Shift the organisational assumption that the more prestigious and the higher up in the hierarchy the role is, the more motivated the individual will be.

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## Solutions for the organisation:

It's clear from the conversations we've had with women that not everyone chooses a traditional career path of becoming a subject matter expert in one area and climbing the ranks. The women we spoke to were guided by other things such as purpose and curiosity. How can organisations support people who choose a different path up the mountain?

Below we explore some starter ideas for organisations to consider:

### 1. Make purpose a priority

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One of the strongest themes that came out of our conversations with women leaders was their connection to purpose. They were drawn to projects or roles that were meaningful, where they felt they could make a difference. They were guided by what they felt passionate about.

### The benefits of purpose

Much research has been conducted in recent years around the value of connecting to one's purpose. Scientists, medical experts, academics and businesses all point out the powerful impact that a purpose can have on people (better quality sleep<sup>28</sup>, less likely to become depressed<sup>29</sup>, reduced stress<sup>30</sup>, increased immune response<sup>31</sup>). Not only can having a purpose make us feel more fulfilled<sup>32</sup> but it even lengthens our lives<sup>33</sup>. It, therefore, stands to reason that **helping all employees (not only the women) discover and connect with their purpose should be made an organisational priority**, in order to have a healthier, more motivated and fulfilled workforce. This can be made possible through a variety of initiatives such as purpose workshops, learning journeys and coaching sessions, encouraging employees to continuously reflect and experiment.

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<sup>28</sup> Is purpose in life associated with less sleep disturbance in older adults?, Arlener D. Turner, Christine E. Smith, and Jason C. Ong, July 2017

<sup>29</sup> The Absence of Positive Psychological (Eudemonic) Well-Being as a RiskFactor for Depression: A Ten-Year Cohort Study, A. M. Wood and S. Joseph, 2010

<sup>30</sup> A Meaningful Life is a Healthy Life: A Conceptual Model Linking Meaning and Meaning Salience to Health, Stephanie A. Hooker, Kevin S. Masters, and Crystal L. Park, March 2018

<sup>31</sup> A Functional Genomic Perspective on Human Well-Being, Proceedings of the National Academy of Science USA, B. L. Fredrickson, K. M. Grewen, K. A. Coffey, S. B. Algoe, A. M. Firestine, J. M. Arevalo, et al., 2013

<sup>32</sup> 2016 Workforce Purpose Index: Purpose At Work, LinkedIn and Imperative, 2016

<sup>33</sup> Association Between Life Purpose and Mortality Among US Adults Older Than 50 Years, Aliya Alimujiang, MPH1; Ashley Wiensch, MPH1; Jonathan Boss, MS2; et al, May 2019



## 2. Make 'questing' a possibility

The women we spoke to were driven by meaningful and purposeful work. And sometimes the definition of 'meaningful work' meant something different at different times in their lives i.e. their purpose evolved. Which is why women were not afraid to jump sideways, step up or down or stay put depending on how purposeful their work was at the time. Almost all the women we spoke to had a meandering path to the top. Consequently, it feels vitally important for organisations to support this pathway. How can they do this? **By making 'questing' (i.e. seeking out purposeful work and going where this takes you even if it means stepping sideways or upwards or downwards) a possibility and holding it in as high regard as more traditional routes e.g. just going upwards.**

### Straight arrows don't work for all of us

With the age of retirement increasing in some countries, many people are spending more years of their lives at work. The 'straight arrow' approach of expecting employees to stick to their lanes and simply progress upwards doesn't work for all of us. As we've seen, women who feel the work is no longer meaningful have no qualms about checking out and leaving. In order to retain and nurture talent, it's important for organisations to recognise that the typical path doesn't work for everyone. This is the first step towards making questing a possibility.

### Shift assumptions

A second step is to **shift the organisational assumption that the bigger, the more prestigious and the higher up in the hierarchy the role is, the more motivated the individual will be.** This is not necessarily a motivator for everyone. As we've seen, many of these women turned down senior roles if these roles didn't match their purpose at the time. **It's important for organisations to**

**understand the other motivations that are at play** (e.g. purpose, passion, curiosity etc.) and to make these as valid. It is also important to begin to attach prestige to new criteria, such as impact, sustainability, change, and solving tricky problems, for example, rather than hierarchy.

### Break up with the alpha male culture

One of our male Client Directors commented that they believe that some men have a deeply ingrained feeling of **needing to be the provider**, and therefore they assume that the bigger the role, the bigger the opportunity, a culture that then permeates throughout the organisation. We shall talk more about this in the next chapter, but **breaking up with the alpha male culture is one of the most significant and impactful actions an organisation can take to shift the needle for everyone.** Generations of men raised, as Michelle P. King describes in *The Fix*, to be 'the hero' at work, to work long hours, to avoid outward displays of emotion or weakness<sup>34</sup>, has had a seismic effect on organisational culture, for both men and women. "Gendered standards for behaviour are imposed on men and women from the moment they are born, so it is taken for granted as the way things are." Michelle lists a few of the standards men are expected to live up to and how this prevents them from being themselves at work: encouraged to display a lack of empathy with others and themselves in order to be perceived as strong; expected to be the primary breadwinner - exceeding at work is therefore intrinsically linked with men's self-esteem, value and identity; expected to have all the answers, take risks and avoid admitting mistakes."<sup>35</sup>

One of the most positive and active steps men can take to help address the gender imbalance at work is to reimagine what it is to be a man at work i.e. to **break up with the alpha male culture, and to experiment with what this looks like.** More on this later.

# Alpha Male Culture

### Reimagine current career pathways

As well as shifting assumptions, preconceptions and cultural norms (as described above), **organisations will need to reimagine their current career pathways**. One organisation we worked with re-imagined their career pathways and saw them **more as a lattice rather than a ladder**. They created a **development mosaic** to enable people to explore many possibilities and opportunities. It's worth seeking inspiration from departments that may already be doing this. Software Engineers, for example, often work on a project-by-project basis, shuffling teams around according to the challenge that needs to be solved, gaining new capabilities along the way. We encourage organisations to consider how to make this a possibility for more people, where it becomes **less about the role, and more about building capacities, solving interesting problems, and focusing on a purpose**.

### Accept 'failure'

And with these new opportunities comes the **acceptance of 'failure'** i.e. it's important for organisations to allow for the possibility that individuals will try new projects or roles that may not end up fitting them. And to understand that this indeed isn't a 'failure' at all. Rather, it's part of the process. It takes courage for organisations to shift from their traditional path, to plan for and cultivate disruption. But consider the alternative – talented people leaving if their purpose is not being fulfilled.

### 3. Build reflection into the process

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Some of us are conditioned to rise up the ladder at such a pace that we don't take the time to stop and reflect along the way. It's important to have the space to pause and reflect on whether the path we are taking is the right one for us. The women we spoke to, who rose to the top, were supported by

coaches, mentors, therapists or inspiring role models. These people enabled them to reflect on what they valued, and on what their talents and possibilities were. We all could do with more of these people in our lives.

### Create 'Possibility Mirrors'

Creating 'Possibility Mirrors' in organisations could be helpful. What do we mean by 'Possibility Mirrors'? Many of the women we spoke to were talent-spotted and their next role came about through the suggestion of others. What if we could formalise this process for everyone? Instead of a coaching session beginning with 'what are you good at?', what if the coach/manager could tell the individual what they believe this person is great at? And what if the individual could gather feedback from a variety of different people to enable them to see their own potential and possibility? Perhaps talents will be pointed out to them that they didn't know they had, or which they had been undervaluing. They don't need to take all feedback as gospel. Rather, they can use the feedback they receive as a way to reflect on their current journey.

### Enable managers

**This is likely to require a certain upskilling of managers in order for them to have the capacity to provide meaningful coaching sessions to support their direct reports.** Some leaders may already have this ability. But for others, biases may block them from seeing an individual's full potential. There is not an overnight fix and we shall talk more about how to counter bias in later chapters. It is likely that some leaders will require support in order for them to hold their coaching sessions safely, which is why it's important to receive feedback from a variety of people.



## STORY

The transformative nature of possibility mirrors is evident during Jane's coaching sessions:

"Looking back at the thousands of hours of coaching I have given, I have probably uttered around 10 sentences, time and time again, more than any others. One of these sentences is "you have all the qualities, personality and capabilities to be a CEO. You could go all the way." I have shared this with men and women. This sentence is met with many reactions, the most common is a pause and then some nodding accompanied by tears of relief.

It always seemed strange to me that these incredibly competent people had never been told (and this especially applies to the women) that they were incredibly competent. What was equally amazing was to see what an unlocker those words were. Incidentally, another of the sentences is 'no you are not crazy, the situation is!'





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# IF YOU'RE A UNICORN, DON'T TRY TO BE A HORSE

*"Some women, in my experience, have had to shape and mould their behaviour to fit in. I haven't done that. I've always tried to be true to myself. But what that means is that being truly authentic and being yourself, you don't necessarily fit in with the conventional way of thinking."*  
— Elaine Lorimer

**Tracey Clements**, now the SVP (CEO) of Mobility and Convenience Europe at BP, has been a COO and CEO in retail and can pinpoint the exact moment when everything changed for her. It was the moment in her career when **she realised that every single day she had been coming to work and hiding her true self**. At the time, she was the only woman at her level. Instead of letting her qualities shine through, she had been displaying qualities that she felt the business valued i.e. being assertive and decisive, dominating the conversation etc. In other words, qualities of an alpha male culture.

She had been suppressing qualities that felt more natural to her. In her case, these were: putting in the time to really listen to her people and to her customers, understanding their needs, and focusing on their experiences. After a while, hiding herself away had become utterly exhausting and untenable. When she realised this, **"almost overnight I reclaimed myself."**



**Tracey Clements,**  
SVP (CEO) Mobility and  
Convenience Europe, BP

She had essentially been hiding her deeply caring nature, and by bringing that to the fore, she was able to reclaim herself. She subsequently became a standout leader in her organisation and the area of the business that she led outperformed several others.

**Reclaiming oneself and recognising, accepting, and embracing one's differences and strengths is a recurring theme in the conversations we've had with women.** Over time, several women learnt to lead more authentically and to let go of their attempts to fit into the prevailing paradigm. This evolution often began with a moment (or moments) of *self-awareness*, a word that surfaced frequently during our conversations. Self-awareness enabled these women to understand what they were good at.

**Sometimes this self-awareness came through external influence e.g. a mentor or a manager or a development programme sparked change:** "she spent time helping me be more self-aware. She was able to articulate the things I would do intuitively and help me understand what I was doing and why." (Janine Osborn) "She helped me get a better balance between external referencing and internal referencing. I'm much more self-aware of my strengths and owning them." (Thea Roberts) "I worked with a coach to develop a self-awareness programme. It was transformational." (Cathy Gilman)

Moments of self-realisation also came through challenging experiences e.g. having to change in order to fit in: "I had to be quite blokey... For a while I didn't show much emotion... I wasn't as authentic as I've learned to be. It led me to know how I wanted to treat people..." (Thea Roberts) "After that experience I learned not to lose my voice, not to let others speak for me. I'm obsessive about writing my own material." (Georgia Gould) Through self-awareness, these women learned to own their strengths and to lead more authentically.

