



Leaders shaping tomorrow

Leadership insight, career design, and future skills advice for all—shaped by women leaders across our global network



Welcome

Welcome to our **Leaders shaping tomorrow** career advice toolkit. This resource shares collective insights from our women leaders to support everyone at every stage of their career.

We're excited to share leadership perspectives, career design strategy, and future-skills advice from in-depth interviews with over 60 women leaders at PwC. Learn more about who took part in the final chapter.

It provides tailored, research-based insights to help you manage the new era of work or navigate specific stages of your career path. Wherever you are on your journey, you'll find content that speaks to your needs.

If you're reading this toolkit, you're likely navigating the fast-evolving world of work. We've crafted this toolkit to empower you to advocate for yourself and grow your career in ways that personally reflect your vision of success. While it highlights advice from women leaders, the insights and practical tips are beneficial to everyone considering their career. It also fosters understanding of gender dynamics in the workplace. To broaden its reach, we've made it available within and beyond PwC.

Let this toolkit support you as you unlock your potential and achieve your career goals.

Unlock the full potential of this toolkit

Our career advice toolkit is designed to meet you exactly where you are today. It shares the essential advice our women leaders have pinpointed as pivotal to their personal success for thriving in a new era of work, and at various career stages. Their personal insights are further enriched by their experiences in leading, mentoring, and sponsoring talent throughout their journeys.

To maximise the value of this toolkit, dive into the chapters that resonate most with your current needs. Explore the insights, key takeaways, and reflection questions tailored to your career stage. And remember, as your career evolves, so will your needs. Look ahead to gather strategies that will serve you now and in the future.

Above all, embrace this toolkit with a growth mindset to appreciate what it has to offer. It's designed to support you in achieving your aspirations, whatever they may be.

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Chapter 1:

Career advice for thriving in a new era shaped by four forces

The world of work is accelerating. Technology is recasting how value is created, how decisions are made, and how careers unfold. Linear paths are giving way to continual reinvention. The most durable advantage is no longer a specific tool, but the capacity to learn, adapt, and remain human in a world shaped by AI.

Through our 2026 interviews with women leaders across the PwC network, four powerful forces emerged:

External shifts—how AI is changing the way work gets done

Cognitive adaptation—the meta-skills that sustain relevance

Personal evolution—authenticity and reinvention under pressure

Human differentiators—the capabilities technology cannot replace

These forces shape how careers develop, how leadership is lived, and what it takes to stay relevant. Together, these insights reveal the deeper capabilities all talent must rely on to sustain and grow their impact in a rapidly changing workplace.

External shifts—how AI is reshaping how work gets done

AI is transforming how work gets done—but it is also reshaping how leaders lead. It accelerates decision-making, broadens access to

information, and changes how teams seek clarity and direction. Leaders described AI not as a threat, but as a catalyst—one that requires curiosity, experimentation, and adaptability. *“AI is helping us rethink what really matters.” “Technology is always evolving but AI made me realise how important it is to stay adaptable as this technology evolves.”*

Many leaders acknowledged initially feeling daunted or uncertain, but they emphasise the importance of confidence built through use. *“The only way to get comfortable was to try things, even before I felt ready”, “Giving myself space to play with the tools made all the difference”, and “We can’t wait until we feel fully confident, we have to build the confidence by using it.”* Imperfect experimentation is the new foundation of technological confidence.

In a workplace shaped by rapid technological evolution, those who thrive and stay relevant give themselves, and others, permission to learn in real time. AI enables speed, but it also amplifies the ambiguity people must navigate—making human judgement and psychological safety more important than ever. All talent, particularly leaders, now play a crucial role in helping teams feel stable by modelling AI usage and creating the psychological safety needed to try, fail, learn, and adapt.

Key takeaway:

Actively experiment with AI tools, even before you feel ready. Build confidence through regular practice and model curiosity for others.

Cognitive adaptation—the meta-skills that keep you relevant

Beyond tech, staying power is underpinned by meta-skills that help you evaluate information, decide well, adapt quickly, and reinvent. They are higher order, transferable capabilities like learning agility, critical thinking, interpreting complexity, emotional resilience, reinvention, and curiosity.

“Critical thinking is what keeps you relevant. Tools will change, technologies will change—but your ability to analyse, question, and judge information is what helps you adapt through every shift.”

“AI can generate answers, but you still need critical thinking to decide what you trust. That’s the skill that sets strong leaders apart now. The ability to interpret, not just receive.”

Curiosity also emerged as an essential capability. Those who practice it shift energy from fear to exploration and it serves as an anchoring tool during uncertainty: *“I joined PwC many years ago... and what has always kept me learning is choosing to stay curious, even when everything feels like it’s shifting.”* *“Curiosity is about so much more than asking questions—it’s about being willing to explore and experience.”*

Our interview insights also reflected how much career paths have changed. Steady, linear progression has given way to frequent pivots, skill refreshes, and intentional reinvention. *“When I started, you could build a whole career in one area. It’s different now.”*, *“There came a point when I realised I needed to do something different—to build new skills and approach things in a new way.”* A useful metaphor was the advice to focus on building a personal “skill toolbox” over time: *“You have to look at every experience as adding something to your toolbox.”*, *“Some skills don’t make sense until*

years later... and then you realise that experience is exactly what you needed.” and *“Your toolbox is what lets you reinvent when the moment comes.”*

Key takeaway:

Strengthen the meta-skills that help you question, learn, and adapt. Treat every experience as an opportunity to add to and grow the value of your skill toolbox over time.

Personal evolution—authenticity and reinvention under pressure

The power and necessity of authenticity and reinvention were powerful themes that emerged from our interviews. Cognitive adaptability alone is not enough. We must also evolve personally—building the confidence, courage, and authenticity required to navigate change with humanity and integrity.

Authenticity emerged as one of the most human themes in this year’s interviews. Leaders described it not as a leadership style but as an inner practice—one that shapes trust, connection, and self-belief. Many grew into authenticity after early-career experiences of trying to fit in: *“I realised I was trying so hard to fit in that I lost my own voice... being myself was the only sustainable way to lead.”*

For many, reinvention is emotional work. Leaders spoke about stepping into new roles and greater visibility—often as the first or only woman in the room—and the weight of heightened scrutiny: *“I was the first female*

partner... me and 33 men for a very long time.” “Sometimes being the only one can feel isolating, but being visible matters because others need to see what’s possible.” Reinvention required trusting their voice in unfamiliar spaces, letting go of self-doubt, and stepping forward before feeling ready. “You can achieve far more than you expect — but only if you trust yourself enough to step into the unknown.” “Growth often happens when you take the step before you feel fully ready.”

Authenticity was also deeply connected to emotional intelligence, particularly listening, connecting with others, and understanding one’s impact. *“Being able to read the room and really listen is critical. It’s what creates psychological safety and trust.”* Truthfulness and human judgement can matter more than certainty. Especially in an era of AI-generated uncertainty and misinformation, the trust we build is critical—and must be protected.

Therefore, authenticity, becomes a strategic asset. It’s the anchor that supports reinvention and strengthens trust in a rapidly changing world.

Key takeaway:

Authenticity powers trust. Challenge yourself to step forward, speak up where you hesitate, act before you feel ready, and lead with uncompromising authenticity.

Human differentiators—the capabilities technology cannot replace

As AI continues to scale at rapid pace, the women leaders we interviewed were unequivocal: human skills are becoming more—not less—important.

Several leaders raised concerns about over-reliance on AI: *“If we lose the ability to challenge information, we won’t know what is true or false in 50 years.” “We hear of people copy-pasting what AI produces without questioning it.”* In this context, critical thinking becomes a vital differentiator. AI can provide information at speed, but only humans can verify, interpret, and apply it responsibly. Clients and teams still look to people—not tools—for meaning and discernment: *“Clients still look for our judgment and our beliefs. AI can’t replace that.” “AI can give you information but it’s your own understanding and interpretation that turn it into something meaningful.”*

Curiosity also surfaced again as a differentiating behaviour in an AI era: *“The first thing is to be curious... to really lean into the skills you need.” “It’s not about being ready, it’s about being willing to learn” and “Take the risk to fail. If you don’t take the risk to fail, you will never succeed.”*

