

# A Career Advice Toolkit

## Insights from Women Leaders

Career advice from a collective of PwC's most prominent women leaders across the globe



# Welcome

Welcome to our Career Advice Toolkit. This new and powerful resource shares career advice from PwC women leaders from across the globe. Covering many aspects of career management, it shares their key advice and actionable takeaways. So, whether you're currently starting out, growing your career, preparing for a leadership role, or you're already in leadership, you'll find relevant content in here specifically geared to your needs.

If you're reading this toolkit, it's most likely because you're navigating today's fast-changing world of work. With this in mind, we're pleased to share that the ideas and advice featured throughout this toolkit are curated from qualitative research interviews undertaken with over 40 women leaders at PwC – all of whom, at some point, will have been where you are now on your career journey. The women who took part are all prominent leaders and you can learn more about them in the final chapter of this toolkit.

We've created this toolkit to help you better advocate for yourself and advance your career in ways that both resonate with you personally and reflect what career success looks like for you. And to amplify and widen this toolkit's impact, we've made it available beyond PwC. While this toolkit has a focus on advice from women leaders, it has been designed to include practical tips that everyone can benefit from in thinking about their career; and in better understanding gender dynamics in the workplace.

Wherever you may be on your career journey, enjoy the read! Take action now and let this toolkit help you unlock your potential, serving as a supportive companion as you focus on achieving your career goals.

# Making the most of this toolkit

This Career Advice Toolkit has been designed to meet you where you are at today. In it, we focus on the key pieces of advice that our women leaders identified as crucial to their success across various stages and aspects of their careers. Their advice is further informed by their experiences of working with, leading and – in many cases – being mentors and sponsors to talent throughout their careers.

To get the greatest value from the advice presented in this toolkit, feel free to delve into the chapters that are most relevant to your needs, exploring the advice insights, key takeaways, and reflection questions associated with your current career stage. But do also bear in mind that your needs will change as your career progresses – so you may wish to look forward to glean advice and approaches that may be useful to you both now and in the future.

Above all, please approach this toolkit with a growth mindset and enjoy what it has to offer. It's been created to help you achieve your aspirations – whatever they may be.

# Table of Contents

## Chapter 1

Career advice when starting out	03
Starting your career: Key reflection questions to ask yourself	05

## Chapter 2

Career advice for progressing your career	07
Progressing your career: Key reflection questions to ask yourself	12

## Chapter 3

Career advice for leadership readiness	13
Leadership readiness: Key reflection questions to ask yourself	18

## Chapter 4

Career advice for leadership	19
Leadership: Key reflection questions to ask yourself	23

## Chapter 5

Career advice on managing career and personal life	25
Managing career and life: Key reflection questions to ask yourself	32

## Chapter 6

About the research and the leaders who took part	33
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## Career advice insights index

Acknowledgements and contacts	40
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# Chapter 1: Career advice when starting out

All of the women leaders participating in our research had to start at the beginning, just like you. Drawing on their own experiences, they shared the following key pieces of advice for starting out in your career.

## Show up from the start

At this pivotal moment as you embark on your professional career, it's important to recognise that you are beginning a journey that is "*a marathon, not a sprint*". You have so much to learn and so much opportunity to develop – and the starting point should be focusing on learning what your role involves. In the early days, much of what you do might be relatively basic, while other aspects will stretch you. Based on their own experiences of those early days, the advice of our leaders was to "*show up from the start and go the extra mile in everything you do*".

**Key takeaway:** Be enthusiastic from day one and give your full commitment and effort to everything you do. This will set you up to deliver the greatest possible impact.

## Be a curious sponge

Curiosity and a growth mindset are critical skills. This may seem like stating the obvious, especially when you're at the beginning of your career and there is much to learn. But fostering the mindset and ethos of being a "*learn it all, not know it all*" person will help you adopt vital growth-orientated ways of thinking and behaviours that will serve you well at this stage of your career and beyond. "*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. Be proactively curious, view every single experience as a learning opportunity, and soak up all the knowledge that's on offer.

## Find your voice

Many of our leaders said that early in their career, they often held back when they had opportunities to push themselves forward, speak up and contribute. Looking back, they put their reticence at the time down to reasons such as being the most junior person or the only woman in the room; or having a very different viewpoint from what was being shared. Either way, the effect was that they didn't speak up as much as they could have. Today, they're united in encouraging everyone starting their career to have courage in finding their voice. This is not about speaking for the sake of speaking – but about 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:** There is value in your voice. Find 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 highlighted that looking up and around when they started their career, they saw leaders who seemed naturally self-assured, decisive, and in control. This was not (yet) how they viewed themselves – and this perceived gap between personal traits and leadership characteristics can create mental roadblocks for not only women, but everyone. What is essential to realise is that these leaders didn't start their career the way they seem now. "*Confidence isn't something you wake up with one day. It's something you develop by*

*stepping into challenges, embracing discomfort, and proving to yourself that you belong in the spaces you aspire to lead.”*

**Key takeaway:** Don't critique yourself based on your observations of others. Instead, watch and learn – and seek to put yourself in situations that will help you build your confidence, such as speaking up.