**Interestingly, during our interviews, we observed that the more senior within the organisation the leader was, the more likely they were to say that authenticity was the key to their success.** Vasiliki Petrou observes that "young ones, unfortunately, suffer much more from general social anxiety than we suffered and that comes from social media... There is a strong sense they feel they *belong* to a community, to be liked, to be followed... I mentor them to believe in themselves, not to care about what others think. Ultimately, to care about who they are and focus on their strengths... Just focus inside and be happy with who you are."

For Vasiliki's own career, she feels lucky to have met a visionary leader who valued diversity. "When I came into the company, it was very clear that I did not fit in the box." Fortunately the Head of Beauty at the time was not concerned. "Thank God he had the vision because if it was another person, I might not have been picked."

The CEO also demonstrated the importance of diversity: **“to go for people that don’t fit in the box because this is where the beauty of positive disruption comes from.”**

**The overriding pattern that emerged from our conversations was a move towards authenticity** – becoming aware of and embracing one’s differences and strengths. Harnessing them rather than hiding them away. To lead, there is “no one-size-fits-all otherwise you become inauthentic and then people don’t particularly want to follow you.” (Gail Rebeck) As [Ciara Dilley](#), VP of Better Choice Snacking Brands at Pepsico, puts it, it’s about “showing up as me... bringing my whole self to work” in order to lead more effectively.

**Thea Roberts,**  
Executive Coach and Mentor



## STORY

Just before the pandemic, Jane was on a call with two learning and development professionals from a global FMCG business:

They told me that the CEO had gathered a group of 100 young women leaders from all over the business to help him understand how to help them ‘get on’. His first question was “Ladies, where do you see yourselves in 10 years’ time?”

They began to answer his question, and their answers sounded like this: “I see myself doing something I love,” “I see myself working with people I admire doing something that has meaning,” “I see myself with a community of like-minded people making a difference.” The two L&D leads I was talking to said that they watched his face as he got increasingly irritated eventually stopping the answers by saying “Ladies, I want to know which jobs you want, how far you want to go, I don’t know what to do with ‘I want to do something meaningful’.”

At this point one of the women on my call said, “So Jane, we need to help the women articulate where they want to go, lean in.” I was in a different place, I said, “Hang on a minute, 100 women have answers, and one man doesn’t know what to do with those answers, isn’t the problem that the man doesn’t know what to do with their answers?” They sat back confused but curious and in the conversation that followed we all eventually understood – they were so in the habit of believing that women not getting on was due to a **problem in the women**, they had not questioned their CEO’s position, plus he had the power of course.”

# Solutions for the organisation



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It is not the women that need to be fixed, it is the cultural norms around them that need to shift.

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## Solutions for the organisation:

### Don't leave it up to the individual to solve

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Many of the women we interviewed had to actively fight against the pressure to conform, particularly early on in their careers. They should not have needed to. Creating a culture that embraces diversity and difference is the responsibility of the organisation, not the individual. That isn't to say the individual is not involved – the solutions will require active participation and accountability from every member of the organisation. But it should be the responsibility of the organisation as a whole to put steps in place that enable a diverse working culture. Quick fixes, such as a Diversity and Inclusion workshop, are unlikely to solve the issue in any meaningful way. Simply measuring success by DE&I activities – training, comms, slates, panels, etc. – gives a false sense of progress. The issues that need to be addressed are systemic and will take considerable effort and energy but are well worth it.

Let's explore how organisations can evolve their culture so that different voices and different ways of leading and operating can co-exist and are encouraged.

### Stop trying to fix the women

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We encourage organisations to stop running women's leadership programmes that are designed to fix the women or make them behave more like men, such as assertiveness courses. Caroline Criado Perez calls this preoccupation the 'Henry Higgins effect' (a nod to the character in the 1956 musical, *My Fair Lady*). 'Why can't a woman be more like a man?' he grumbles. "It's a common complaint – and one for which the common solution is to fix the women. This is unsurprising in a world where what is male is seen as universal and what is female is seen as 'atypical.'"<sup>36</sup>

By encouraging women to be more like men, organisations are moving further away from diversity. They are sending out a message that encourages conformity. They are implying that it isn't the organisation that needs to change, rather it's women's behaviour. Instead, we recommend that organisations start to embrace the mess of difference, make space for it, and curb the anxiety it might engender. Difference is the birthplace of innovation. **It is not the women that need to be fixed, it is the cultural norms around them that need to shift, which we shall explore in more detail.**

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<sup>36</sup> Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men, Caroline Criado-Perez, March 2019, P122

### Break up with Don Draper

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In *The Fix*, Michelle P. King points out that men are “expected to be the hero at work,” putting on a metaphorical cape and “conforming to people’s notions of what it means to be the brave male leader” such as “working long hours, taking risks, not showing emotion or displaying any weaknesses.”<sup>37</sup> Workplaces are designed in such a way to reward this conformity. “To be considered a ‘real man’, men need to follow a rigid set of behaviours – and doing this comes with benefits.”<sup>38</sup>

Michelle asserts that this alpha male prototype of how one should lead (with characteristics such as assertiveness, arrogance and dominance) still “dominates nearly every aspect of working life.”<sup>39</sup> It continues to be a requirement for both men and women and it **pervades our organisational culture**. She reports that the consultancy firm, Bain, found that the number one factor that negatively affects employee engagement is the pressure to fit the ideal worker stereotype. “Employees who work for companies that embrace different types of workers and career paths are substantially more engaged than average – that is, they have a positive attitude toward their work and the organization.”<sup>40</sup>

Organisations that encourage this alpha male prototype, **fail to leave any room for alternative – and arguably more effective – ways of leading, which is why several of the women we interviewed at the beginning of their careers tried to conform to conventions and expectations**. Over time, they learnt to embrace their differences and reclaim themselves.

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<sup>37</sup> *The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work*, Michelle P. King, P223


<sup>38</sup> *The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work*, Michelle P. King, P224

<sup>39</sup> *The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work*, Michelle P. King, P225

<sup>40</sup> *The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work*, Michelle P. King, P206 from “Everyday Moments of Truth: Frontline Managers Are Key to Women’s Career Aspirations”, Julie Coffman and Bill Neuenfeldt, Bain Brief, Bain & Company, 2014







Michelle argues that one of the best things organisations can do is to “break up with Don Draper” i.e. drop the stereotypically male culture. (NB. Don Draper is a fictional character in the television series, Mad Men, which in this instance is used as shorthand to describe a deeply ingrained ‘ideal’ worker prototype: white, male, heterosexual, willing to commit most of their time to the organisation, promote their own achievements, take action and tell others what to do, be extroverted and dominant in social situations, assert themselves, speak up, ask for what they want, be decisive even if it means going it alone. Michelle asked 735 men and women in a professional services firm to find out what they thought the ideal worker standard was in their organisation. 70% came back with that response).<sup>41</sup> She argues that there are downsides for men when living up to this stereotype. In order to conform, men lose their own identities. They are conditioned to equate their self-worth to fulfilling these standards. She invites men to **decide for themselves and redefine what it means to be a man at home and at work**.<sup>42</sup> By breaking this prototype, we may then **allow multiple identities and leadership styles at work to flourish**, and enable **both men and women to lead more authentically**.

An example of how to start to shift this dynamic could be to **encourage men to be honest about their needs outside of work**, putting family needs ahead of the organisation, with leaders role modelling the importance of work-life balance, enabling men to manage their dual identities associated with work and home.<sup>43</sup> Exploring how men could become the bread-sharer, as opposed to the breadwinner in their relationship

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<sup>41</sup> The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work, Michelle P. King, P25

<sup>42</sup> The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work, Michelle P. King, Chapter 8

<sup>43</sup> The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work, Michelle P. King, P245



is also something Michelle proposes.<sup>44</sup> This could start with conversations such as discussing a male partner's identity and role at home or exploring whether a female partner's work and career are seen as just as important as her partner's career.

We should add that, for those who may not believe it is possible to shift the culture, breaking up with Don Draper is entirely within our grasp. In *The Fix*, Michelle shares the surprising **case of offshore oil rigs** from a study published in *Research in Organizational Behavior*, in 2010. Safety on these oil rigs was a number one priority. When men working on these oil rigs adopted safe working practices, they no longer lived up to gender roles. The study found that in dangerous situations, men typically try to be brave and emotionally detached, which can encourage them to take risks or avoid asking for help. But on these oil rigs, this was considered unsafe. Instead, they were free to share their vulnerabilities and concerns and to ask for help. They were encouraged and

rewarded for calling out unsafe behaviour. Since home life can create emotional stress, which can impact safety, they were also encouraged to share aspects of their personal life. "Men who supported the shared aim of safety and practised skills like listening, collaborating, learning were deemed more competent."<sup>45</sup> Now imagine if this was embedded in their hiring and promotional processes. Ditching Don Draper was perhaps an unexpected consequence of putting safety first, but it shows that breaking the mould is entirely possible.

**Recognise that diversity is essential for organisational survival – and do something about it**

**If there is a lack of diversity in your organisation, treat this as seriously as if it was a business-critical risk.** As we mentioned in our introduction to this study, the business case for diversity is clear – diverse teams perform better. McKinsey reported in 2020 that teams they

<sup>44</sup> *The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work*, Michelle P. King, P238

<sup>45</sup> *The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work*, Michelle P. King, P233 from "An organizational approach to undoing gender: The unlikely case of offshore oil platforms", Robin J. Ely and Debra E. Meyerson, 2010



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## Taking diversity seriously is an act of organisational survival.

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studied who were the most gender diverse outperformed those who were the least by 48%.<sup>46</sup> If organisations think that Diversity and Inclusion is about being kind to outsiders and is an act of benevolence, they are very much mistaken. **Taking diversity seriously is an act of organisational survival.** Vivienne Ming, an inspiring, trans, Silicon Valley CEO and neuroscientist, who is using AI to solve health and inclusion issues, says “diversity always wins! Again and again, more diverse entrepreneurial founding teams, more diverse boards, more diverse companies – all things being equal – tend to outperform less diverse businesses, often substantially.”<sup>47</sup> To organisations, Vivienne says, “You are doing this for you, not just for them.”<sup>48</sup> Many big institutional investors understand this, which is why they are putting pressure on companies that have few senior women, not as a tick boxing exercise, but because doing so increases stakeholder value.<sup>49</sup>

The ‘them’ that Vivienne Ming refers to (i.e. people who are seen as ‘other’ by the organisation), is not a small number. It is at the very least, half of the global population (i.e. women)! And it starts to be a great deal more than half when we take into account gender identity, ethnicity and other diverse intersections, including men who also don’t want to lead in the way the organisation is requiring. Which is why taking Diversity and Inclusion seriously is a business necessity for all organisations because if they don’t, **they run the very real risk of**

**becoming irrelevant.** If an organisation’s female representatives are trying to act like men, they will not bring their authentic perspective, and organisations need this perspective in order to create robust strategies, products, marketing plans – the list goes on. Everything in business depends on including multiple voices.