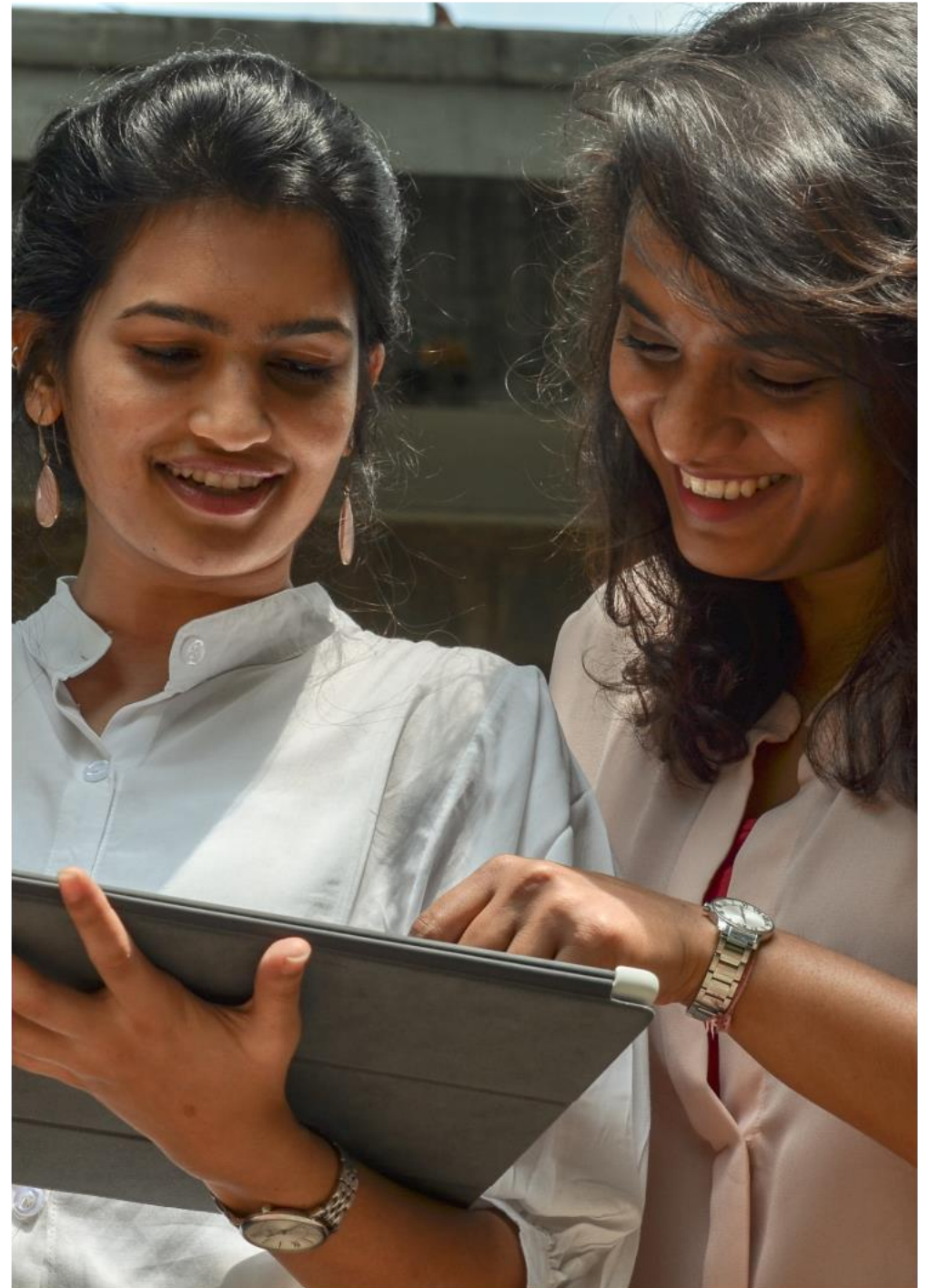
Leaders also observed that early-career talent may need more intentional development of human skills, as AI can shortcut experiences that once built confidence in communication, relationships, and navigating conflict. Without deliberate effort, foundational skills may erode.

Human presence, empathy, and relationship skills were repeatedly described as irreplaceable: *“It wasn’t a technical solution that shifted things with a client—it was human connection.”* Human skills are not “soft”. They

are strategic differentiators that shape trust, stability, and meaning in an AI-enabled world.

Key takeaway:

Prioritise the uniquely human skills that AI cannot replicate. Strengthen your judgement, communication, empathy, and curiosity—and practise them deliberately in real interactions.



A new era of work—the self-reflection questions that matter

How is AI influencing your work today?

Where might experimentation help you build confidence?

What meta-skills helped you navigate recent change?

Which meta-skills do you want to strengthen or do you need to build to stay relevant?

Where are you showing up authentically—and where are you holding back?

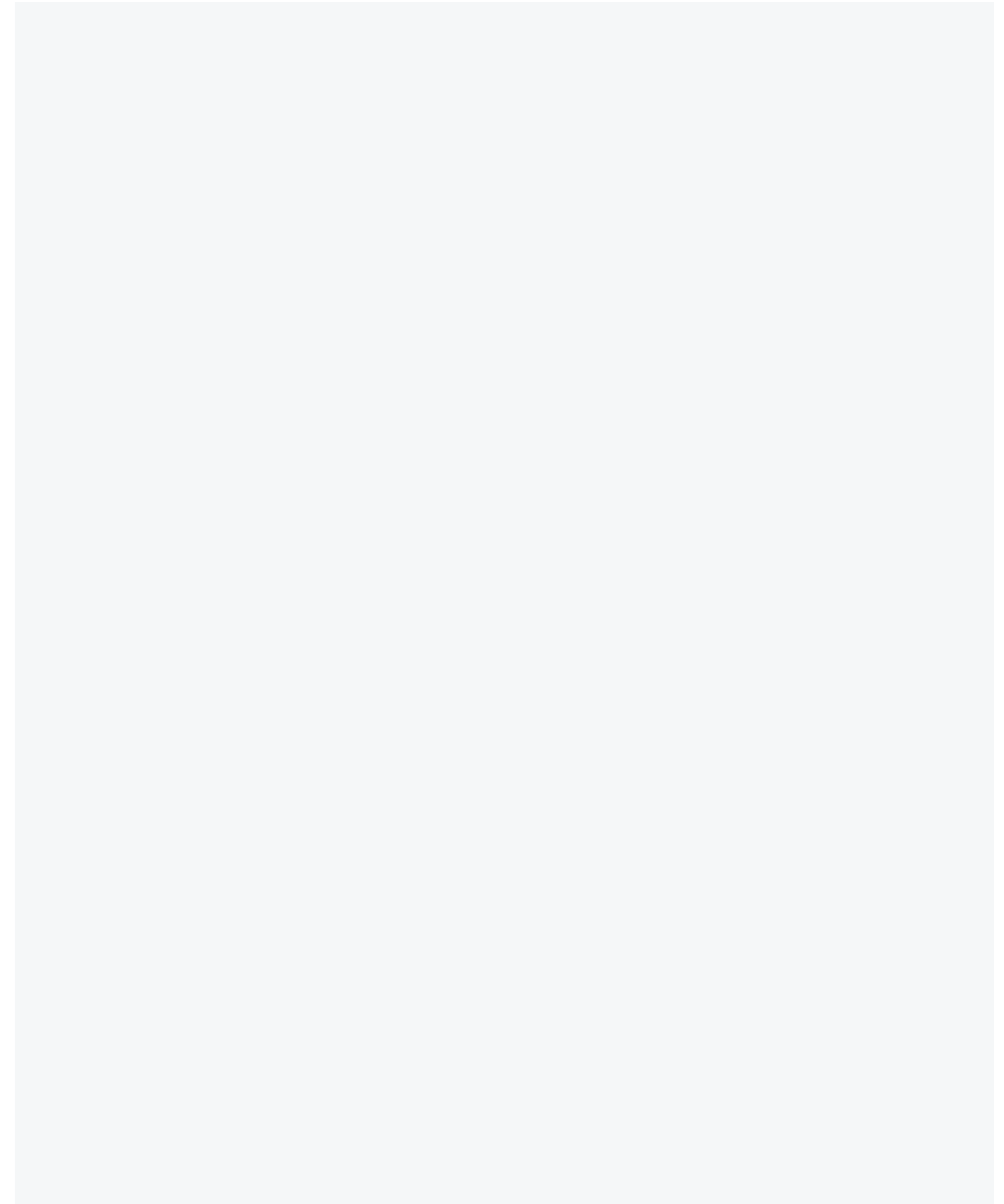
What would greater openness make possible for you?

Which human skills differentiate your impact?

How might you deepen empathy, listening, or communication?

How are you sharpening your critical thinking skills in the rise of AI?

My reflection notes



Chapter 2:

Career advice on starting your career

Every woman leader in our research had to start at the beginning—just like you. They've shared insights from their own experiences to guide you as you embark on your career path. They also emphasised that early career success is no longer defined by proving yourself in one domain, but rather building versatility, digital fluency, and human impact. Early career success has evolved from proving yourself to building adaptability, learning quickly, and staying open to new skills.

Start strong

As you begin your professional journey, remember: it's *"a marathon, not a sprint."* You're at the start of a path filled with learning and growth opportunities. Your starting point should be focusing on understanding and learning your role. Based on their own experiences, our leaders advise: *"show up from the start and go the extra mile in everything you do."*

Key takeaway:

Be enthusiastic from day one. Commit fully and give your best effort. This will set you up to deliver the greatest impact.

Embrace curiosity

Curiosity and a growth mindset are essential skills. While it might seem obvious, especially early in your career, adopting a *"learn it all, not know it*

all" attitude is crucial. This mindset will help you develop growth-oriented thinking and behaviours that will benefit you now and in the future.

"Being curious beyond your work and job description is so important. Ask the person at the next grade about their job, find out what people are focused on in different parts of the business. You'll be surprised how much you learn – [gaining] information that might not be relevant right now, but that will become relevant at some point down the line."

Key takeaway:

Think of yourself as a curious sponge. Absorb all the available knowledge, be proactively curious, and turn every experience into a learning opportunity.

The value of learning agility

Career starters are entering a world of work that is evolving faster than ever. Learning agility is the most important skill you can develop early in your career. Our leaders emphasised the importance of adapting quickly, absorbing new information, and remaining open to different ways of thinking.

"You learn by staying open to ideas—even when they challenge your usual way of working."

"Agility matters more than having the perfect plan. Things change, so you need to learn fast and keep moving."

"Curiosity is the spark, agility is what turns it into action."

Curiosity is essential, but agility brings it to life. It helps you respond constructively to change, stay resilient during uncertainty, and continually stretch into new spaces.

Key takeaway:

Building your learning agility muscle early on will serve you throughout your career.

Find your voice

Many leaders recall holding back early in their careers. Their hesitation was often due to being the most junior person, the only woman in the room, or simply having a different viewpoint. They are united in encouraging new professionals to be courageous in finding their voice. It's not about speaking for the sake of it, but recognising that *"there is a reason you are invited to a meeting,"* and that *"if your idea is different from what is being shared, it's most likely because you are bringing a unique perspective that no one else is thinking about."*

Key takeaway:

Your voice has value. Discover it and let others appreciate it.

Build your confidence

"One lesson I wish someone had shared with me earlier is that confidence is built, not given." Many of our leaders shared that when they began their

careers, they observed leaders who appeared naturally confident, decisive, and in control. Like many of us, they didn't initially see these traits in themselves. This perceived gap between personal attributes and leadership qualities can create mental barriers for everyone. It's crucial to understand that these leaders didn't start their careers as they appear now. *"Confidence isn't something you wake up with; it's something you develop by facing challenges, embracing discomfort, and proving to yourself that you belong in the spaces you aim to lead."* One leader recalled being incredibly nervous in her first client meeting. The turning point came when a senior colleague whispered: *"You don't have to be perfect — you just have to be present."* She said that moment changed her whole mindset.