## Raise your hand and say 'yes'

For the leaders we interviewed, being proactive in seeking out or volunteering for specific tasks, projects and opportunities beyond the scope of their direct role was a common reality in the early years of their careers. Being ready and eager to say 'yes' to new things outside your comfort zone brings many benefits – including learning new skills, broadening your exposure, building new relationships, and getting comfortable with the uncomfortable. All of this will help you to build valuable “*work muscles*” that you will be able to draw 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's scary, raise your hand and say 'yes'.

## Learn to network

Today, the ability to network is a fundamental skill in business. So it's vital that you focus on learning the art of networking, network actively, and start building your network from the early stages of your career. *“Networking is about so much more than exchanging business cards”*: it's actually about building meaningful relationships that will ultimately translate into valuable support, guidance, collaborations, and opportunities throughout your career. Activities like joining professional organisations, attending industry events, and engaging with online communities can all open up opportunities for networking and provide you with a “*source of energy*” to help drive your career forward. What's more, *“having a network can be crucial for support”*.

A further benefit of networking is that it provides opportunities to expose yourself to diverse experiences and perspectives. *“The way to build those connections is by being out there and being genuine, bringing your entire self – not just your professional self – because genuine connections are not based on transactional relationships.”*

**Key takeaway:** Mastering the art of networking early in your working life will serve you well throughout your career, providing you with a powerful source of both support and energy.

## Find mentors

Make a concerted effort to forge strong relationships from the start of your career: with those you work with, those you are working for, and – equally importantly – with people beyond that 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 be career-limiting if you don't hear it and take it on board. *“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 – by finding 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: 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 – by recognising and realising your own unique strengths, personal qualities and broader skills, and communicating these effectively to others.

**Key takeaway:** Recognise that each of us has a personal brand, and consider how you will cultivate your own personal brand to sustain and amplify your impact from early in your career.

## 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 that – one step at a time.

## Starting your career: Key reflection questions to ask yourself

What does success look like to me at this moment in my life and career?

What skills do I need to develop to excel in my current role?

Which individuals can I seek out as mentors?

Am I clear on my career goals?

How can I introduce myself and my career goals most effectively to new contacts?

How can I overcome any reticence or anxiety I might feel about networking?

What strategies can I use to build my confidence and contribute more effectively by contributing my ideas?

How can I practise being confident in a way that feels authentic to me?

What are the stretch goals I can bake into my development plan?

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

How can I balance being good at what I do every day with continued opportunities to learn?

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

# My reflection notes

# Chapter 2: Career advice on progressing your career

The leaders we interviewed highlighted that the transition to their first managerial role was one of the biggest step-changes in their careers. It required them to “*develop and flex the business muscles*” they’d started building at the beginning of their careers. What came across clearly from this research was that the direct personal experiences of the women we interviewed – and particularly their experiences of interacting with women they have worked with – have often mirrored broader trends identified by gender diversity research, such as women’s higher risk aversion or reluctance to push themselves forward and advocate for themselves. Against this background, here are the key pieces of career advice they shared for seeking or making that first initial progression to manager level.

## The strategic ‘yes’

Many of our leaders admitted that, early in their careers, they struggled to give an immediate ‘yes’ to an opportunity, as they contended with what might be described as a blend of overthinking and self-doubt. They also highlighted this trait as being evident among the women they have led and worked with over the years. We immediately ask and grapple with “*Is it the right moment? Am I good enough? Am I ready?*”. Learning to say ‘yes’ to an opportunity even as they wrestled with their internal dialogue has proved game-changing to our interviewees’ careers and has helped them establish habits that have made accepting new opportunities ever easier as they’ve progressed. “*It’s the opportunities I’ve said ‘yes’ to that have been career-defining.*”

**Key takeaway:** Don’t hesitate, just say yes. “*Whenever an opportunity is offered, take it*” – and remember, “*if you are being offered an opportunity, it’s because you are ready for it*”.

## Make your efforts visible

Alongside a hesitancy to accept new opportunities, our leaders have noticed a further potentially career-limiting characteristic prevalent among women: while they are often doing a lot, and doing it really well, those above and around them are not aware of this. A major reason? This research suggests that women aren’t communicating as overtly as they should about how much they are doing and the resulting impacts. “*In general, women have a tendency to do things well and not always show it. [So you should] make sure that people around you know what you’re doing and how well you’re doing it. Don’t take for granted that people will take notice and value you for it. Tell them. You can do that without over-selling yourself.*”

A contributory factor to women’s greater reticence highlighted via these interviews and echoed in wider research is that they’re less comfortable talking about their achievements and “*self-promotion*” generally. It’s important here to flip the script and frame it less as self-promotion and more as sound self-advocacy and career management. “*Understand that your leader won’t always be able to see what you’re doing, so be prepared to articulate it to them. Remember, leaders are super busy, so you need to actively manage that relationship. It’s a proactive skill that many people don’t talk about.*”

The importance of positioning and raising awareness of your impact is crucial at this stage in your career. “*Start positioning yourself within the organisation by ensuring that key people are aware of your work and your contribution.*”

**Key takeaway:** It’s important to learn how to communicate the depth and scope of your work, contributions and impact to those people who should know about them, and to get comfortable with doing this proactively.