Organisations need to embrace difference. As [Vasiliki Petrou](#) says, “go for people that don’t fit in the box because this is where the beauty of positive disruption comes from.” Embracing difference will enable people to feel safer to be themselves. **Organisations can start by looking at their processes in order to shift the needle on diversity.**

In her book, *Invisible Women*, Caroline Criado Perez describes how the New York Philharmonic Orchestra had no female musicians for most of the twentieth century. All of a sudden something changed in the 1970s - the number of female players started to increase. This was remarkable, especially given that turnover in orchestras is low (you are usually hired for life). So what had changed? **Blind auditions.**<sup>50</sup> Today the proportion of female musicians in the orchestra is over 45%.<sup>51</sup>

Caroline comments that “GapJumpers gives job applicants mini assignments designed for a specific post, and the top-performing applicants are sent to hiring managers without any identifying information. The result? Around 60% of those selected

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<sup>46</sup> Diversity wins, How inclusion matters, McKinsey & Company, May 2020

<sup>47</sup> Inclusivity and Purpose Drive Workers: A Q&A with Vivienne Ming, SHRM HR Magazine, August 2022

<sup>48</sup> Vivienne Ming speaking with BRIDGE Partnership clients.

<sup>49</sup> The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021, P79 from “Winning the fight for female talent: How to gain the diversity edge through inclusive recruitment”, PWC, 2017

<sup>50</sup> *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Caroline Criado-Perez, March 2019, P92, from “Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of ‘Blind’ Auditions on Female Musicians”, Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse, 2000

<sup>51</sup> *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Caroline Criado-Perez, March 2019, P92

end up coming from under-represented backgrounds."<sup>52</sup>

**What if organisations could similarly re-evaluate their processes:** just to name a few, they could have blind recruitment processes for the initial hiring steps; they could ensure that their hiring and promotions panels comprise a diverse group of people from the organisation; they could have an external panel reviewing promotions and checking for biases; they could ensure that multiple career pathways are possible (as explored in our previous chapter).

### Actively spend time with people who violate your stereotypes

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If the women we interviewed had operated in an environment that accepted and embraced diversity, they would not have felt the need to conform. They would have been able to lead authentically much earlier in their careers. So how do we enable a culture of diversity?

**Vivienne Ming points out that humans have a tendency to seek out people like themselves.** Even when they know they would benefit from spending time with diverse groups, they choose not to. Vivienne explains that this is down to our biology – it's deeply rooted in our brains. When we meet someone similar to ourselves, the area of our brain related to trust, switches on for free. In fact, we are rewarded with dopamine even before the person in front of us has proved that the trust we are giving them is justified. On the other hand, when we meet someone unlike ourselves, we need to exert a huge amount of effort to build that trust. And we only receive the dopamine when the collaboration with that person has paid off.<sup>53</sup>

**So how can organisations counter this biological process?** How can we retrain our brains to share trust more readily and create diverse collaborations? **Vivienne explains that spending time engaging**

**with people who aren't like us and who violate our stereotypes is the best way to retrain our brains.** She conducted an experiment that involved dividing a class of 30,000 students into online groups of 10 and experimenting with the make-up of these groups.

**Her research revealed that the groups that comprised people who had a shared core (i.e. where people had some similarities to one another) but also had explicit differences, outperformed all other groups in her experiment.** She calls this 'Complementary Diversity'. The shared core enables some level of trust to be built for there to be psychological safety. But the diversity enables people to actively engage with people who violate their stereotypes. Moreover, the diversity of the group enables more ideas to be generated and for the group to find more creative solutions. **We encourage organisations to think of examples in which they can engineer opportunities for these gatherings to occur, for there to be a common connection but for the group to also be diverse.** A purpose that is deeply and meaningfully shared, is one example of a common connection.

Vivienne goes one step further in her research. People respond well to reward as a form of motivation. She explains that "the best is [to reward] the minority opinion i.e. you only give rewards when someone was right when the majority was wrong. In which case, wow, suddenly the idea that you need people that are different becomes transparent."

### Create psychologically-safe spaces for Dialogue

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Another way to enable people to get more accustomed to collaborating and engaging with others who are different to them is to **create psychologically-safe spaces that enable people to truly see and understand one another;** to dial up their capacity for empathy.

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<sup>52</sup> Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men, Caroline Criado-Perez, March 2019, P111

<sup>53</sup> Psychological Safety & The Neuroscience Of Trust With Dr. Vivienne Ming, ChangeCatalyst, Leading With Empathy & Allyship, Episode 76



We are not talking about bringing people together to solve a specific work-related problem. Sometimes it is when we are away from our roles, when we are given space and an opportunity to talk to other people and to share our thoughts, that we truly see ourselves and others. **Ask yourself, aside from social gatherings, when does that happen in an organisation?** In the action-orientated world of organisations (where we are trying to fight fires and find solutions), it sometimes feels as if there is little room for such a space.

As consultants in Organisational Development, we create these spaces / gatherings / opportunities. These **'immersions'** can take various forms. They almost always involve taking people **outside their usual environment**, asking them to observe, to listen without judgement, to drop their shields and to hopefully expand their field of perception. Sometimes immersions involve asking someone that has - what one could call - a 'majority voice' (this might be related to hierarchy in the organisation, ethnicity, gender etc.) to spend time with a group

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Many challenges at work feel urgent, so much so that we spend very little time in Dialogue.

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of people who have 'minority voices.' The intention is to notice what you are feeling and what you are learning about others and yourself. It is an opportunity to encounter and to experience. During these immersions, we see people unmasking themselves, where the armour that has been weighing them down comes off.

In Dialogue, by The Dialogue Group, the authors point out the difference between Dialogue and Discussion.<sup>54</sup> People spend a lot of time in organisations in the Discussion phase -- narrowing down, trying to find closure, arguing a case, persuading, justifying, and gaining agreement on one meaning, essentially it's a convergent conversation. Dialogue, on the other hand, is to do with seeing the whole, seeing connections, inquiring, learning, and exploring. It is about having divergent conversations.

Many challenges at work feel urgent, so much so that we spend very little time in Dialogue. The Dialogue Group argues that if we spend more time in Dialogue (uncovering and unearthing what's really going on), we may need to spend less time in Discussion. We suggest that organisations take time to consider how they can create more space for Dialogue, where people have the opportunity to explore, to observe, to share, where they can grow their capacity to truly understand people who are different to themselves, and where they can start to embrace difference. This will help organisations become diverse places of work. It will enable them to dismantle the alpha-male culture that is prevalent in so many businesses today. In turn, this will allow everyone to lead more authentically.







## 4

# LEAD LIKE THESE WOMEN

— *Don't fix what isn't broken* —

Michelle P. King points out that both men and women **continue to describe the notion of leadership with attributes that have traditionally been assigned masculine**, such as assertiveness and dominance.<sup>55</sup> We are still experiencing the 'Think Manager – Think **Alpha Male**' phenomenon. But what if these are not at all the attributes that we need in order to solve the challenges we are facing today?

**Evidence is emerging that shows that when women do make it to the top, despite the obstacles, they are considered on average to be more effective leaders.** Mary Ann Sieghart points out that “a meta-analysis of 99 studies found that women were rated by other people as significantly more effective leaders than men, although male leaders rated **themselves** more highly than women did.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The Fix, Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work, Michelle P. King, P225  
<sup>56</sup> The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021, P33, from “Gender and perceptions of leadership effectiveness: a meta-analysis of contextual moderators”, Samantha C Paustian-Underdahl, Lisa Slattery Walker, and David J Woehr, 2014

**Pamela Klyn,**  
Senior Vice President -  
Corporate Relations &  
Sustainability at Whirlpool  
Corporation



The early months of the COVID-19 pandemic were an interesting moment in time to observe. Mary Ann notes that a study conducted by Supriya Garikipati and Uma Kambhampati for the World Economic Forum compared “countries led by women with other nations that had similar demographics and economies... they found that the female-led countries locked down earlier and had significantly fewer cases and deaths than the male-led ones. The results were ‘especially highly significant’ on deaths.” Also, Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times, who looked at death rates, put the difference down to a question of ego: women leaders were happy to put public health first, defer to scientific experts and act quickly. They were humble, they didn’t assume their country would be fine because their nation was exceptional.<sup>57</sup>

The women we interviewed, who were leading from a place of authenticity, demonstrated leadership qualities that are *precisely* what organisations need in order to solve the disruptive challenges they face today.

**Empathy and collaboration are essential when it comes to navigating today’s challenges.** This is because the challenges we face are becoming increasingly complex and multifaceted. They can rarely be solved with a quick fix. Instead, they require us to go below the surface and listen deeply to unearth what’s really going on. **This takes empathy.** Once we’ve identified the problem, the solution is unlikely to come from just one leader. It takes the *whole* team (i.e. a collection of diverse minds from different backgrounds) to solve it and to open up the discussion wide enough for

breakthrough ideas to emerge. **This takes collaboration.** When a solution has been created by the entire team, everyone is invested in its success.

The irony is that several of these qualities (e.g. listening deeply, empathising, collaborating) have historically not been considered leadership strengths *at all* by organisations. **Instead, women have been encouraged to move away from these capabilities.** Yet time and time again, the women we interviewed leaned on them in order to thrive. **Let’s take a look at these qualities in more detail:**

#### **Empathy – going below the surface**

“As women, we often bring greater empathy and can walk in someone’s shoes”  
– Louisa Gregory

During our conversation with Pamela Klyn, she explained “I’ve noticed that I am more empathetic than my male colleagues and care for people. People respond to it.” She goes on to say, “I can make the tough decisions, but **I don’t forget we are human beings.**” She thinks of her team as “people first and workforce second... **I have a curiosity for what makes people tick.** A genuine interest in a person builds trust.”