Key takeaway:

Don't judge yourself based on others. Instead, observe and learn. Seek opportunities that help you build your confidence, like speaking up.

Raise your hand and say 'yes'

The leaders emphasised the importance of being proactive early in their careers, seeking or volunteering for tasks, projects, and opportunities beyond their immediate roles. Being ready and willing to say 'yes' to new experiences outside your comfort zone offers numerous benefits like learning new skills, expanding your exposure, building relationships, and becoming comfortable with discomfort. All of this helps you develop valuable "work muscles" that you'll rely on throughout your career. *"Don't wait until you feel 100% ready to seize an opportunity. Growth comes from experience and learning along the way."*

Key takeaway:

Even if it feels daunting, raise your hand and say 'yes'.

Learn to network

Today, networking is a crucial skill in business. It's essential to hone your networking skills, actively engage, and start building your network early in your career. *"Networking is about more than exchanging business cards."* It's about forming meaningful relationships that translate into support, guidance, collaborations, and opportunities throughout your career. Joining professional organisations, attending industry events, and engaging with online communities can open networking opportunities and provide a *"source of energy"* to propel your career forward. *"Having a network can be vital for support."*

Networking also exposes you to diverse experiences and perspectives. *"Building those connections requires being genuine and bringing your whole self—not just your professional self—because genuine connections aren't transactional."*

Key takeaway:

Mastering networking early will benefit you throughout your career, offering a powerful source of support and energy.

Find mentors

Make a concerted effort to forge strong relationships from the start of your career. Build bonds with those you work with, those you are working for,

and—equally importantly—with people beyond the immediate sphere of your core role. It is through building such relationships that you develop mentors, and mentors are an essential part of any career support system. *"Mentors are people who give you a safe space to open up about the things that you find difficult, and they help you to think through what you might do to overcome those challenges."* When the relationship is truly strong and trust-based, a mentor will do much more than guide and positively reinforce. They will also challenge. *"They'll push you on the things that you find difficult"* and give you that vital developmental feedback that could limit your career if you don't apply it. *"Many of the people I worked for early in my career remain powerful mentors to me today."*

Key takeaway:

Mentors will be fundamental to your success. So, focus today on building the trust-based relationships that will become pivotal to your career tomorrow. Find people who will evolve organically into the mentors you'll need.

Develop your personal brand

Your personal brand is how you promote yourself and tell your story. It's the unique combination of skills, experience, and personality that you want people to see when they meet or speak with you. *"A strong personal brand can enhance visibility and credibility, which in turn opens doors to new opportunities."* So, as you lay down and build on all of the important career foundations highlighted in this chapter, make space to think about how you are developing your personal brand. Start by recognising your unique

strengths, personal qualities, and broader skills—then, communicate them effectively to others.

Key takeaway:

Recognise that you have a personal brand, and consider how you will cultivate it to sustain and amplify your impact from early in your career.

Skills with intention

Early careers are no longer defined by mastery of one domain, but by versatility, digital fluency, and human impact. Many career starters enter the workforce as digital natives, fluent in technology and increasingly familiar with AI. Access to these skills is not a differentiator, but how intentionally you transfer them into professional ways of working is. Applying digital and AI capabilities to navigate ambiguity, collaborate effectively, and build the enduring human skills that will matter long after a first role is what will set you apart.

Key takeaway:

Start building your skill toolbox now intentionally. Develop the digital fluency and human skills that will enable you to thrive alongside AI.

Think about the next step—not the final one

Not one of the leaders we spoke to said they started their career with the aim of becoming a PwC partner or leader. In their view, starting a career with that mindset would have put too great a burden of expectation on their shoulders. Their advice was to view your career trajectory “*one step at a*

time”. “*When you are just starting out, it is hard to picture yourself in the role of a partner. But it is not very hard to picture yourself operating at the next grade.*”

Key takeaway:

Rather than focusing on your final destination, plan your career progression step by step. Look up to the next grade, identify what you need to master to get there, and focus on achieving growth.

Starting your career—the self-reflection questions that matter

How do I define success at this moment in my life and career?

What skills do I need to develop and enhance to thrive in my current role?

Who can I approach as potential mentors?

Am I clear on my impact goals?

How can I effectively present myself and my career aspirations to new contacts?

What steps can I take to overcome any hesitation or anxiety about networking?

How can I build my confidence and share my ideas more effectively?

How can I practice confidence in a way that feels authentic to me?

What stretch goals can I incorporate into my development plan?

At this stage in my career, what do I want to be known for?

How can I balance being strong in my daily tasks while seizing learning opportunities?

What is the next step in my career, and how can I prepare for it?

My reflection notes

Chapter 3:

Career advice on progressing your career

Our leaders shared that stepping into their first management role marked a pivotal moment in their careers. It was a time to "*develop and flex the business muscles*" they had been nurturing. We uncovered that the personal journeys of the women we spoke with often mirrored broader gender diversity trends, such as a tendency towards risk aversion and hesitancy in self-advocacy. Furthermore, we learned that progression is no longer a ladder it's a portfolio of skills, experiences, and relationships. Considering these findings, our women leaders offered valuable advice for those looking to make their first move into management.

Embrace the strategic 'yes'

Many leaders confessed that, early in their careers, saying 'yes' to opportunities could be challenging due to overthinking and self-doubt. This trait was also observed in the women they have mentored. Questions like "*Is it the right moment? Am I good enough? Am I ready?*" often surfaced. Yet, learning to embrace opportunities despite internal doubts has been transformative for their careers. "*It's the opportunities I've said 'yes' to that have been career-defining.*"

Key takeaway:

Don't hesitate—say yes. "*When an opportunity arises, seize it*"—and remember, "*if you're offered an opportunity, it's because you're ready.*"

Human skills that accelerate

Our leaders emphasised that human skills are vital to shaping career trajectories in a world reshaped by technology and transformation. As your career grows, demand for and the importance of communication, empathy, listening, relationship-building, and the ability to translate complexity into clarity also grows.

"Listening well is a leadership skill. It builds trust, especially in uncertain environments."

"Communication is the skill that unlocks everything else, especially when teams are navigating change."

"AI can give you information but it's your judgement and understanding that make it meaningful."

Our leaders emphasised that these skills accelerate mobility and help you thrive in evolving roles.

Key takeaway:

Your career expands when your skills do. Seek out experiences that stretch your thinking and broaden your impact.

Make your efforts visible

Beyond hesitancy, our leaders noted another potential career barrier: women often excel in their roles, yet their achievements remain unnoticed. This research suggests that women may not communicate their contributions as openly as they should. "*Women tend to excel quietly. Make sure those around you know what you're doing and how well you're*

doing it. Don't assume recognition will come without you highlighting your efforts." Discomfort with discussing achievements often contributes to this hesitation. It's crucial to reframe this discomfort as self-advocacy and career management. *"Your leader may not always see your work, so articulate it to them. Leaders are busy, so actively manage that relationship. It's a proactive skill often overlooked."*

Key takeaway:

Learn to proactively communicate the breadth and impact of your work to those who need to know.

Make your ambitions known

Our leaders recalled times when they weren't assertive enough in expressing their ambitions. They noted it as a broader difference they'd experienced between men and women at work.

"Putting your head down and working really hard unfortunately is not a strong enough signal that you want to progress, and it is important to know this." *"If you want to work on an iconic client, play a role on a strategic project, or be promoted, you have to make that known."* Expressing your ambitions is indispensable. While it may feel uncomfortable initially, it's easier than missing out on opportunities because decision-makers weren't aware of your interest. *"Some of our younger women are fantastic candidates. But they're shy about coming forward to ask for promotions or about saying they want to lead on a big project."* Our own [research](#) has highlighted that women who self-advocate for opportunities are much more likely to obtain career development experiences than those who don't.

Key takeaway:

Hard work alone doesn't signal your desire to progress—people won't know your aspirations unless you share them. Ambition isn't a dirty word, so make your goals known.

Embrace the Challenge

A recurring theme from our interviews is the importance of stepping beyond your comfort zone. This might mean leading a project without prior experience, speaking at a conference for the first time, taking on a challenging assignment, or transitioning to a different area of the business. *"Women can tend to get tied up in the potential risks, rather than viewing the potential gains."* Our interviews with leaders reveal a shared trait: they excel at stepping out of their comfort zones, a skill that has been pivotal in advancing their careers. One leader shared, *"I put myself out of my comfort zone. And the learning was that I didn't want to do it, I thought I couldn't do it, but I tried – and then, of course, you find it's not nearly as hard as you think."* Often, women see a job description and *"see two out of ten things they can't do and that will hold them back."* Career progression often involves taking risks and seizing opportunities as they present themselves. Our leaders highlight that these are the moments that foster personal and professional growth, enhance visibility, and open doors for advancement.

Key takeaway:

Embrace a growth mindset and see challenges as opportunities. Take a risk—once you've done it, it becomes easier to do again. Consider this:

why hesitate to step forward for something if you're already fully capable? By venturing beyond your comfort zone, you enable personal development in every endeavour.

The importance of mentors and sponsors

Mentors and sponsors are pivotal in shaping the careers of the leaders we spoke with. *"Mentors and sponsors serve different purposes, and a balance of both is essential."* Mentors guide you, offering a safe space to discuss challenges and strategies. They provide positive reinforcement and push you to grow. A sponsor's role is quite different. *"They are much more about the career environment; they are the people who can help you achieve your ambitions."* *"Sponsors are your voice when you're not in the room, influencing people to put opportunities your way, giving you enough rope to go and learn and actually prove yourself on those opportunities, backing your involvement in the big client project or advocating for your progression."* While you can request mentorship, sponsorship is earned. Sponsors choose you based on trust and understanding of your capabilities, as they stake their reputation on you.

These relationships also help you navigate the 'unwritten rules' of career progression. *"Recognise these rules and leverage them."* Engaging with experienced mentors helps you understand and adapt to these nuances.