**The ability to walk in other people’s shoes and have empathy for others was one of the strongest themes that emerged** from our conversations. Georgia Gould told us that “compassion is not seen

<sup>57</sup> The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021, P34, from “Women leaders are better at fighting the pandemic”, Supriya Garikipati and Uma Kambhampati, 21 June 2020 and from “What the pandemic reveals about the male ego”, Nicholas Kristof, 13 June 2020, The New York Times



## 'How Did She Get There' Survey

We asked all participants the open-text question: When you think about what makes you stand out as a leader, what is your most powerful leadership quality? The themes that emerged from the survey chimed with the patterns that emerged from our interviews:

# 30%

of the responses highlighted leadership qualities such as **enabling others, collaborating and connecting with others**

# 25%

of the responses highlighted leadership qualities such as authenticity, honesty and integrity

# 20%

of the responses highlighted the importance of empathy

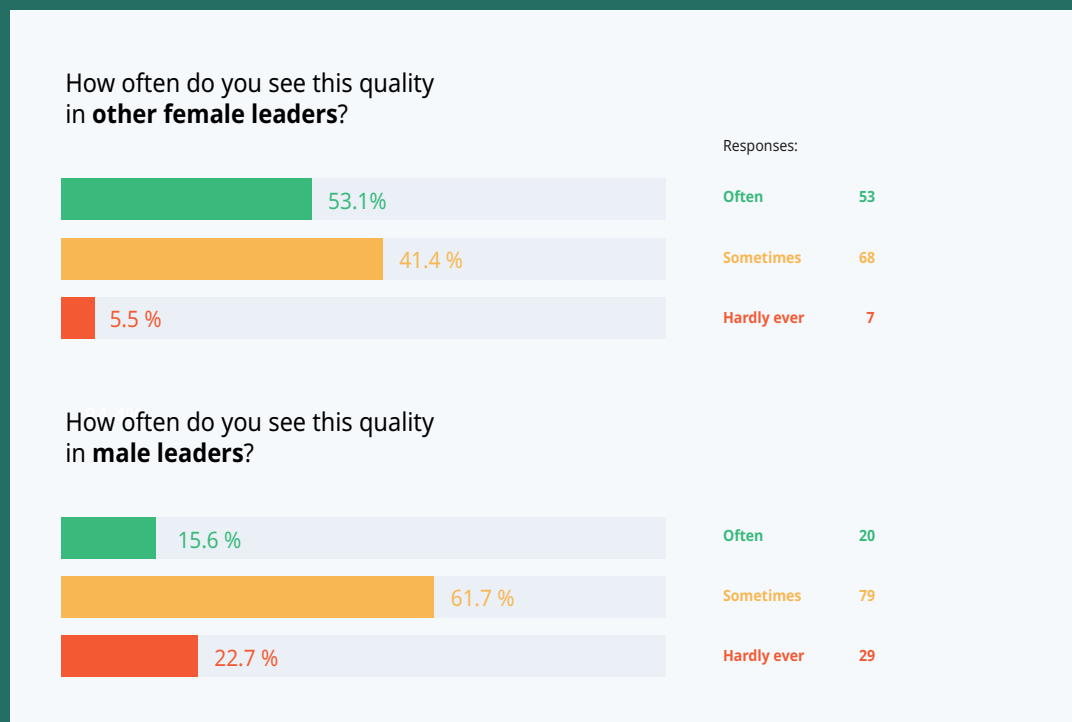
# 11%

of the responses highlighted dealing with complexity and visioning

Many of the attributes highlighted in the survey are similar to those that our interviewees had leaned on.

Interestingly, when participants were asked how often they see these qualities (i.e. the qualities they said made them stand out as a leader) in other female leaders, 94.5% said 'Sometimes' or 'Often' and 5.5% said, 'Hardly Ever'. When participants were asked how often they see these qualities in other male leaders, however, a larger proportion of participants answered 'Hardly Ever' (22.7%) and the remaining 77.3% answered 'Sometimes' or 'Often'.

In short, survey participants said they saw these leadership qualities displayed more often in the women in their life than the men.



\*128 women participated in our survey. The questions in the survey were designed to test several hunches and patterns we'd noticed from the interviews, to see if similar patterns emerged from a broader group of women. Women self-selected for the survey – they were asked to complete it if they felt they had been successful without compromising who they were or without trying to be more like the men around them.

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The ability to listen deeply and to empathise is especially powerful today because it enables these women to go deeper and uncover what's really going on.

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**Jenny Rowlands,**  
Chief Executive at Camden Council



as leadership. Competence, authority, decision making, etc. are seen as the skills. My traits are thought of as weaker traits." Yet she won the role of Leader of Camden Council precisely because she was "sitting in living rooms and talking to people."

When **Lorna Davis**, Board Member at B Lab, was responsible for a large advertising campaign for a brand that was close to collapse, she **learned the value of listening**. "I learned how to listen to consumers... I turned the brand around and set it on a growth trajectory... there is very little I can't solve if I listen carefully and let the information in."

**The women we interviewed never accepted the status quo.** As soon as they started a new project, or a new role, they immediately sought to understand

everyone around them (their colleagues, customers, partners), as well as the challenges they faced. When we first spoke to **Tanisha Carino**, she was in the middle of interviewing every board member for a non-profit in which she was the Vice Chair. "I don't know them. I don't know why they are motivated to be part of the board. I just need to understand what's in their heads a little bit more if I'm going to be an effective vice chair and chair."

**As well as enabling these women to get to the root of people's perspectives and the heart of a problem, empathy also allows them to resolve conflict and find a way to partner with whomever they need to.** "My manager saw that I could build relationships with anyone... for most people I can find a rapport." (**Jenny Rowlands**) When **Maria-Pia De Caro** noticed that someone was being aggressive, rather than blaming this person, she understood that it was coming from a place of suffering. She looked beyond this and tried to see things through the other person's lens.

**The ability to listen deeply and to empathise is especially powerful today because it enables these women to go deeper and uncover what's really going on.** And once they do, they can start to address the root cause, have courageous conversations, and enable everyone to collectively work towards a solution that will drive real change.

**Tanisha Carino,**  
Partner at Brunswick  
Group



## ‘How Did She Get There’ Survey

We asked survey participants an open-text question:

“What do you consider are your most important functions as a leader?”

52%

said their function was to empower and enable others to be at their best

25%

of the responses involved changing the business or culture, but the reason for this was to enable and empower others

Only 9%

mentioned strategy or business performance, and many who did, said they saw this as an output rather than a primary function

**Enabling others was a very strong theme that emerged from the survey, just as it was in our interviews.**

\*128 women participated in our survey. The questions in the survey were designed to test several hunches and patterns we’d noticed from the interviews, to see if similar patterns emerged from a broader group of women. Women self-selected for the survey – they were asked to complete it if they felt they had been successful without compromising who they were or without trying to be more like the men around them.

## Facilitation

Supriya and Uma, the two economists who conducted the study into different public health responses to the pandemic for the World Economic Forum, determined that “good communication skills and **transformational leadership** skills”<sup>58</sup> led to lower death rates in women-led countries. What is transformational leadership? Mary Ann Sieghart describes it as the ability to “mentor and empower employees, encourage them to develop their full potential, engage their trust, and allow them to contribute their views – in other words, being democratic rather than autocratic leaders.”<sup>59</sup>

The women we interviewed had these skills in abundance. They had an exceptional

ability to **facilitate**. The word ‘facilitator’ comes from the Latin word ‘*facil*’: *to make easy*. By facilitating, these women saw their roles as the **enablers**: enabling the group to do their best thinking together, enabling diverse opinions to co-exist, and enabling the discussion to open up wide enough so that ideas and even breakthroughs could emerge. They created a safe space to ensure that all voices were heard and valued; they enabled all opinions (even those that differed from their own) to be respected. They galvanised a team around a problem and enabled them to be at their best.

**Louisa Gregory**, Chief People Officer at eEnergy, explains that “The most important thing for me is developing people’s belief in themselves. All I am is the enabler

<sup>58</sup> The Authority Gap: Why Women are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and what We Can Do about it, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021, P35, from “Women leaders are better at fighting the pandemic”, Supriya Garikipati and Uma Kambhampati, 21 June 2020

<sup>59</sup> The Authority Gap: Why Women are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and what We Can Do about it, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021, P33, from “The Female Leadership Advantage: An Evaluation of the Evidence”, Alice H Eagly and Linda Carl

for people to be their best self. Opening up conversations, helping people to be themselves and to say freely what they think without fear.” “I make it really clear that I believe in people.” (Jenny Rowlands) “What people want is to know that what they do matters.” (Lorna Davis)

Leanne Cutts, President and COO (International and Europe) at Saputo Inc., remembers one of her mentors “helping me understand psychological safety in a team, contracting, role modelling, holding things lightly... being inclusive.” She now understands “how to get the best out of the team I have, creating belief in the team. I galvanise people around a goal.”

During her years in public service, Jenny Rowlands, Chief Executive at Camden Council, has walked in the shoes of many people and found solutions for seemingly impossible problems. Here are a couple of examples of her recent challenges: “How do we ensure the Afghan refugees currently in hotels in our borough, thrive in our society?” And “how do we bring people back to work and help them manage the trauma of the pandemic?” She is a big thinker but **she doesn’t fall into the trap of assuming she has all the answers.** Instead, she brings many minds together to solve the challenges with her. For her, everything starts with a question, rather

than an answer. She is interested in gathering insights and letting the solutions emerge. She enables the discussion to open wide enough for breakthrough ideas to materialise. **The process is inclusive and emergent.**

**The women we spoke to were able to facilitate their teams effectively and this was, in part, due to their lack of ego - they didn’t need to be the star of the show.** They role modelled vulnerability and were not afraid to show when they were wrong. “I have a willingness to be humble, vulnerable and to be wrong and to demonstrate this.” (Cathy Gilman) **They were willing to raise others up and celebrate their gifts:** “What I’m proud to admit is that the people that work for me are really good at what they do; which is exactly why I’ve hired them. What we have to do is to build together; it’s about finding people that have got the courage, the conviction and the energy, and also finding people that can call out, speak up, and engage... or seeing the potential in individuals so that they have the ability to chase the success they desire, to empower others is so rewarding whilst giving them the opportunity to succeed. I’ve never held back in fear of somebody being better than me - It makes for a very happy team and a very successful business.” (Tracey Woodward)



By enabling the whole team to be at their best, these women were able to reinvent, redesign, and find sustainable solutions. And the solutions were sustainable because *the entire team* had created them and had a stake in them. The quality of conversation these women were able to facilitate unlocked a collective intelligence and deep alignment in their teams. **Our conversations showed us that the**

Cathy Gilman,  
CEO at Starlight Children’s  
Foundation



**capabilities that are needed to solve today's challenges are those that many of these women already excel at.**

We are not saying that men do not possess these strengths. We are saying that it is these strengths that the women leaned on. And unfortunately, **these particular qualities are often undervalued by organisations.** As we have seen in the previous chapter, several women initially tried to suppress these strengths in favour of ones that were associated with the alpha male culture. What if organisations enabled more women to reach senior positions and encouraged them to lead authentically? How much more could these organisations achieve? Why aren't we taking the time to learn how these women are leading?

## One last point – Intuition

As we close this chapter, it would be remiss of us not to share one final observation. Several women we spoke to described using their intuition when they made decisions.

In her book, *Work Like A Woman*, Mary Portas explores the skill of trusting your instinct: "... whether you're running a corner shop or a global enterprise, you can plan a huge amount based on what you know as fact: your market, profit margins, staffing costs and all the rest. After that comes intuition. Or instinct. Or whatever you want to call it. **Sometimes you just know a decision is right even if you can't prove it** – and the skill of trusting your instinct is often **highly underrated in business.**" Li Edelkoort, arguably the world's most influential trend forecaster, has said she

listens "like a slave to intuition".<sup>60</sup>

Mary shares a story where she describes how the dynamics are very different in a meeting when women are present. "When a former head of GCHQ was interviewed about putting more women at the top of the intelligence services, he commented on the effect they have: "it's radically different with two women on the Board rather than one," he said."... I find that the discussions are deeper, I think they are more emotionally intelligent, and, if you like, I think **there is more intuition in the room.**"<sup>61</sup>

Speaking about her experience in retail, Mary says, "... what I realize now was that what made me so successful at Harvey Nichols – my intuition – **flew in the face of alpha culture's devotion to logic.** Because however fully paid up I was as a member of the alpha tribe, there were certain parts of me that couldn't be filtered out. And I drew on my intuition again and again to create windows that pushed the boundaries and helped revitalize the store's reputation."<sup>62</sup>

Mary does point out that, although intuition goes against the grain of an alpha culture, it isn't "a female thing: it's a human thing. And it has served some of our most iconic male leaders well. Steve Jobs said that 'everything else is secondary' and Bill Gates also attests to its power."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> *Work Like a Woman*, Mary Portas, May 2019, P45

<sup>61</sup> *Work Like a Woman*, Mary Portas, May 2019, P45

<sup>62</sup> *Work Like a Woman*, Mary Portas, May 2019, P42

<sup>63</sup> *Work Like a Woman*, Mary Portas, May 2019, P46

**Several of the women we interviewed demonstrated this ability to listen to and act on their intuition.** When [Jenny Rowlands](#) is in a meeting, she makes a point of “saying what’s going on in the room and trusting my feelings”. [Gail Rebeck](#) remarks that “I notice things and have good instincts, but I know instincts are based on experience... I have a sense of where things need to be.” [Sophie Neary](#) comments, “you combine the power of that instinct with huge experience and it becomes very powerful.”

[Vasiliki Petrou](#) comments that “women leaders can tap into a lot of mighty sensory intelligences that are available to us, I don’t know how much is available to men. But at least I can see it in women because there is a lot of intuitive energy... For example, I can feel if something is wrong in one of the companies. Once I called one of my CEOs and said, I think there is a problem there. He said, how the hell did you find out? You must *feel* the business, the business is not just on paper. When I look at numbers, I see the story that the numbers are telling to me, items, numbers, sets of figures... People have become way too robotic and automatic.”

She adds, “I see patterns when I look at the world... Biotech is doing this, healthcare is doing that. What are the adjacent patterns and how is all of this going to disrupt the Beauty and Wellness sector? Over the years, intuitively it was coming to me, I was always open to the kind of alternative way versus just the rational way.”

Perhaps intuition is underrated in business because it isn’t quantifiable. When explaining ‘gut feeling,’ Simon Sinek says “sometimes intangibles get ignored because we lack the ability to fully grasp or explain them, to have the patience to nurture them or to know which yardstick would accurately measure them.”<sup>64</sup> But as more and more thought leaders attest to its importance, perhaps organisations will start to value intuition. It’s certainly something that several women we spoke to relied on when making key decisions and it is one of the reasons why many of them are thriving.

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<sup>64</sup> Find Your Why: A Practical Guide for Discovering Purpose for You and Your Team, Simon Sinek David Mead, and Peter Docker, September 2017, Page 25



# Solutions for the organisation



## Solutions for the organisation

### Learn from the women in your organisation

We hope the observations in this chapter act as a wake-up call for organisations. In the previous chapter (If you are a unicorn, don't try to be a horse) we encouraged organisations to stop trying to fix the women. Here we go one step further – **organisations shouldn't simply stop fixing the women in their organisation, they should be *learning* from what they are doing and *valuing* it.**

The way in which the women we interviewed are operating enables them to thrive in a world where organisational challenges are becoming more complex and disruptive. The solution we put forward is to re-evaluate the skills you are currently valuing as an organisation and to ask yourself if you are setting yourself up for the future. We will share a set of skills and meta skills that we believe are essential now and for the future and we encourage organisations to value and nurture people who are already adept at them.

### Assess, or reassess the skills you need for the future

We encourage organisations to assess whether they are investing in the most relevant and valuable skills for their future. We've noticed that many organisations we've partnered with favour left-brain skills (such as decisiveness, decision making, analysing etc.). We suspect that over-favouring these capacities, and undervaluing right-brain capacities, is preventing organisations from effectively responding to the challenges and disruption they are facing. Curiously, some organisations are run with a sense

of efficiency and logic as if managing a machine. An organisation is, however, not a machine; it is a living system. Furthermore, responding to the chaos and turbulence in our world with a machine-like response is less likely to work.

Consultancy studies by CCL<sup>65</sup> and BTS<sup>66</sup> have shown that the skills organisations will need in order to thrive in the future are heavily dependent on right-brain thinking. The women we interviewed used many of these skills on a daily basis in order to navigate the complexity they were facing. But organisations, from our experience, have traditionally undervalued these capacities, and haven't sought to learn from what these women are doing.

This is not to say, by any means, that the skills these women used are gender-specific. Rather, these are skills and capacities that everyone needs in order to thrive in an increasingly unpredictable world. We encourage organisations to take note of these capacities and to value them, as well as the people who excel at them already. This could be reflected in who they hire and who they promote, and what their Learning and Development focus is for the future.

Our recommendation would be for organisations to review the framework below, compare it to their current priorities, and assess what they need for the future.

<sup>65</sup> Leadership Skills in an Uncertain World, Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), November 2020

<sup>66</sup> The 5 Skills Leaders Need to Be Successful in the Future, Megan Lambert, BTS, July 2017





## So what are the 'skills of the future'?

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Here are four key skills that are essential for the future:

### Navigating uncertainty

The challenges that people are facing are becoming more complex and unpredictable. For organisations to thrive in the future, they need people who can navigate this uncertainty, see a way through the mess with a clear head, not be afraid of the unknown, and embrace new territory. There are several meta skills that will support people with this (which we'll explore later.)

### Adopting a learning mindset

The pace of change in the world means that we can no longer just rely on our existing knowledge and skills – skills quickly become redundant. And we can no longer be an expert in just one subject matter. Instead, it's important to have people in the organisation who have a learning mindset, who have the ability to keep growing and learning, and who can remain curious. Adopting a learning mindset allows people to **adapt** to any situation. Dropping any ego means they no longer see themselves as the expert and are open to learning from the situation and from others around them in order to collectively solve the issue at hand.

### Systems Thinking

Another skill that is essential is systems thinking – the ability to understand that we are all part of a network, an ecosystem and our actions impact everything and everyone around us. And the ability to harness these connections in order to form meaningful and creative partnerships. These partnerships will enable us to innovate together, and in turn, go faster together.

### Design Thinking

Perhaps traditionally more associated with a startup culture, innovating through design thinking is an essential skill in order to stay ahead of the game in a world that is quickly changing. Among other things, design thinking involves the ability to ideate based on some initial hunches, to suspend one's judgement so that all ideas can be explored, to rapidly prototype, to fail fast and to test and iterate.

## Meta skills

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Underpinning these skills is a set of meta skills that support and enable the skills of the future. One could call them foundational skills. They **enable** people, for example, to manage their energy and the energy of those around them, to facilitate challenging conversations, and to deeply connect with other people's points of view. We encourage organisations to build these essential capacities in their people. Let's look at them in more detail:

### Facilitation

Most of the complex challenges these days can't be solved alone. It takes the collective thinking of a group to find the way through. A leader of the future understands that it's unlikely that they alone have all the answers. They appreciate that it's their role to **enable the group to do their best thinking together**, to listen to one another, to open the discussion wide enough for ideas and breakthroughs to emerge, to eventually converge and agree on the way forward and to implement it together. Facilitation is all about guiding people through this process and ensuring all voices are heard.



### Presence

There are several skills within Presence that are of value. To give you one example, Presence is about raising people's **levels of awareness** – an awareness of what is going on around them and an awareness of themselves, i.e. understanding their own responses to situations, understanding what's going on when they're not at their best (what is triggering them, what their self-talk is).

In doing so, they can start to master their mindset. They can recognise when they are feeling overwhelmed. Presence is about giving oneself self-care in those moments and understanding how to rebalance and resource oneself in order to be at one's best more of the time. [Paaras Parker](#), Chief People Officer at Paycor, shared a great example of Presence. She explained that when she did a lot of activities as a child "I wasn't necessarily exceptional at anything, I was just really good and committed to whatever I was doing, and I think this translated to what I learned during COVID; I really value being present. So, if I'm here with you, I'm here with you. If I go and do an activity, I'm doing that activity... so it's not necessarily trying to be better than anybody else, but just being the best that I can in the moment that I'm in."

**Paaras Parker**  
Chief People Officer,  
Paycor



## STORY

Jane recalls the challenge of getting organisations to expand their field of perception:

“When we work with leaders to help them learn how to solve challenges in their organisations, often one of the hardest things is getting them to go outside their usual channels of communication for input and ideas. This happens even when we ask them to speak to the customers who will use their solution, other business leaders who have solved this problem, known experts in the field, etc.

We are desperate for them to talk to almost anyone they don't usually talk to because we know about the power of unlikely collisions. Years of being rewarded for staying within the lines, being right, having the best ideas, being first and being fast is strong conditioning that is hard to break. But break these we must as they no longer serve us.”



**Vasiliki Petrou,**  
Group CEO at Unilever  
Prestige

## Empathy

Many of the women we interviewed demonstrated heightened levels of empathy. Empathy is an important meta skill for the future because it enables people to **deeply connect with a different point of view and to be changed by it and grow in the process**. By walking in other people's shoes, we can truly understand the challenges we face, our colleagues face, and our customers face. It can help us unearth what's really going on. Empathy enables us to expand our field of perception because it allows more diverse views to enter the discussion, which in turn leads to more creative solutions.

## Intuition

As Mary Portas puts it, the skill of trusting your instinct is often highly underrated in business.<sup>67</sup> That may be because it's about trusting something, even if you can't prove it. Intuition is something intangible. It's about your 'felt sense', or to put it another way, your gut feeling. The women we interviewed often spoke of trusting their feelings and listening to themselves when

they sensed something wasn't right. They spoke about relying on their emotional and sensory intelligence. That is not to say that they didn't use their cognitive reasoning too. But rather, they didn't dismiss their intuition. From their intuition, they could spot things that required further exploration. It is curious how we rely so heavily on left-brain thinking to solve challenges and problems that are often human problems. After all, organisations are living things. As Vasiliki Petrou puts it "people have become way too robotic and automatic."

We hope that sharing these eight skills has been helpful. We recommend exploring them as an organisation to see where there are gaps, and opportunities to grow. We encourage organisations to re-evaluate what they are valuing within their culture and fairly reward those who are already thriving in these areas.

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<sup>67</sup> Work Like a Woman, Mary Portas, May 2019, P45



## 5

### Chapter Five

# Partnership not dominance

*"Fellowship is as important as leadership."  
— Kari Daniels*

During our conversations, one of the most inspiring patterns we observed was **the long-lasting partnerships these women forged**, partnerships that were instrumental to their growth and their success. What's more, these women were discovering new and creative ways to collaborate and rise up together.