Key takeaway:

Both mentors and sponsors are crucial for career growth, each offering unique benefits. Mentors challenge and support your development. Seek them out, build those connections, and rely on their guidance. Sponsors,

on the other hand, open doors to new opportunities. To attract sponsorship, excel in your role, make your contributions known, embrace new challenges, and clearly communicate your career aspirations.

Embrace growth feedback

Feedback is a constant necessity in your career journey. It's crucial to understand your strengths, but equally important to identify areas for improvement. While many shy away from giving or receiving developmental feedback, it's essential for growth. *"When you ask for feedback, people often focus on the positives. I always request three positives and one area for improvement. That single improvement point is key to becoming a better manager. Whether it's from your team, leaders, or colleagues, regular feedback accelerates your growth."* Building trust-based relationships and having mentors can help you seek out the tough feedback you need. But missing out on this feedback can hinder your career progress. *"Be comfortable asking others what you can improve."*

Key takeaway:

A growth mindset means valuing feedback, even when it's tough to hear. Lean on trusted relationships to actively pursue constructive feedback and make it a proactive part of your development strategy.

Recognise the transition

We've shared insights on career progression, but what happens when you achieve it? Many interviewees noted that moving to a manager-level role was one of the biggest step-changes in their careers. Acknowledge the

magnitude of this change. *"Stepping into my first managerial role required a major reset and a shift in mindset."* This reset is crucial as you move from executing tasks to managing people, projects, and relationships—a more complex role. *"You have more responsibility and relationships to manage, balancing upward and downward management requires a different skillset."*

Leaders highlight delegation as a key skill for successful transition. *"Delegation can be uncomfortable, as it may seem like offloading work. Identifying capable individuals and training them can be time-consuming, but it's essential for growth."*

"Having trusted relationships with your team and superiors makes delegation easier. Mistakes aren't failures—they're learning opportunities."

Listening is another vital skill for managers. You've learned to speak up, now it's time to master when to listen. *"Listening is crucial. As a new manager, you might feel the need to exert power. But holding back and listening first is a skill I learned over time."*

Consider the signals you're sending. Early in your career, finding your voice builds confidence. As a manager, use your confidence to refine your voice and project the right signals. You might not be demonstrating what you think you are. Communicate your readiness and seize opportunities to share your voice in important meetings.

"I was working on a very large client engagement and was all over the detail for the meetings with the very senior stakeholders at this client. But I didn't really get a chance to speak because there were other, more senior people in the meeting. At one point I got a little frustrated and I said to the partner that while I was fully conversant with all the details of the content, I

never get to demonstrate it in front of the client. His response was to tell me just to take the opportunity. The big realisation was that I was waiting to be given permission to share my input, but his impression was that I wasn't feeling up to it because I wasn't confident enough to give my input. But after that moment, we were both able to adjust our behaviour, and it worked for both of us. I found my voice, and he was able to step away from those meetings and I became the firm's representative."

Key takeaway:

Excelling in execution has led to your promotion to manager. Now it's time to shift gears and embrace the transition needed to thrive in your new role. Actions to support your growth and success include:

Build trusted relationships both upwards and downwards, seeking guidance and support as you transition.

Actively seek feedback from those around you to stay on track and grow.

Move out of the execution space to focus on your team. Develop their capabilities, delegate effectively, and recognise diverse approaches to achieving great results. Foster equity and support team members' aspirations and wellbeing.

Master the art of listening to understand, not just to respond.

Mistakes are learning moments—handle them well.

Find your voice and contribute your knowledge and skills effectively in key meetings.

Client-centric approach

Focusing on clients is a cornerstone of career growth. It's vital to deeply understand their business, industry, and how they function within their ecosystem. As you progress, this insight becomes even more integral. You need to broaden your understanding of various business aspects. For instance, if you're a tax specialist, it's important to grasp how digital changes, like AI, impact your clients. While broad business knowledge is important so are interpersonal skills. Authenticity and genuine interest in clients—as people—are foundational to strong relationships. Striving to truly understand their needs, goals, and challenges with empathy, authenticity, and interest are vital.

"This is the time to think beyond your core business. Broad business knowledge becomes increasingly important. Read widely to expand your knowledge base."

"I learn something new every day, and this mindset helps me build strong relationships with clients because I'm genuinely interested in them. You create connections that are impossible in a transactional approach."

"My reputation for growing client revenue isn't from hardselling. It's from a genuine interest in them as people, their challenges, opportunities, and business."

Key takeaway:

A client-centric approach is crucial for making an impact. Develop the business knowledge and interpersonal skills needed to succeed with and for your clients.

Role models and the next step

In our research, many women shared that during their managerial phase, it was common to notice a lack of women in senior roles. They acknowledged that this landscape has transformed significantly, offering a brighter outlook for women today. These women were pioneers, often the first in their roles, and they emphasise that *"you can be what you can't see."* They highlight the value of role models—those who inspire, guide, and teach. *"Observe those a step or two ahead. What do you admire about them? What aspects of their leadership connect with you? Identifying these qualities will help shape the leader you aim to become."*

Key takeaway:

It's beneficial to see leaders who resemble you, but the absence of such role models didn't hinder our leaders from reaching their potential. So, don't let it hold you back. Look to senior leaders, even if they're different from you, and learn from their strengths. Blend these insights to become the leader you aspire to be while staying true to yourself. And if you've just stepped into a managerial role, keep your sights on the next level while focusing on the work it will take to get there.

Everything else

We've already shared impactful advice. As you take on more responsibilities, it's crucial to balance career advancement with excellence in your current role. Continue to be present, stay curious, and be eager to learn. Focus on upskilling, refining your voice, building confidence,

enhancing your brand, expanding your network, and nurturing trust-based relationships.

Key takeaway:

Don't pour all your energy into just your core role. Stay aware of—and keep working on—everything.



Progressing your career—the self-reflection questions that matter

How do you define success in this moment in your life and career?

Have you explored new experiences in the past six months?

Are you embracing the right opportunities?

Is your network expanding with the right connections and in a meaningful way?

Do you have strong, trusted relationships with mentors who guide you?

Are you advancing your personal development across your work portfolio?

What upskilling and growth opportunities should you actively pursue?

How can you make sure your efforts and achievements are visible?

Are you actively seeking feedback for growth, and how are you using it to improve?

Are you clearly expressing your career goals?

Have you positioned yourself to gain advocacy from sponsors?

Have you honed the skill of active listening?

Do you have a clear understanding of expectations at the next level?

Are you transitioning from an execution role to management in a way that enhances your growth potential beyond management?

How will you inspire and motivate others?

How are you sharpening your critical thinking skills in the rise of AI?

My reflection notes

Chapter 4:

Career advice on leadership readiness

Some women we spoke with were surprised when offered leadership positions, while others had clearly expressed their ambitions for such roles. Yet, all agreed that the guidance provided in this toolkit was crucial in making leadership a tangible goal. They emphasised the dual need to leverage the experiences that helped them become effective leaders while staying future-focused and relevant in an AI shaped world. In this chapter, we focus on their insights and observations about getting ready for leadership roles and tackling any mental barriers that might stand in your way.

Brand Perception

Imagine this: you've dedicated your career to shaping and nurturing your personal brand. As you consider stepping into leadership, it's crucial to pause and reflect on any differences between how you see your brand and how others perceive it. Why does this matter? Because, as our leaders remind us, *"your brand enters the room before you do"* and *"brand perception is brand reality."*

One leader shares her experience: *"As someone who can appear enthusiastic and casual, I've found these traits sometimes lead to being underestimated, especially as I advanced. To address this while staying true to myself, I use a technique from a development programme. Before entering a professional setting, I focus on three words I want others to walk away thinking about me. I am my total authentic self through these three*

words." This approach has allowed her to add a touch of polish and energy to her natural style, making sure she is seen as she intends—balancing authenticity with the leadership qualities she wants to project.

Another leader encourages others to *"write down three words or phrases that define their personal brand at work, then ask five colleagues to do the same. Comparing these often reveals a gap between self-perception and how others see you."* Recognising these gaps fosters self-reflection and authentic leadership, helping you make small adjustments that bring your true self to every situation and achieve your desired impact.

Key takeaway:

Identify any gaps between your brand belief and perception, and work to bridge them.

Visibility elevation

Networking, relationships, mentors, and sponsors are vital for career advancement. But at this stage, it's also essential to focus on raising your visibility. Our leaders shared that many women at PwC are respected within their business area and by their clients, but there's a need to actively increase visibility beyond immediate circles and across the firm.

Interviewees emphasise that greater visibility is crucial for readiness for senior leadership roles, especially in professional services. *"To take on a leadership role, you must excel in your field. You need to be recognised for this both within the firm and externally with clients and the industry."*

One leader recalls advice during her promotion journey: *"In a large organisation, it's easy to get lost. People need to know who you are, recognise your skills, and what you contribute to the firm. Then, they'll nominate you for roles."* Another adds: *"You must expand your networking. Connect with people across different service lines within the firm. And it's crucial to network outside the firm. If you're in a specific industry, like oil and gas or financial services, engage with industry players and become known as a 'go-to'."*

Key takeaway:

Strengthen your networking efforts and develop your leadership skills to enhance your visibility.

Leadership techniques

The women we spoke with shared a wealth of strategies they've picked up along their journey to help them be an example of leadership in any setting. They highlighted the value of techniques that allow you to remain true to yourself while showcasing your leadership skills. These strategies can be subtle, involving only slight behavioural adjustments, yet they communicate clear messages to those around you.

"Growing up professionally surrounded by men, who were all fantastic mentors, I do remember this lightbulb moment of seeing a client CEO in action, who was the first female CEO I was ever exposed to. She was a very full-on personality who clearly held the room in every way. But she was also clearly a family woman, looking the way she did and doing the things she wanted to do. I learned from her not only how to lead in your

own authentic way, but also some tricks of the trade of how to own a room."

"Walking into audit committees, you must focus on how you can generate respect and authority when you aren't what they're expecting." Various interviewees contributed their own perspectives on such leadership tactics. *"Making sure when I enter a room I go and speak to the most senior person, because often people don't expect that of a woman."* *"I make sure I take a seat at the centre of the table, not down the bottom."* *"I might not be able to discuss the football or rugby results, but I don't need to jump straight into business; I can ask leaders about their weekend."*

Key takeaway:

Be aware of the signals you are sending—whether conscious or subconscious—and adopt behaviours that project competent leadership.