When we sat down with [Leonie Foster](#), Customer and Digital Director at Selfridges, she shared a striking memory during her time at a major retailer early on in her career. Soon after she joined, she quickly became part of a network of highly capable senior women who supported one another. She explains "we knew each other well and were each other's support... we would operate by supporting each other's position." She went on to detail how this would work. When one of them was particularly good at board papers, they would lend their support to the group, while another who excelled at presenting would coach the others. **Essentially they all leaned on one another's strengths and rose together 'in partnership'.**

**Leonie Foster,**  
Customer and Digital  
Director at Selfridges



The beauty of this experience was that these women were creating a **culture of mutuality** so rarely seen in organisations whose order of the day is usually to promote individuality. Moreover, the fact that they had risen together didn't detract from their sense of personal achievement. They saw their collaboration as a strength.

**These partnerships focused on a purpose and a mission**, as opposed to any notion of personal success. One participant of the survey comments, "I am not focused on my own success; I care about the **causes** I work for. I can't achieve any real improvement in the world by myself. Therefore, with friends, colleagues, mentees, employees, my team, my own leaders, partners, and networks – all the people I interact with, I want to empower them to be the best they can be, and lift them up so we can make a difference together."

**The partnerships these women developed were long-lasting:** "When I reflect back on the things that have helped me and the journey as a woman I think the relationships were key. I always got on well with men but with women, there was a sisterhood. Many of the women I worked with or who were the wives of my colleagues I'm still close friends with." (Keshini Jayawardena) Leonie says, "my

advice is to build your network and do it by being kind to people and helping people... You should help, challenge and support along the way. When I left the organisation, all the women were amazing in their support of me, but the men were less so – women reciprocate. I had given a lot and I got it back but not in a transactional way."

Margaret Heffernan, an entrepreneur, CEO, writer and keynote speaker, explains that through history, women have historically had less, e.g. less institutional power, and as a result, have had to become very good at building alliances and collaborating. Those who have less in the world, recognise that they will get nowhere without alliances. One builds alliances to help others. Collaboration is all about building mutual trust, generosity and reciprocity with others. Margaret adds that as the world now moves from a competitive mindset to a collaborative mindset, these skills women have developed are now, in fact, a huge professional advantage. Which is why women are able to do a lot, even if they have less e.g. less capital, less institutional power, etc.<sup>68</sup>



## SURVEY BOX:

We asked all participants the following question: “When you think of your career to date – considering the different parts to your journey and the high and the lows – can you share one story that summarises what has helped you be successful? Note: As this is probably the most important part of the survey, we appreciate you providing a detailed answer.”

It was fascinating how the responses from these 128 participants who had self-selected to take the survey, so closely mirrored the responses from the women we interviewed.



The biggest theme to emerge by far was the support of others, whether that be via their network, great managers and leaders, or an inspiring role model/mentor or sponsor. Here are a few snippets:

“

“I was lucky enough to receive specific and tailored support from someone who, as well as being a role model, advised and challenged me. She opened doors and made sure my career and professional well-being were prioritised alongside an extremely hectic work schedule. I have since sought out mentors at different points in my career and now mentor women embarking on their careers in senior roles.”

“

I've found that new opportunities often come through people who know me well and have referred me to a role/person. This has been based on their view of my potential and their view of me being a capable, adaptable person. People seeing potential and being willing to give me a chance to deliver on/above their expectations has allowed me to take on broad roles, across industry. Equally, I have always taken risks and not been afraid to try new things.”

“

... Being open to doing something so far out of my comfort zone, and knowing you have support if you need it, has given me the greatest learning opportunity and ability to shine.”

“

I have been lucky to find strong female role models/mentors along the way, who have believed in me and taken a chance on me.”

## **Other strong themes that emerged were:**

**Believing in myself/Trusting myself:** “Building my confidence enough to recognise and be proud of my strengths and differences. Staying true to my values at all times and being brave in challenging alternative views. It was cathartic to recognise and accept that I don’t need the affirmation of others.”

**Saying yes to opportunities:** “Saying yes to opportunities – even if I doubted that I could do them. Three years ago, I took on a C-level role in an industry I had never worked in. Although I doubted myself, I connected to an inner confidence that tells me that I can do it, have always succeeded in big challenges in the past and that if it turns out I don’t like it/ it’s not for me – I can learn from it and find something else.”

**Keeping my options open:** “Always be open to opportunities and new adventures. Don’t wait until you think you can do every element of a role – apply for it when you know you can do some of it and feel confident that you can learn the rest on the job. My whole career has been modelled on this view – I’ve never planned a move, I’ve always kept my ear to the ground, my eyes open and taken chances.”

**Taking risks:** “Trying out new things. Being venturesome has opened up opportunities that could not have been thought of when I started my career.”

**Drive:** “Hard work and consistent proactive ‘to-do’ attitude!!” “... it’s an insatiable desire to do and be better”. “Personality, drive, belief in myself, curiosity, love of people are the things that have helped me the most.”

**Purpose & Passion:** “So, my definition of successful may be a bit different... it absolutely isn’t about landing a big job or sitting at the top of a hierarchy. I feel successful in that I know what I love doing and what I want from work... and what I’m now comfortable saying ‘no’ to”. “Understanding my purpose, enjoying what I do and paying it forward.”

**Values:** “Being authentic and true to one’s beliefs and values even if that meant making unpopular decisions and choices.”

**Authenticity:** “I’ve worked for some incredible female leaders who have inspired me that it is possible to be true to yourself and your values and that you don’t have to have an alpha male personality to succeed in making it to the top.”

**Additional themes were resilience, courage, curiosity, empathy, asking for help, gratitude, and self-awareness.**

\*128 women participated in our survey. The questions in the survey were designed to test several hunches and patterns we’d noticed from the interviews, to see if similar patterns emerged from a broader group of women. Women self-selected for the survey – they were asked to complete it if they felt they had been successful without compromising who they were or without trying to be more like the men around them.



**Janine Osborn,**  
People Director, Group  
Executive Functions  
at Lloyds Banking Group

**In addition to partnerships, many women highlighted the importance of mentorship** during their journey. The majority of women expressed gratitude to role models and mentors that shaped their lives. These mentors were both men and women. [Janine Osborn](#) recalls “the most pivotal relationship was with Danny... She backed me and pushed me forwards to take opportunities... I often think I’ve just been lucky, and there is an element to that, but I have also underestimated myself. Danny helped me see that.”

**These women were not afraid to ask for and to accept help along the way:** “I’ve always managed to find really good mentors. And I’ve always worked really hard for good people who gave me the opportunity to succeed – I think it’s important to always ask for help. It’s also extremely important to offer it too if you’re able to do so.” ([Tracey Woodward](#))

**They were very keen to ‘pay it forward’** and mentor others. [Claire Camara](#) recalls, “my mentor taught me the importance of relationships. Her mantra was ‘pay it forward’. Wherever she is, she will find an opportunity to share her success... I also wanted to try to support young people and contribute through my work with them and my coaching.”

[Maria-Pia De Caro](#)’s mentor called her every single month for 20 years. She would advise her on how to take the next steps or “she would just listen to me,” and intuitively replay back what she heard in Maria’s voice. Her mentor only ever asked Maria to do one thing in return: “you need to do the same to others that I’m doing with you.” And since then, Maria has mentored hundreds of people.

**Many took their role as a mentor incredibly seriously:** “I would never allow somebody whom I mentor to fail. I spend a significant portion of my day coaching peers and those at the beginning of their careers and am committed to doing so because there’s karma in this world.” ([Tanisha Carino](#)) “Mentoring a person means more to me than an appliance that we produce... Creating a multiplier effect of mentoring someone and having them mentor 14 more.” ([Pamela Klyn](#))

The women we spoke to showed tremendous gratitude for those who supported them on their journey. They acknowledged the mentors and role models who enabled them to rise. They were not afraid to ask for help and to learn from others. They forged partnerships that lasted a lifetime. And they paid it forward by mentoring the next generation of leaders. In our Solutions section, we’ll share how to embed the concept of partnership across an entire organisation. We’ll explore the difference between a culture of partnership versus dominance and we’ll discuss how partnerships can be amazingly creative driving forces that extend beyond the confines of an organisation to customers, communities and even competitors.



**Maria-Pia De Caro,**  
Chief Supply (Chain) Officer  
at Nomad Foods

## Solutions for the individual:

### Get curious about people around you

We wanted to start this section with a bit of advice for the individual before moving on to suggestions for the organisation. For the readers out there who feel as though their organisations are not providing them with enough opportunities to network and collaborate, we certainly encourage you to proactively seek out broad and diverse networks yourself – there are a wealth of benefits in doing so. Margaret Heffernan explains that social capital (i.e. having high levels of trust, reciprocity and generosity with others) routinely outperforms financial capital. In other words, if you have a large number of people with whom you can trust, and where help is reciprocated, this can be much more powerful than having a large bank balance.

Margaret encourages people to **build their network by being curious** and by trying to get to know others deeply. This isn't about superficial exchanges of business cards or attending speed dating business events, or only going after people who have some form of higher status/power. This is about really being curious about people around you: what's their story? What do they care about? How can you help them? It's about **seeking out others who are different from you** because it is that difference that you will learn from. Building relationships with people who are different enables you to have access to a knowledge network that is rich and diverse, which makes you more intelligent, and enables you to be in the 'traffic flow of great ideas' so that you can become more creative and contribute meaningfully.<sup>69</sup>

Margaret points out that her richest

opportunities came from people who were junior to her. **Don't go after people tactically** (e.g. people who are powerful). She describes this approach as self-centred and ungenerous. Rather than treating people as tools to advance your career, instead understand **how you can help them, not the other way around**.

Now for suggestions for the organisation...



<sup>69</sup> Margaret Heffernan: 3 TED Talks, Research & Books—Making A New Case for Business Diversity, The Female Red Zone Podcast with Maribeth Kuzmeski

# Solutions for the organisation





### Create a culture of partnership not dominance

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We believe that the ultimate goal for organisations, in order to bring them into the future, is to create a deeply rooted culture of partnership across their entire ecosystem (i.e. mutually beneficial partnerships with their employees, with their customers, with their business partners, and with their community). Creating a partnership culture, we recognise, is no small feat. But organisations can start by taking a few small steps (such as enabling employees to network and form strong bonds with one another). Organisations can then become progressively more ambitious as they go.

What do we mean by a partnership culture? Let's explore what this means first before sharing some ideas on how to implement it. In her book, *The Real Wealth of Nations*, Riane Eisler lays out her theory on the **difference between dominance and partnership cultures**.<sup>70</sup>

Riane explains that "in the *domination system*, there are only two alternatives for relations: dominating or being dominated. Those on top control those below them – be it in families, workplaces, or society at large. Economic policies and practices in this system are designed to benefit those on top at the expense of those on the bottom. Trust is scarce and tension is high, as the whole system is largely held together by fear and force."