Leading with confidence in a technology-driven environment

The transition to leadership now requires more than just leading people. It also means having the confidence to navigate a world increasingly shaped by technology. Our interviewees shared that leading today means making sense of complexity, using data wisely, and helping teams adapt to new tools and processes: *"Technology is changing the pace of everything. As a leader, you need to stay grounded and help your team do the same."*, *"Teams look to you for clarity when things are complex. AI won't give them that. You will."* and *"It's not about being an expert in everything. It's about being open, curious, and willing to learn alongside your team."*

But they also emphasised that technology should never come at the expense of human connection. Leaders must balance digital fluency with empathy—supporting their teams emotionally as they navigate new ways of working.

Key takeaway:

Lead the tech transition with humanity. Offer clarity, model learning, and support people through change.

The career pivot

Our research highlights a common experience among leaders: the career pivot. These changes can be diverse, ranging from exploring new business areas and technical skills to moving between employers, industries, and even continents. When managing a career shift, key themes like curiosity, embracing opportunities, taking risks, and seeking experiences beyond your comfort zone are vital for success. While these shifts can be initially challenging, our interviewees found them to be catalysts for growth, helping broaden their perspectives and increase their visibility. They also saw these changes as essential steps towards leadership roles.

Our women leaders urge you to embrace career shifts. They emphasise that career paths are no longer straight lines. Diverse experiences and reinvention are gainful in shaping your journey. Taking risks can be daunting, especially when it means leaving a role you excel in. But often, it's a leap worth taking, as many of our interviewees have shown.

"While working in audit, I was asked to help coordinate and eventually lead a technology-focused group. That was quite a tough pivot to navigate, but I
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pushed myself. Because it was in the tech space, most of the time it was 99% men. Eventually I pushed through. You start small and keep going, then it just snowballs. You start with a small network, and it grows and over time you become a 'go-to' person in that space. I think the trick is to persevere and recognise that it's okay to be different."

"Career pivots aren't about abandoning what you've done—they're about expanding your expertise and exploring new areas. I started in auditing, where I built a foundation of analytical and detail-oriented skills and understood clients' businesses. I then pivoted to consulting, a move that allowed me to develop strategic thinking, problem-solving abilities, and adaptability. Today, as an internally facing member of the leadership team, I draw on these diverse experiences to lead with depth and perspective."

"If you're in a role where you're not learning anything new and it's all becoming a bit familiar, it's time to move on. Don't let yourself get stale. Always be curious and have the urge to learn new things. Moving on can be harder than it sounds, because sometimes you're in a role where you really like the people, love the team, and find the work interesting. But you have to challenge yourself. I've never regretted making a move to do something different, because I've always met new people, learned new things, and become a better person and a better leader for it."

"I've changed firms, I've changed roles, lines of business. Sometimes I've said 'yes' to opportunities that I didn't necessarily want at the time, but I don't regret any of it. Just take a chance. Most likely nothing bad will happen, and if it does then go back and choose the other path."

Key takeaway:

Careers aren't linear anymore. To advance, you'll likely need to be open to reinvention and embrace career pivots. Take the risk.

Make your leadership ambitions known

In our previous chapter on career advancement, we emphasised the importance of clearly expressing your desire to progress and embrace new opportunities. As you explore the transition to leadership, it's crucial to communicate your aspirations to the right decision-makers. While excelling in your current position is vital, sharing your leadership goals is equally important. Don't assume that your ascension automatically signals your leadership ambitions to those above you.

One experienced partner shared a valuable insight. When she shifted to a strategic role within her firm's Territory Senior Partner (TSP) team, she believed she was clearly indicating her ambition for a leadership position. However, six months in, the TSP expressed uncertainty about her career goals. *"He had people regularly informing him of their desired roles. I realised my actions weren't conveying my intentions. I needed to be more vocal about my aspirations."*

Others echo the importance of making your ambitions known. *"The first big leadership role I had....it was the kind of role that many people used to assume only a man could do, and I was longing to show that women can do that role, too. I said to my boss at the time that I'd really like that role. He replied 'well, have you told anyone?' and I said 'no'. He said there were four other partners who wanted that role and they'd all spoken to the*

person holding the position about it already. He made me march down there to do the same. And it worked, and now, I am in an even bigger leadership role."

"Be sure to tell all of the senior people – particularly those who already have the role and appoint people to it – that you want the role. I know that might sound simple, but too many women don't tell people they want the job. I spent more of my career than I should have thinking that if I performed well in my current role, they would pick me. Now I just look people in the eye, and say I want the job."

Key takeaway:

While maintaining high performance in your current role, make sure to vocalise your leadership aspirations to the key decision-makers that matter.

Recognise that leadership isn't easy

Understand that leadership is challenging. You're constantly in the spotlight, which can be daunting when stepping into your first leadership role. While some leaders make it look effortless, most find it demanding. *"I've never pretended this is easy; I've never pretended that I just sail through my days with no drama, no friction, and no challenges, or that I have perfect children and perfect clients. I think it helps people if they understand that leadership is hard, and that no one is doing it perfectly."*

Key takeaway:

Leadership is a significant change and it's challenging. Success requires self-awareness, resilience, and support. But don't let this deter you—it's the reality for everyone in leadership.

Fear of making mistakes in the spotlight

As you approach or transition into leadership, you've likely experienced career highs. However, it's essential to accept that every career journey includes lows. The leaders we spoke to discussed making mistakes and facing setbacks, such as misjudgements, client errors, or not securing a desired leadership role.

A recurring theme was that women often over-analyse mistakes. *"Leading my first major client, I made a communication error that eroded trust. I struggled with the consequences, but was reassured when partners shared similar experiences. A sponsor advised me to learn from it, close the chapter, and move on."* *"As women we tend to over-analyse our mistakes. I can't even remember what some of the things were that I lost sleep over. My advice is to not take mistakes personally, and to not let fear be a reason for not doing things. How you respond to setbacks defines you more than how you manage success."* *"Working through a mistake side by side with my client was a breakthrough moment and how I handled it built exponential trust. All these years later they remain a client and I'm their chosen relationship partner."*

Similarly, don't let setbacks define or hold you back. *"I was deferred from the partner process twice, which was tough. But I stopped trying so hard,*

started leading like a partner, and was admitted the next year." *"If you're shortlisted for a leadership position but miss out, there will be other opportunities. Use setbacks to reinvent and focus on your next step."* *"I remember one role where the team leader didn't recognise or value my qualities. He just didn't see them because he was wired a different way. I thought, 'my career isn't going anywhere right now', and that was tough. But then we had a switch, that leader left and another came in. He was also really different from me, but he saw what I could do, what I could bring—and that's a big part of why I'm in the leadership role I'm in now."*

Key takeaway:

A career without lows doesn't exist. New leaders will make mistakes. What matters is how you respond. Own up, be transparent, and course-correct. Handled well, mistakes and setbacks offer learning opportunities, build resilience, and show humility. Learn from them—and learn to let things go.

Ask for what you need to be successful

"Whenever a leadership opportunity is offered, take it. Don't think you're not good enough. Instead think and ask for what you need to be successful. This means stopping yourself from asking, 'Is this the right moment? Am I good enough? Do you think I'm ready?'. Instead seize the opportunity, make the most of it, and focus on asking what you need to succeed in that role."

"Every time I've been asked to take on a new role, I never expected it. In each of those situations I had to think to myself: this is a huge opportunity, it's now, and it might not come again. At each move, the jacket I've put on

has been bigger than the one before, but through having amazing support and asking for what I needed to be successful, I've soon filled it and then an even bigger one would come along."

Key takeaway:

Don't hesitate. Accept the challenge, whatever it may be, because the opportunities could be significant. Don't get caught up in 'why not?' Just say 'yes,' reflect on what you'll need to succeed, and ask for it.

Why me?

One of the senior leaders we interviewed encourages those approached with a leadership opportunity to ask, 'why me?'. This advice resonated with many women we spoke to. *"In my first senior leadership role, I tried to be who I thought they wanted and focused on what my predecessor would have done."* This is an easy trap. *"When I asked why I was given the job, I was told it was for my creativity and innovation. So, I stopped trying to be someone else. Now, 'why me?' is one of the first questions I ask when offered a new leadership role."*

Build on 'why me?' by asking further questions when faced with a leadership opportunity. One interviewee always asks three questions: "What are your hopes for me in this role? What are your fears? What legacy would you like me to leave?"

Key takeaway:

Understand from the start why you've been chosen for a leadership role so preconceptions or past influences don't blur your potential impact.



Leadership readiness—the self-reflection questions that matter

How do you define success at this moment in your life and career?

What's the most important lesson I've learned in my career so far?

How am I managing the demands of my career path while focusing on personal growth and skill development?

Is my professional network extensive enough, and does it include the right connections?

Do I have the necessary visibility both within my organisation and externally?

What type of leader do I aspire to be, and what changes do I need to make to achieve that?

Have I communicated my leadership goals to the right decision-makers?

What do I need to ask for to be successful?

Why was I selected for this leadership role, and how can I leverage that to my advantage?

My reflection notes

Chapter 5:

Career advice for leaders

In today's corporate landscape, the stark reality is that women remain underrepresented at the highest levels. As in earlier chapters, we offer career advice and insights from our interviews. Alongside these, we provide personal reflections to make these roles feel more relatable and achievable. Our interviewees highlighted the importance of showcasing leadership at every career stage and that leadership is becoming more human-centred and trust-driven as technology evolves. They also offered specific advice on holding leadership positions.

You don't need to have all the answers

Our discussions with leaders reveal that women often place undue pressure on themselves. There's a common belief that they must *"have all the answers," "solve every problem,"* and *"shoulder all the burdens"* alone.

"I used to feel immense pressure to know everything before stepping into a client or leadership meeting. It took me a while to realise that asking insightful questions is more valuable than having all the answers."

As a leader, it's crucial to understand that *"you don't need to be the smartest person in the room... if you are, you're in the wrong room."* What's vital is knowing how to ask the right questions.

Recognising that you don't have to tackle every issue is key. *"It's a skill to discern which problems you can address and which aren't yours to solve. Trying to fix everything drains your energy, so focus on what's within your*

control. This understanding has helped me manage issues that would otherwise linger. Of course, as a leader, you take responsibility. But knowing what's yours to solve helps you prioritise."

"Avoid making significant decisions when stressed or negative, as you might regret them. As a leader, it's okay to request more time."

Key takeaway:

Leadership doesn't require having all the answers. Instead, develop the ability to identify the right problems to solve and ask the right questions.

The authentic advantage

A consistent theme in our interviews is the power of authenticity. The notion that they *"needed to play a part"* often held women back from being their true selves early in their careers. *"For years, I wore a mask, trying to emulate what I thought a PwC partner should be. I split myself into 'home me' and 'work me.' But I realised there's just one me. Maintaining a professional façade was exhausting. Feedback suggested I seemed cold and unapproachable. So, I began to be more genuine, sharing both successes and challenges, and talking about my home life. Interestingly, people liked me more, and I built stronger relationships."*

Recognising your unique strengths is crucial for leadership success. *"I think being different, as the first woman in several leadership roles, has been an asset and an opportunity for me. My advice would be don't hide yourself or conceal your emotions. Make them work for you—and that can give you a superpower. I've experienced this myself in leadership roles and in client conversations."*

Being your true self takes courage, and the right people will appreciate you for it. This doesn't mean that you need to please people all the time: there's no contradiction between being kind and being strong."

"As a leader you have to be decisive, you have to push, and you have to say no. And those qualities are sometimes identified as more masculine traits. But I became much more successful in my career when I made sure that my female side was well represented too. Now I feel that I can be my total self at work. This means I share my vulnerabilities with the people I work with, I share the mistakes I make. I don't care whether or not that means people think I'm small, I know I'm not."

Authenticity doesn't mean being "an open book" with every flaw exposed. But showing who you are and being vulnerable can forge connections and inspire followership. You need that human connection if you aim to create genuine leadership and not just hierarchical command.

As a leader, you need to inspire, motivate, and empower your team to achieve results. This is challenging if you're not authentic or trying to fit a leadership mold. *"I'm not an extrovert. I'm clear that I can only lead in my way. So, when I took on my current role, I told my predecessor I'd do it my way, not his. Every time I've assumed a leadership position, I've made it clear upfront: 'Don't expect it to be what it was before. I have to be myself.'"*

As workplaces become more digital—authenticity becomes one of the most powerful ways to build trust and credibility. In an AI-enabled environment, authenticity also helps humanise leadership. It bridges the gap between transformation and the lived reality of teams. It supports psychological safety, encourages openness, and creates a sense of stability during

change. *"AI is changing how we work—authenticity shapes how we lead."*, *"Your story matters. It helps others feel they can show up as themselves."* and *"Authenticity doesn't mean being unfiltered. It means being intentional, honest and human."*

Key takeaway:

Empower and connect by being true to yourself and leading in your unique way.

Team and Support

A key insight from this research is that effective leadership hinges on a solid support system. It begins with understanding what you need to succeed and extends to nurturing a network that supports you and empowers your team.

"Creating a strong support network is crucial. Seek mentors for guidance, connect with peers who share your journey, and rely on family and friends for steadfast support. These relationships form the foundation of a rewarding career and life, offering advice when it's most needed."

"As a leader, while you hold responsibility, remember to lean on the networks you've built. These connections are there to support you and provide fresh perspectives as you grow into new roles."

Identify your key stakeholders: mentors and sponsors who guide, confidants who share truths, and relationships that broaden your thinking.

"Identify those with whom you must build trust, and plan how to keep them informed and aligned with your role."

Leadership is about recognising that *"the team is more important than the individual"* and focusing on building and empowering the right team. Unlike the shift to management, leadership is less about delegating and more about mentoring and coaching. *"Surround yourself with a strong team. Build trust, listen, and create an environment where they feel valued. Embrace diverse perspectives, celebrate successes, and prioritise people skills. Great leadership is about empowering others as much as achieving results."*

"Understand your team, know their strengths, and position them to excel. Be open-minded and share opportunities. The essence of leadership is doing what's best for them, not just for you."

Key takeaway:

No leader stands alone. Focus on building the right support and empowering your team.

Use your strengths

Recognising your capabilities and focusing on your strengths emerged as a significant theme in our research. Understanding what you excel at, utilising those strengths, and knowing how to address any weaknesses are crucial to your success as a leader.

"I strongly support strength-based development. Identify what you're good at and turn it into a superpower. But also be aware of your limits and make use of your team."

"It's crucial to understand your strengths and weaknesses. You need to rely on your strengths in how you lead and deliver. For instance, I'm relatable and excel at building and managing relationships—I've refined these skills, enabling me to work with everyone effectively, building trust and achieving results."

"I make it a point to view my strengths and weaknesses from an objective perspective. What are my weaknesses? How can I manage them in this leadership role?"

"In my team interactions, I believe that without empowering people, they won't gain the confidence to grow. Feedback from my team often highlights their appreciation for my awareness of my limitations and my willingness to delegate tasks to them, knowing they can handle it. As a leader, I rely more on my team now than I did on partners earlier in my career."

Key takeaway:

Use your strengths, be mindful of your weaknesses, and consider both when planning your path to leadership success.

Overcoming imposter syndrome

Imposter syndrome is a common challenge for many of the women leaders we interviewed. The feeling of not being the "obvious choice" or looking different from predecessors can amplify this experience. Recognising imposter syndrome when it arises, finding strategies to manage it, and using it as a catalyst for self-improvement are key steps forward.

"In my early leadership role, I felt overwhelmed. My partner encouraged me to let go of doubts, reminding me of my capabilities. It took time, but eventually, I found my confidence and my impact grew significantly."

"A senior partner once told me, 'You are good enough.' This resonated deeply, as we all grapple with imposter syndrome and question our worth at times."

"Being well-prepared has always helped me tackle imposter syndrome. I experience it daily, but I see it as beneficial—provided it doesn't undermine my confidence. It keeps me sharp and striving for improvement. Unchecked, it can erode self-image, which is a risk."

Key takeaway:

Imposter syndrome is real. Remember, you are enough. Harness it to your advantage.

Contending with bias

Research shows that much bias is unconscious and not ill-intended. We all tend to connect with those similar to us. Focus on what you can control. When bias arises, address it directly and use it as a chance to educate.

"We can only control what we do and how we feel about things. Now when I go into a room and I'm the only woman there, I don't allow it to affect me. If I have something to say, I'll say it. If somebody interrupts me, I'll interrupt them back. I just see myself as a human being in a room full of human beings. I keep giving everything I do my best shot. And that's all we can do. Give it our best shot."

"I recall having to have a difficult conversation with a client on [experiencing gender bias]. That wasn't easy but it was very powerful. It became a very open and honest conversation and actually led to a very strong [and] longstanding trust-based relationship with him." "When I feel like [gender bias] is happening to me, I try to be pragmatic. Understand that it is often very unconscious. But where its not or it is a problem, be prepared to deal with it and to call it out, particularly on behalf of others."

"I learned early on not to take things personally, because a lot of what people say is more about them than you. Throughout my career I've heard things like, 'You only got that role because you're a woman'. I used to take that personally. But actually, it's their issue, not mine and I don't have to justify myself. I've always said, 'Come back and tell me what you think after I've done the job for a year'. Basically, worry about the stuff you can change and control. Don't worry about all the other stuff."

The leaders expressed that they try not to take things too seriously or too personally. They try to keep a sense of humour, and also lean on their fortitude and resilience. "Especially in the face of the stereotype that powerful women are abrasive. In my experience, I've felt that I got a lot farther and a lot more of what I wanted by not fighting every single friction moment. Sometimes you roll along with this one to go win a much bigger thing down the road. I think for me it's a lot easier when you don't approach every situation as an 'us versus them'." "I grew to get a kick out of how long it took the client to realise I was the most senior person on our side of the table." "You can't break the glass ceiling without getting shards in your back. Resilience and positive energy are important."

Key takeaway:

Focus on controllable factors, demonstrate your capabilities, build resilience, and address bias when necessary.

Role model impact

Role models are present at all levels, but leaders are expected to set the standard due to their visibility. Reflect your values and behaviours, considering the legacy you wish to leave.

"Your actions and words are observed by others. Even in challenging situations, maintain composure. The right demeanour is crucial. If you're stressed, your team will be too."

Be positive in the face of challenges. There are always solutions, but you can only find a good solution if you think positively. You must lead with a 'can do' mindset and *"make sure your actions and what you say align."* *"As a leader, you need a mindset where you try to always focus on what can be achieved, instead of what can't."*

"I grew up in quite a male-dominated sector. I definitely kept aspects of myself hidden because I feared they might hold me back. But then I realised that it was important to bring them to work more overtly, so that other people felt like if they had some of those things that they would also be able to succeed. What I found was it's not about me, but it is about how it makes other people feel. If you're a young mother, and you work part-time, and you're ethnically diverse, people need to know that. It's important for them to see that people from different backgrounds can succeed in our world."

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Key takeaway:

Leadership involves being a visible role model. Lead by example with consistent actions and behaviours. Be mindful of your impact and focus on uplifting others.

Continuous learning and experimentation

The insights and experiences shared in this toolkit highlight a powerful common thread: leaders who continue to grow, stay curious, and actively stretch themselves are more likely to remain relevant and impactful. A commitment to continuous learning is not a 'nice to have' at senior levels—it's a core responsibility of leadership, that cannot be delegated. *"A genuine thirst for knowledge and a curiosity to explore further are essential."*

Leaders who model this mindset are the ones who innovate, adapt quickly, build trust, and maintain the broad perspective needed for effective decision-making in a constantly evolving landscape.

But continuous learning alone is no longer enough. In today's world—a world fundamentally reshaped by AI—learning must be matched with experimentation.