On the other end, the "*partnership system* supports mutually respectful and caring relations. There are still hierarchies, as there must be to get things done. But in these hierarchies, which I call *hierarchies of actualization* rather than *hierarchies of domination*, accountability and respect flow both ways rather than just from the bottom up, and social and economic structures are set up so that there is input from all levels. Leaders and managers facilitate, inspire, and empower rather than control and disempower."<sup>71</sup>



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<sup>70</sup> *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating A Caring Economics*, Riane Eisler, November 2008

<sup>71</sup> *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating A Caring Economics*, Riane Eisler, November 2008, P56-57 of Google Books Digital Version

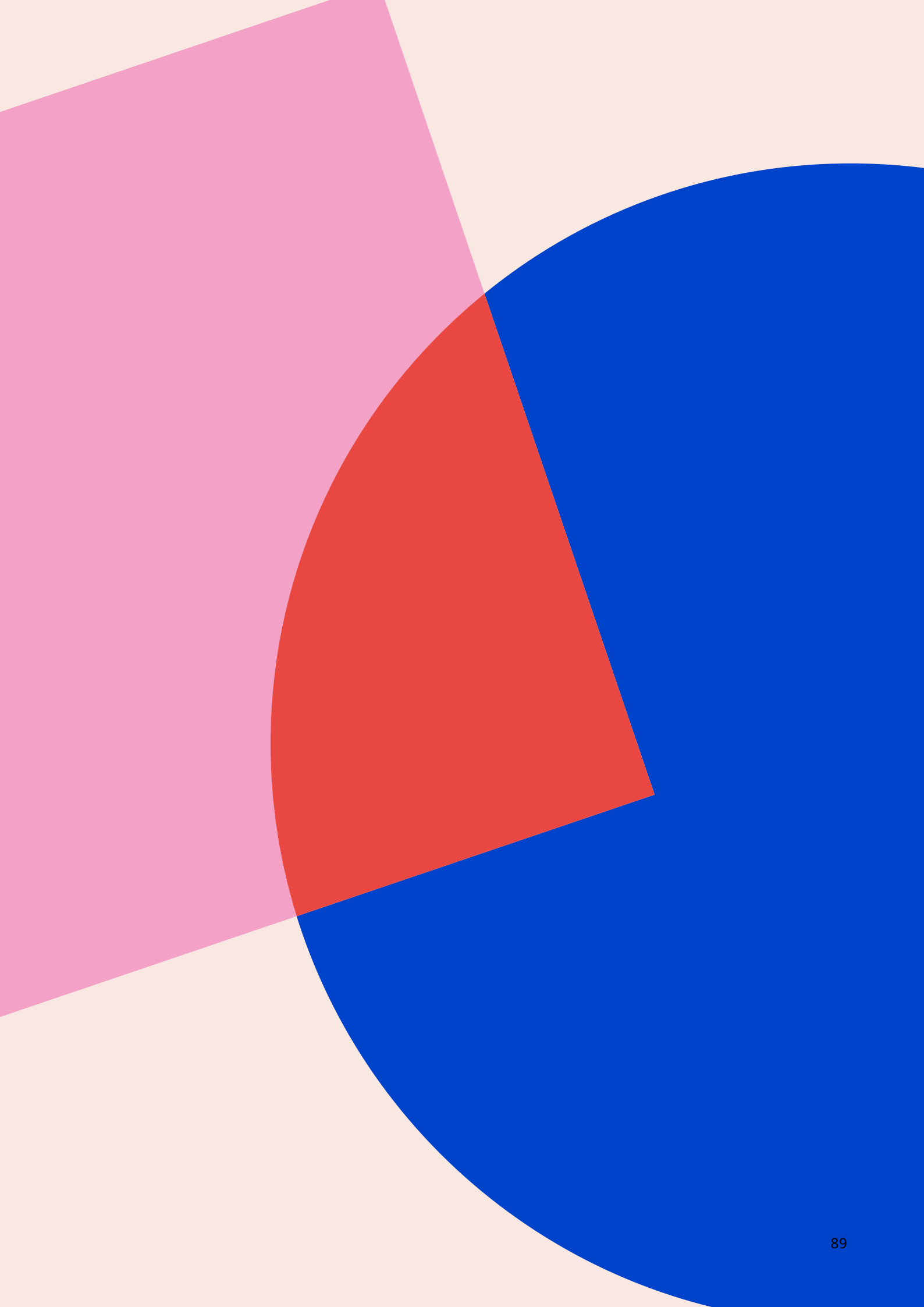
She goes on to say that “no society is a pure partnership or domination system. It is always a matter of degree.” She adds that “in the Nordic nations, which orient more closely to the partnership system, the general quality of life is far higher than in nations that orient more to the domination side of the continuum. And not coincidentally, Nordic nations are noted for policies that give caring and caregiving visibility and value.”<sup>72</sup>

Riane points out that systems that are based on partnership are likely to be sustainable, whereas those with dominance cultures are not. Here are some key differences between the two systems, based on Riane’s insights:

 <b>Partnership</b>	 <b>Dominance</b>
<b>Value the work of all, including that of carers</b>	<b>Value some work and position above others. No value in caring</b>
<b>See hierarchy as function</b>	<b>See hierarchy as value</b>
<b>Collaboration and inclusion are the life blood of organisation</b>	<b>Collaboration is a difficult necessity</b>
<b>Think loose and systemic</b>	<b>Think rigorous and structured</b>
<b>Purpose led</b>	<b>Role led</b>

<sup>72</sup> The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating A Caring Economics, Riane Eisler, November 2008, p57 of Google Books digital version





Now we'll share some practical ideas which will hopefully be food for thought for your organisation:

### Create opportunities for diverse networking

As we can see from these interviews, many women forged lifelong partnerships that were instrumental to their success. These partnerships were often reciprocal and women were happy to support one another and rise together in service of a greater purpose. They were grateful to the mentors who nurtured them and were keen to pay it forward by mentoring others. These interviews highlighted the pivotal role that partnerships can play. Organisations need to do more than just encourage their employees to build strong networks such as these. Rather, they need to **provide ample opportunities for these partnerships to emerge**.

Most importantly, organisations need to create opportunities for their employees to network and collaborate with a **diverse and broad group of people**. As mentioned in previous chapters, diversity is vitally important to the success of an organisation. Diversity is the principal predictor of innovation within high-performance teams.<sup>73</sup> We are currently working with an organisation that recruits from specific universities. 70% of their new recruits are from these universities. This means that there are a lot of alumni from these universities already in the business. Senior leaders from these alumni greet their new hires and hold freshers' gatherings. Immediately there is a sense of belonging for this group. But what about the other 30% of new hires who weren't from these universities? **It's essential for organisations to create networking opportunities that enable a broad cross-section of the community to come together. This could be on different topics, on shared challenges, or on any number of things, provided it brings a variety of people together.** Consider Google's 20% time for example. (20% of the time at work, Googlers are allowed to

pursue projects they are passionate about, of their choosing). This enables people to come together on a common topic and shared purpose. Since it's not part of their usual day job, they will typically be mixing outside their usual spheres.

### Offer mentorships

Many of the women we interviewed recalled the vital support they received from mentors throughout their life. They also spoke of their own willingness to be mentors, putting in the time and energy to help others, describing the gratification they received from this. It seems as though both the appetite and the need are there. Making mentoring accessible, valued and actively encouraged within the organisation will enable more people to receive support. Please feel free to read our suggestions around mentorships we shared in [Chapter one](#).

### Reward collaboration not competition

If organisations want their people to work together, don't reward them for working apart. Are the goals and objectives that are being set encouraging collaboration or competition/separation? Are they causing friction amongst team members? Consider setting goals that are **meaningful and shared**, where the whole team is rewarded as a result. If individual KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) are really necessary, is there a way where team members can be responsible for each other's KPIs in some way, to encourage co-ownership?

### Focus on purpose not roles and responsibilities

Many of the women we interviewed focused on a higher purpose. They dropped egos and organised themselves in a pragmatic way to get the job done. It's important to understand one's individual responsibilities on a project, but only when it doesn't get in the way of (and overtake) the purpose at hand as illustrated in the story to the right.



## STORY

### Let the Verticals go

Jane shares some common phrases she hears:

"I always experience a heart-sinking moment in a room when someone says, 'we need to do a RACI' (Responsibility Assignment Matrix: Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed). I am usually already nervous because people have been saying things like 'we need to be clear who is responsible for what' or 'they are doing my job' or 'people aren't sure what they are responsible for' or, my favourite 'how is this matrix meant to work anyway?'

I won't get into the fact that organisations are complex, and the world is changing – you know that. The ubiquitous Matrix organisation was intended as an answer to this complexity, but if we approach the matrix with the same command control mindsets that we held in a vertical-only structure we end up with a confusing diagram and complex RACIs that no one ever refers to after they are created. It's the verticals that lead to this confusion, they are a clever way to try to keep the hierarchy intact. Let the verticals go and organise by what needs to get done. The best examples of this are consulting organisations who tend to organise around the work, not the boss."

### Value caring

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Riane comments that “we would all be dead if it were not for the work of caring for children, the elderly, and the sick. We would be in very bad shape if our day-to-day needs for food, clean clothes and a habitable place to live weren’t cared for. There wouldn’t even be a labor force to go to their jobs or businesses if it weren’t for the work of caregiving. So why has the essential work of caring and caregiving been given so little economic value?”<sup>74</sup>

Riane goes further. When she references caring and caregiving, she does not limit this to caring for children, the sick or the elderly. “When I speak of caring and caregiving, I mean activities guided by a caring orientation. A caring orientation not only fulfills human needs and aspirations. It also offers a wholly different approach to business and government policies that is both financially and socially profitable.” For Riane, a caring orientation ‘spans the gamut’ and she includes “caring for employees, customers and other business stakeholders” among others.<sup>75</sup>

She argues that “a caring business orientation can actually be more profitable in simple dollars and cents than the old uncaring one. For example, the highly successful software company SAS Institute has been extremely profitable precisely because its policies make the welfare of employees a top priority... Some companies have even incorporated caring into their management training programs.”<sup>76</sup> These companies “are finding that concern for the welfare of employees and their families translates into increased competence and collaboration, encourages creativity and innovation, contributes to the organization’s collective capacity, and transfers into better business relations, internally as well as externally. In short,

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<sup>74</sup> The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating A Caring Economics, Riane Eisler, November 2008, P61-62 of Google Books digital version

<sup>75</sup> The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating A Caring Economics, Riane Eisler, November 2008, P41-42 of Google Books digital version

<sup>76</sup> The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating A Caring Economics, Riane Eisler, November 2008, P40-41 of Google Books digital version





they are seeing that a caring rather than uncaring orientation is good for both people and for business.”<sup>77</sup>

We encourage organisations to consider how they can embed caring practices and policies as part of a move towards a partnership culture. As Riane points out, when employees are cared for, they contribute more meaningfully to the organisation. Consider reviewing your policies to see how suitable they are. Have you truly put yourself in the shoes of your people when creating these policies? Are you considering whether they work for individual/exceptional cases whilst also maintaining a balance of fairness for the rest of the group? Are you investing in the development of your people and in the right areas? Are you supporting the mental health of your people?

### **Broaden your partnerships**

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A partnership doesn't have to be just between colleagues. We encourage organisations to broaden their thinking around partnerships to include their entire ecosystem. [Georgia Gould](#), leader of Camden Council and [Jenny Rowlands](#), Chief Executive at Camden Council have been collaborating together on complex issues within their community for many years. Their partnership is particularly unusual because it is not especially common for people in these roles, which have different pressures, to collaborate so well together.

What also makes their partnership unusual is the way in which they collaborate with their community. Rather than presenting the community with a set of solutions that have been vetted and deemed suitable, they come with a set of questions instead, in order to dig deeper into the problem. If, for example, the challenge is “How can we ensure all our residents have access to enough nutritious and sustainable food to eat every day?” they get the community involved in sharing their views but also in solving the challenge. The Council is

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<sup>77</sup> The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating A Caring Economics, Riane Eisler, November 2008, p41-42 of Google Books digital version

working to address both the **cause** of food poverty (reducing household incomes and financial instability) and support **grassroots community activity** to get everyone access to food in their communities – funding food co-operatives operating on estates and community champions working in communities to promote access and awareness.

The solutions that emerge come from the collective intelligence of everyone involved - getting people involved so that they feel empowered by their own agency. Sometimes the solution involves the community pooling their talents together and resolving the issues themselves. New community leadership emerges where the Council enables and facilitates residents and neighbourhoods to connect, experiment and learn together.

### Remove unnecessary hierarchy

At BRIDGE Partnership we don't have a CEO and it was one of the best decisions we have ever made. We created what we call a 'Peer Leadership' approach where there are several leadership groups that work through dialogue and discussion. It requires clarity of process and facilitation, but it works. One of the most interesting outcomes is that our teams report that there are no longer any 'weird dynamics' lurking in the shadows. Those who have been in the business the longest are reporting that it is the best phase of their

working lives thus far, and it seems to be yielding the best results.

Inspired by the book, *Unboss*,<sup>78</sup> Vas Narasimhan, the CEO of Novartis, has been taking his organisation on a journey designed to flip the hierarchy pyramid in order to create Servant Leaders. He attributes the strengthening of Novartis's culture, and its ability to respond effectively to complex changes (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) to this shift in hierarchy.

Consider removing swathes of unnecessary hierarchy and organise as mentioned above around purpose, partnership and outcomes. It is a radical proposition, but organisations have too often been making small step changes that are yielding little benefits. Sometimes it takes the radical to truly shift the needle. We suggest that the days of huge deficit between top and bottom in organisations should be a thing of the past.

We hope that these starter ideas around how organisations can grow their partnership culture have provided some initial sparks. As we mentioned, there are degrees of change – creating opportunities for a diverse group of people to network and collaborate can be a very valuable first step. A longer term goal could be to embed the culture change across the entire organisation.

<sup>78</sup> Unboss, Lars Kolind and Jacob Bøtter, October 2012







# CONCLUSION:

According to a study conducted by IBM which surveyed 2,600 executives, middle managers, and professional women and men in 2020 and 2021, **“only 1 in 4 organizations make the advancement of women a top 10 priority.** In a period when the pandemic has decimated many women’s careers, relying on conventional approaches won’t close the gender gap.” They go on to share that **“fewer women** hold senior vice president, vice president, director, and manager roles **in 2021 than in 2019.”**<sup>79</sup> Even though progress has been made in certain areas, it **can sometimes feel as if we are going backwards...**

If anything, we hope this study acts as a **call to arms.** Treat the challenges that women are facing at work **as an urgent business-critical risk.** Ensuring that your workforce is diverse and able to freely thrive is not a benevolent act, rather **it is an act of organisational survival.** When there is a true commitment to bringing about real and systemic change, incredible things happen. And it isn’t just women who reap the benefits, all genders do.

IBM reports that “more men who work for organizations with a higher ratio of female executives report being satisfied with their jobs versus men at companies with fewer women in top roles.”<sup>80</sup> What’s more, FTSE350 companies where women make up more than a third of their most senior jobs have a net profit margin over ten times greater than companies with no women at this level.<sup>81</sup>

The overarching message that resonated loud and clear from the interviews was: **stop trying to fix the women, fix the organisation.** Organisations can **learn so much from the women who are thriving.** The women we interviewed shared qualities that are considered to be ‘skills of the future’ and which make them ideally placed to solve complex and disruptive challenges faced by organisations. If you have very few women in your senior teams or **if you are lacking any kind of diversity, it is not because those that are absent are inadequate for the roles.** It is because the context is wrong for them. For example, it could be because the culture is one of dominance and not partnership, competition and not collaboration. It could be that the culture values more traditional and patriarchal forms of leadership.

These facets of the culture may be historical, something that has been that way for so long it is ingrained in the organisation’s DNA. Workshops and initiatives are not going to cut through the status quo. Instead, it takes **a dramatic rethinking of the organisation’s mindset, culture, values, structure and processes** to enable more women to thrive. This may feel radical, but it is entirely within an organisation’s grasp. And sometimes it takes a radical approach to truly enable this shift.

On the next page is a one-sheeter with some starter ideas:

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<sup>79</sup> Women, leadership and missed opportunities, IBM Institute for Business Value, March 2021

<sup>80</sup> Women, leadership and missed opportunities, IBM Institute for Business Value, March 2021

<sup>81</sup> The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It, Mary Ann Sieghart, 2021, P78 from WOMENCOUNT 2020, Margaret McDonagh and Lorna Fitzsimons

# HOW DID SHE GET THERE?



## Parental Power

Take the stigma away from therapy

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Ensure that managers prioritise the development of their teams

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Make mentoring accessible

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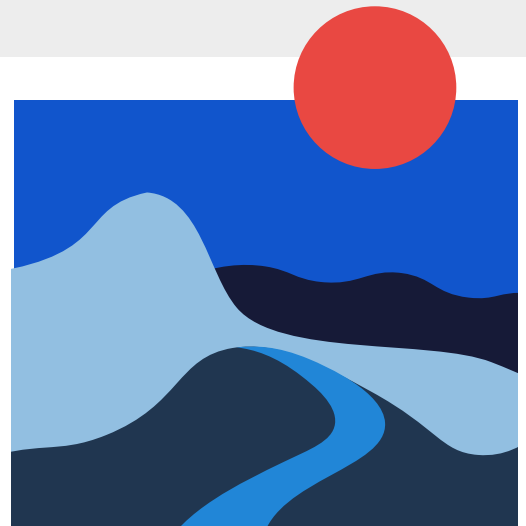
Mentors as cheerleaders

---

Invest in Vertical Development

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1



## A Different Path Up The Mountain

Make purpose a priority

---

Make 'questing' a possibility

---

- Straight arrows don't work for all of us
- Shift assumptions
- Break up with the alpha male culture
- Reimagine current career pathways
- Accept 'failure'

Build reflection into the process:

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- Create 'Possibility Mirrors'
- Enable managers

2

## If You're A Unicorn Don't Try To Be A Horse

Don't leave it up to the individual to solve

---

Stop trying to fix the women

---

Break up with Don Draper

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Recognise that diversity is essential for organisational survival – and do something about it

---

Actively spend time with people who violate your stereotypes

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Create psychologically-safe spaces for Dialogue

---

3





## Lead Like These Women

Learn from the women in your organisation

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Assess, or reassess the skills you need for the future

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Consider the following 'skills of the future':

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- Navigating uncertainty
- Adopting a learning mindset
- Systems Thinking
- Design Thinking

Consider the following meta skills:

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- Facilitation
- Presence
- Empathy
- Intuition

4



## Partnership Not Dominance

Get curious about people around you – for the individual

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Create a culture of partnership not dominance

---

Create opportunities for diverse networking

---

Offer mentorships

---

Rewards collaboration not competition

---

Focus on purpose not roles and responsibilities

---

Value caring

---

Broaden your partnerships

---

Remove unnecessary hierarchy

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5





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## **Solution brainstorm participants:**

Aron Barnes, Client Director at Bridge Partnership

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Lynda Wallace, Client Director at Bridge Partnership

Naomi Partridge, Facilitator, Coach and Social Impact Entrepreneur at HOLOS

Pete Green, Client Director at Bridge Partnership

Roisin Reynolds, Founder at Ivydale

Sophie Ireland, Hub MD - EMEA at Bridge Partnership

Tim Littlehales, Client Director at Bridge Partnership

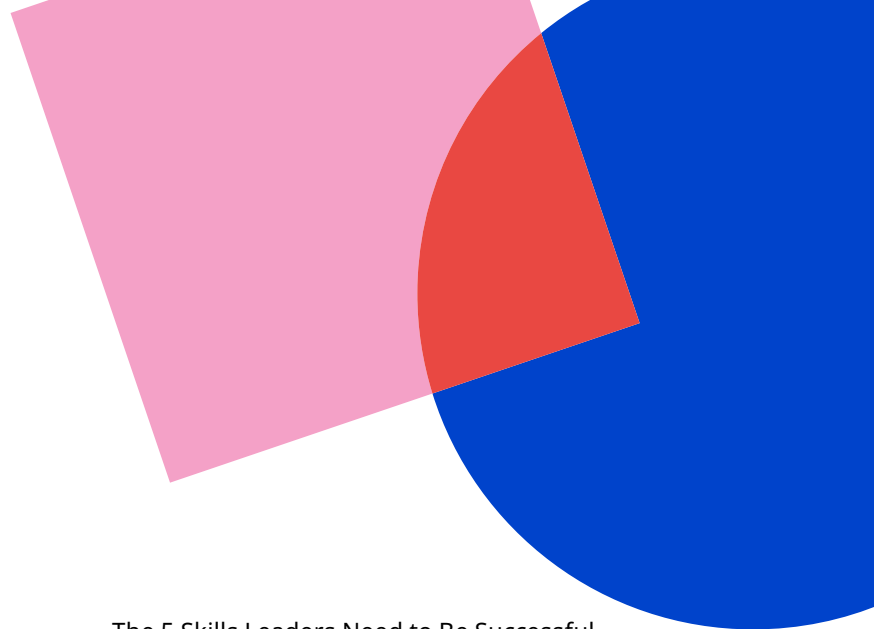
Veronica Linares, Founder, Executive Coach and Leadership Consultant at Values Leadership Consulting Ltd



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# BRIDGE

## About BRIDGE Partnership

BRIDGE Partnership are a consultancy in organisational and leadership development. For nearly 30 years, they have been supporting some of the largest brands across the globe to achieve breakthrough organisational change. Their focus areas include evolving leaders, accelerating team performance and making purpose matter, developing thought leadership and pioneering practices in the field.

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# Leftfield

## In collaboration with We Are Leftfield

Leftfield, our thought partners on this study, are a design thinking studio who work with organisations to find unexpected solutions to some of their toughest challenges. They have partnered with BRIDGE on a number of projects, including several immersive digital learning journeys.

**We're happy to talk.**

If you want to continue the  
conversation, please contact:  
[hello@bridge-partnership.com](mailto:hello@bridge-partnership.com)