Leaders reflected that much of their career development to date has been grounded in building on existing strengths, deepening skills, applying experience, and refining judgement over time. However, this new era of work has shifted the ground beneath all of us. With the pace of change accelerating and the full potential—and risks—of AI still emerging, even the most experienced leaders find themselves at a more level starting point with colleagues at all stages. In many ways, everyone is now learning in

real time. And to stay relevant, leaders must understand AI, its impact, and how it reshapes the value they both bring and create.

The women we spoke with emphasised the importance of being brave enough to test tools even when they feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable. *“You have to learn quickly to actively engage, rather than merely observe”*. Creating space to experiment is becoming a defining leadership behaviour. And doing it openly matters because leaders set the tone. When they experiment out loud, share their learnings, and normalise not having all the answers, they build the safety for their teams to do the same.

“AI isn’t the future, it’s now. And we have a unique opportunity to shape how it’s developed and deployed. What’s clear to me is that when human insight is amplified by powerful technologies like AI, organisations can move faster and further. I challenge myself and my teams to constantly ask: ‘Could AI help me do this differently? Could it help me challenge an assumption and reach a better answer?’ The skill that’s rising in importance is the willingness to experiment, make mistakes, and crucially, share what you learn. We mustn’t forget that while it’s fast moving, the potential of AI is still emerging.”

This mindset shift marks a new chapter in leadership: one where curiosity, courage, and experimentation become strategic capabilities.

Key takeaway:

Embrace continuous learning and active experimentation. Stay curious, be brave, and role model an environment where others feel safe to explore, adapt, and grow alongside you.



Leadership—the self-reflection questions that matter

What does success mean to me right now in my life and career?

What supports should I continue to ask for to thrive in my role?

How am I balancing career demands with ongoing development and skill enhancement?

Is my professional network extensive enough?

Do I have a clear understanding of my strengths and areas for growth?

Am I fostering the right levels of trust with my team, partners, and stakeholders?

How can I adopt a more strategic mindset?

What approaches can I use to clearly communicate my vision and goals to inspire others?

What steps should I take to support my team on this journey?

How will I maintain approachability while upholding authority?

Am I presenting my true self?

Am I actively seeking feedback from all levels?

What support systems do I need to establish and sustain as a leader?

How can I be a positive role model and uplift those around me?

My reflection notes

Chapter 6:

Career advice on managing career and personal life

Our conversations with women leaders revealed a shared understanding: you can choose what matters most to you because you can't have everything at once. Recognising your priorities is a skill worth honing. Our leaders emphasised that in the corporate world, dedication and hard work are crucial for career growth. But let's not mistake success for overwork.

Setting boundaries, creating space, and focusing on personal wellbeing are vital. Many workplaces have made strides in offering flexibility and autonomy, and it's up to us to keep pushing forward.

This chapter offers insights from our leaders on how to effectively balance your career and personal life.

Personal identity

Amongst the leaders we interviewed, many were artists, authors, dancers. Passionate about sports, yoga, meditation and travel. We even had a pilot. We discovered a shared insight: while your career is a significant part of who you are, it shouldn't define you entirely. Engaging in hobbies and interests outside of work enriches your perspective and fuels your energy, ultimately enhancing your professional life.

“Yes, as a leader I work really hard at my job, but I also work hard at my hobbies and developing new interests.” “In business we can find ourselves in bubbles, surrounded by a lot of very like-minded people. When I’m not

working, I like to engage in very different worlds, for example with those who dedicate their lives to meditation. I find that both energising and important in fostering broader perspectives.”

Key takeaway:

Cultivate personal interests that energise and bring joy beyond your career.

Recharge to excel

Our interviewees openly discussed the pitfalls of overwork, with some experiencing burnout. The message is clear: overworking isn't sustainable. You need time to rest, recover, and distance yourself from work to truly thrive.

“Making time for activities that recharge and bring personal fulfillment has a positive impact on your overall wellbeing and professional performance.”

“You have to understand that working your socks off 24/7 is not, in the end, doing you any good. Because if you’re doing that, you’re not putting enough distance between your work life and your personal life.”

“I got great advice from a mentor who told me to leave space for spare time in my head, because it’s impossible to be a strategic thinker or identify what you’re not seeing without space and distance from what you are working on.”

“It sounds so simple, but to be at your best you need to be fit and healthy, you need to sleep well, you need to focus on other things. Sometimes you need to say ‘no’ and stick to it.”

“If you are going home early because of something, enjoy the moment instead of feeling guilty... I’m good at managing my agenda and I’m quite organised as a person, which helps me. I make choices about where and when I can do things. I don’t feel guilty about it when I can’t [participate in certain projects or events] because I know the firm is best off when I’m at my best.”

In essence, recharging is crucial for success and longevity, so developing these habits early is key. Be kind to yourself, recognise when things are 'good enough,' and focus on building trust and impact—especially as you advance and lead others. "Do your best, but also be kind to yourself. Excellence shouldn't come at the cost of your well-being. Sometimes, 'good enough' is sufficient."

“As a senior leader, I focus on my people’s output. How they achieve that output is, in large part, up to them. It’s not about how much time they spend in the office or what their working hours are. Some people choose to do their job in very different ways because they’ve got other priorities that they also need to focus on. It’s all about having confidence in them and trusting them to do their job.”

Key takeaway:

Establish habits that support sustainable high performance, making sure rest, recovery, and space are integral to your routine.

Set boundaries and stick to them

Building the skill early in your career, of knowing yourself and recognising what’s important to you so that you can establish a pattern of boundary-setting so you can focus on the things that matter to you is important. *“Any employer will take everything that you’re willing to give.” “I learned this too late. I always said ‘yes’ to work, no matter whether it was early in the morning, late at night, during my holidays, at weekends, it was always a ‘yes’. And I broke. I’ve had to learn how to set boundaries for myself and now I’m much less stressed because I know what my priorities are.”*

"It's all about prioritisation. Don't waste time on the things that don't add value to you. [Instead,] pour your time and energy into those things that matter both to your career and personal life."

It can be very easy to pile too much pressure on yourself, so time and energy management are both essential. Being able to focus “in the now” is very important. You also have to transparently communicate your boundaries and stick to them. *“Time is our most important asset. It’s non-renewable and we need to use it to the best of our abilities. That requires being 100% in the now, whatever we’re doing. Multitasking is overrated.”*

As a leader, asking for help with sticking to your boundaries can be a great way of setting the tone for others to do the same. *“I really love my work and can get very passionate and engrossed, so I ask my team for help enforcing my boundaries. For example, if I need to leave on time for an event or a family matter, I will tell them that it’s very important to me and ask them to kick me out at a certain time.”*

Key takeaway:

Get comfortable establishing boundaries that set the right tone for your team and empower you to do what matters most to you personally.

Be an agile planner

Across a 40-odd-year career, it's important to accept that life happens too. There will always be competing priorities, and you need to be proficient in managing them. There will be stages where personal priorities take precedence, meaning you might have to lean back or pivot in your career. Overall, you need to be adept at planning your time. Develop the agility you need to make decisions when life throws you a curve ball.

Remain true to yourself, focus on what matters most, and show courage in asking for the support you need.

“Whether it’s your own self-care, work, family, kids or aging parents, you’ve got all these balls that you’re constantly juggling. So, you have to prioritise. Some great advice that I got is that not all those balls are made of the same material. Some of them are made of glass. Those are the ones that you cannot afford to drop. Some of them may bounce back. Some of them maybe are heavier at one point in time, so you need to bring in other people to help. But being very clear on what your non-negotiables and your priorities are, is key.”

“I had made an international move to be the global relationship lead for an iconic client. I was really enjoying and flourishing in the role. I then got the shock news of my sister back home getting a terminal illness. I wrestled with what to do, but in my heart I knew I needed to move back to my home
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country. That was a move I was going to make regardless, but I spoke to my leaders, and I got tremendous support from PwC teams in both countries, and they really supported me. I was able to pivot to a different type of leadership role in my home country and be there for my sister. I have never regretted that choice. Follow your heart—because ultimately, you only have one life.”

Setting boundaries is essential, but so is recognising that your boundaries will shift as life unfolds.

“Be aware that things will change. You may want to prioritise work sometimes. Or you may want to prioritise your family or your friends, or you may need to prioritise your health. No one else can tell you what the best balance looks like for you. Ultimately, it’s your call.”

Key takeaway:

Have a plan for managing work and life, but be agile in adapting that plan.

Parenthood

Most of the leaders we interviewed are mothers—most to more than one child, and some to multiple (including one set of triplets). Some are part of blended families, some are currently or have experienced single parenting. Some are parent to young children, others to teenagers, and some to older children. These dynamics have shaped their careers in various ways. Some leaders took career breaks up to three years or worked reduced hours for a decade, while some maintained full-time roles. A common insight emerged: *“People don’t want to see you as a superwoman, always available and working. That’s not inspiring, and it’s unattainable.”*

Here's the career advice they shared for women balancing work and motherhood, and for parents in general.

Don't wait: Don't let your career dictate when to pursue personal goals. If you want a family, go for it. Your career might progress slower, but you'll avoid future regrets.

"The first advice for balancing career and personal life is not to decide on marriage or parenthood based on your career. My experience has shown me that you can build a career that aligns with personal goals."

"I spoke with a director considering delaying kids to focus on making partner. I asked, 'What if you don't make partner? What if you struggle to have kids later? You might regret missing out on something amazing.' You can have both. It might take longer, but having a baby doesn't mean you can't make partner later. The mindset that you must choose is flawed."

Engage in early discussions at home. Globally, women often face a "double burden" of working while managing most childcare and domestic duties.

If you're in the privileged position of parenting with a partner, many of the women in our research emphasised the importance of having open discussions at home early on to agree on how you will manage your career and personal goals together. *"It's really important not to wait until you're returning from maternity leave to have the discussion with your partner about how you share responsibility. This needs to happen when you first start talking about children so that you are both clear on expectations and shared responsibilities."*

"If you have the same goal in your mind, you can make it work. Don't look for the perfect golden balanced life where everything is pink. You won't find it. But if you end up in a situation where you both happen to have a super-important meeting on the same day, you need to find a solution together. And we always do find a solution, because we're in the same boat and pulling in the same direction."

"When discussing kids, my husband wanted one parent at home. I wanted a career and motherhood, so we decided he would stay home until the kids started school. Planning upfront made it manageable."

Make trade-offs: Leaders candidly shared that you can have it all, just not all at once. Understand what uniquely matters to you and what compromises you're willing to make.

Feel comfortable with the trade-offs you make and have a choice in them.

"Stop chasing the illusion of 'having it all' in perfect harmony. Focus on being present where needed most. Make choices aligning with your priorities, knowing they can shift over time. Allow yourself to adjust without guilt."

"Know yourself and what's truly important. Understand what you're willing to compromise on and what you're not. This avoids frustration. Recognise that priorities evolve. For me, certain times with my children were non-negotiable. But compromises happen, and they differ for everyone."

"I always wanted a family and to work on iconic clients and challenging roles. I had to decide what I wouldn't do. I've made trade-offs at home. I love baking but never baked my kids' birthday cakes—I don't have time."

But we enjoy picking a cake together. I'm social but skipped Friday work events for family time. My family knew I'd be there when promised."

"Balance isn't fixed; it's constant recalibration. Success varies at different stages. Sometimes your career demands more, sometimes personal life does, and that's okay."

"Sacrifice is inevitable. As a working mother, something has to give. For me, it wasn't my career or kids. Juggling it all is worth it. I've accepted giving up hobbies for now, but I'll regain that time."

Ask for what you need: The mothers in our research used various approaches to manage time, especially with young children. Consider what you need to achieve and what success means at home and work. Asking for what you want can be daunting. But remember, people are understanding. Asking can be rewarding; and having children might slow things down, but your career goals remain achievable.

"Asking for help is essential. Women often hesitate to ask. But it's crucial to use your voice, no matter how daunting."

"Returning to work after my second maternity leave, I needed to establish a new routine that accommodated my new family and a new role working on one of our largest insurance audits globally. I knew that was going to be a heavy lift. The initial months were too tough, they weren't working for me. So, I went to the partners and explained that I needed to work flexibly to accommodate both priorities. It took me a couple of months to ask for that, but when I did, it was a non-event, and they were really supportive. The lesson? Don't be afraid to ask for what you need at the time. People get it."

"I recognise that it's not always easy—especially early in a career—to ask for what you need to achieve the balance that works for you. Daunting as it may sound, I found that process of asking really rewarding. You realise sometimes in those discussions how much other people do value you and what you bring to the table."

"I think there's this myth that if you take time out, you should come back and automatically be at the same level as your peers before you went. The reality is that you're not going to have the same level of experience. So, it will take you a little bit longer to get to where you want to be. And you need to recognise that's the trade-off you make, but that you can still get there."

"I was always learning and developing, taking on new challenges, which meant I learned a lot across service lines and built a network. So, when it came to my promotion to partner, I had one mentor but many sponsors. And it wasn't a case of me having to prove I could do a full partner role part-time. The other partners knew I could cope with challenges whether I was working 60% or 100%. Plus, I really wanted to take on the responsibility of being a partner. I walked through it first with myself and then with my husband. We decided I should go for it. The question then was whether the organisation was mature enough. And it was. And I became the first part-time partner in my member firm."

Be kind to yourself: Don't pressure yourself. "We want to excel as mothers, employees, and more. Knowing we can't do it all the time is tough, but it's reality."

"Being kind to yourself means accepting you can't be everything to everyone all the time. Use your support system. Work is team-based, and

family life is no different. It's a team sport; lean on others for support (where you have that option)."

Know your non-negotiables: Clearly define your non-negotiables, establish and communicate boundaries, and stick to them. Identify what's important to you, so you know when to say 'no' to protect family time.

Work is always there. Anyone can work 24/7 if they choose. But establish boundaries that make you happy as a parent and in your career. Choose quality over quantity. *"Focus fully at work and with your kids. Don't be distracted at work or answer emails with your kids."*

"After becoming a mum, I set two annual plans: work goals and a personal plan. My personal plan outlines key personal events, like a child's milestone school year or a parent's landmark birthday. These plans helped identify my 'non-negotiables' for the year at work and home, so I knew what to say 'no' to on both sides."

"Even if you're really busy at work, there are some things that are just so important you need to be there. So, if it's that kid's Christmas play that you can never get back, it doesn't matter what's going on at work, you've got to be there. It's important to set those boundaries between work and family, understand your priorities and figure out where the flex comes."

"My children are teenagers now and I've accepted that, as a leader, I might not get to every sports game, but at this stage in their lives it is really important to me that I pick them up from school most days. Because I know it's when they are in the car with me, that's when they are talking to me. At this moment in my life, I flex my day around that."

Ask for help: Parenting is challenging, whether you're a stay-at-home parent or balancing work and family. If work gives you purpose and you choose both, recognise you'll need help. Ask for it and focus on making things easier. Open discussions with your support systems are essential.

"You need a village—family, friends, colleagues, or a mix—because support is crucial. Asking for help isn't weakness; it's wisdom and strength."

"Balancing the two [career and family] obviously requires finding ways to get help. I'm not a wonder woman."

"Where you have the means, try to find support for household duties so that your home time is fully with your family." "As much as you can, outsource the stuff that's not important to you and your value system."

Make sure people are doing you the right favours: Stereotypes can arise when you become a parent. Well-meaning people might think they're helping by not assigning you to big projects or assuming your career aspirations. Advocate for yourself by expressing your goals, whatever they are at this stage. This makes sure people do you the right favours and don't make incorrect assumptions about your availability, interests, or aspirations.

Key takeaways on managing career and parenthood:

If you want a career, be realistic and accept it involves sacrifice. There's no single right answer. Don't make personal sacrifices you'll regret. Prioritise. Don't waste time on things that don't add value. Focus on what matters personally and professionally.

Get comfortable with necessary trade-offs and clearly establish non-negotiables. Plan as best you can, but recognise plans evolve. Be agile in prioritising. Don't be too hard on yourself. Put structures in place to get help, including asking for support when needed.

Navigating career breaks

At some point, many of us will step away from work for an extended period—be it for a sabbatical, health reasons, or parental leave. Maternity leave is a common pause for women, varying globally from 12 to 86 weeks, making it a significant time away from the workplace.

Our leaders encourage you to embrace this unique phase in your life. Whether you're focusing on parenting, exploring a hobby, or recovering from an illness, immerse yourself fully in this time.

It's important to acknowledge that much can change during your absence. When you return, take the time to adjust to your role and the new dynamics—whether it's balancing family duties, managing physical recovery, or dealing with emotional challenges.

Re-engage with your role and be open to learning new skills to keep pace with advancements, especially in digital areas. Rebuild your network and connections. Understand that a "*self-confidence crisis*" is common among returners. "It might feel daunting, but within weeks, you'll regain your sharpness." Lean on your colleagues and family for support. "*I completely disconnected from work during my 11-month break, but I stayed in touch with colleagues, who provided a strong support network upon my return.*"

Key takeaway:

Don't let a confidence crisis hold you back. Invest in finding your footing, rebuilding, and upskilling in a way that suits you.

Balancing career and life—the self-reflection questions that matter

How do I define personal and career success at this stage of my journey?

What activities in my professional or personal life invigorate me? Am I dedicating time to these energising pursuits?

Which priorities hold the most significance in my professional and personal spheres?

Do I have a clear understanding of my non-negotiables and what I will confidently decline?

Am I using strategies that help me recharge effectively?

What strategies should I adopt to set firm boundaries and safeguard my personal time?

Have I built the right support networks? How can I make better use of them?

Am I clearly articulating my needs to achieve my goals?

Am I open and honest about my boundaries?

Do my team members feel at ease sharing their flexible working needs and boundaries with me?

What adjustments are necessary to create a balanced schedule that respects both work and personal commitments? How can I support my team in achieving the same balance?

Are the decisions I'm making ones that I can take pride in?

My reflection notes

Chapter 7:

About the research and the leaders who took part

We embarked on this research journey by identifying and engaging with women in key global and member firm leadership roles across our global network. In January and February 2025, we conducted 42 interviews. Our goal was to gather career advice rooted in their personal experiences, lessons learned, and coaching insights that span key career stages. In January 2026, we conducted an additional 23 interviews, focusing on career advice centred on reinvention and the impact of skills and AI.

We sought candid and honest responses from these women leaders, with all content anonymised to encourage openness during the research phase.

65 women participated, each holding significant leadership roles within our network. Spanning 37 countries, they offered nuanced perspectives shaped by diverse working and societal contexts worldwide. Their roles include positions on our Global Leadership Team, Regional Leadership Teams, and Territory Leadership Teams, among others. Titles range from Territory Senior Partners to Global Client Partners, Line of Service Leaders, Strategy Leaders, Chief Operations Officers, Chief Commercial Officers, Chief People Officers, and more.

A recurring theme is that many of these women are trailblazers. They've been the first to achieve milestones such as being the first woman to become a partner, leading a Business Unit, joining Territory Leadership

Teams, and becoming Territory Senior Partners in their firms, among other notable "firsts".

Many have also managed career shifts, including industry changes, international relocations, and transitions to new business areas. They agree that curiosity and a willingness to say 'yes' have been crucial in driving their career growth and satisfaction.

While 56% of these women have spent their entire careers with us, 44% joined from other industries and sectors.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to each participant for their invaluable contributions and perspectives, which we believe will inspire and guide others in their careers.

Thank you all.

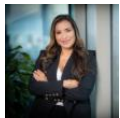
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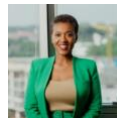
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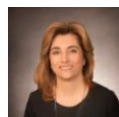
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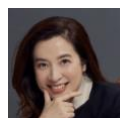
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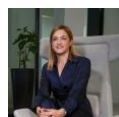
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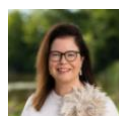
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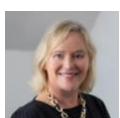
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