## Make your ambitions known

The leaders we interviewed recalled times in their careers when they hadn't been strong enough in advocating for themselves or making their own ambitions clear. Again, they cited this as a broader difference they'd noticed 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."* For many, doing this might not feel immediately comfortable. But it will feel a lot easier than potentially being passed over for an opportunity not because you weren't ready, but because the decision-makers didn't know you were interested. *"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 [PwC 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:** Your hard work alone is not a strong enough signal that you want to progress – and people don't know what you are hoping for unless you share it. Ambition is not a dirty word, so make your aspirations known.

## Take risks

A further key theme of our interviews was the need to step outside of your comfort zone such as stepping in to lead a project you've no experience in, speaking at a conference for the first time, taking an assignment that stretches your skills, or moving to another area of the business. But whatever it may be, *"women can tend to get tied up in the potential risks, rather than viewing the potential gains"*. Among all of the leaders we interviewed, a common attribute is that they have become very adept at moving out of their comfort zone. This skill has played a vital role in progressing their careers. *"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."* *"Women will often look at the job spec and see two out of ten things they can't do and that will hold them back."* Progressing in your career will often require taking risks and seizing opportunities as they arise. As our interviewees emphasise, these are the opportunities that will offer you significant personal and professional growth, increase your visibility, and lead to opportunities for progression.

**Key takeaway:** It's crucial to embrace a growth mindset and view challenges as opportunities. So take a risk – and having done it once, it becomes much easier to do it again. Ask yourself: why would I hesitate to put myself forward for something I am already 100% proficient in? And by being prepared to move outside your comfort zone, you can make sure there are self-development gains in everything you do.

## The importance of mentors and sponsors

Across the board, both mentors and sponsors have played instrumental roles in the career development and trajectories of the leaders we interviewed. *"Mentors and sponsors play different roles and you need a healthy mix of both."* Mentors are there to guide you, provide a safe space for you to be open about the things you find challenging, and help you think through how to deal with those challenges. *"They are there for positive reinforcement, and good mentors will also be there to push and challenge you."* 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."* A differentiating factor is that you can ask someone to be your mentor, but you can't ask someone to be your sponsor. Instead, sponsors choose you. And for that to happen, *"first you have to build up trust and a personal relationship with them"* and they need to know your capabilities

and your potential. Because “*sponsors are also putting their own personal reputation on the line for you.*”

A further benefit of these relationships is that they can help you navigate the ‘unwritten rules of the game’ around what is needed to progress your career. “*You need to be aware of that, and instead of fighting it, use it.*” Asking the right questions and leveraging the experiences of seasoned mentors is important in understanding and accommodating those unwritten rules.

**Key takeaway:** Having both sponsors and mentors is vital to your career progression, for different reasons. Mentors play a more overarching role, pushing and challenging you to become better. You should actively seek out mentors, nurture those relationships, and lean on them for guidance. Meanwhile, sponsors help you get the next opportunity, and vital ingredients in making them choose to sponsor you include being good at what you do, making your contributions visible, gaining broader exposure by saying ‘yes’ and taking risks, and being clear about your aspirations.

## Chase constructive criticism

There will never be a point in your career where feedback is not important. It is always vital to know what you are doing well. But as you seek to progress your career, it is also very important to know where you need to be better. Not many people like giving developmental feedback and there are a lot of people who don’t like receiving it. “*Usually, when you ask for feedback, people tend to be polite, they just give you the good stuff. But I always say, give me three positives and one area for improvement. If I’m going to become a better manager, that one improvement point is very important. Whether it’s from your team members, leaders or clients, constant feedback allows you to grow and advance much faster.*” It is through building strong trust-based relationships and having mentors and sponsors that you can actively pursue and elicit the hard feedback that you might need to hear. Because not getting that feedback in the moments that

matter could become a serious obstacle to your career advancement. “*You have to be okay with asking people what you could be doing better.*”

**Key takeaway:** Part of having a growth mindset is accepting that even if feedback is hard to hear, it is a gift to be valued. You need to lean on your trusted relationships to actively seek out constructive feedback and make seeking developmental feedback part of a proactive approach to feedback.

## Recognise the step-change

We’ve shared lots of insights on how to progress, but what about when you actually make that progress? A common theme among our interviewees was that the transition to their first manager-level position was one of the biggest step-changes in their careers. To set yourself up for success, it’s important to acknowledge the scale of this change. “*Progressing to my first managerial role required a major reset, it really demanded a mindset change.*” Being ready for this reset is vital as you transition from being an executor to being a manager, a far more complex role: “*You’ve got more responsibility and a lot more relationships to manage. You pivot to being in the middle managing both upward and downward at the same time, and that’s a different skillset.*”

Several leaders cited the art of delegation as one of the skills that sets apart those who make the transition well. “*Delegation can be uncomfortable, because people don’t like to be seen as palming off work. It can be hard to identify people who will deliver to your expectation, [and] it can take longer to train someone than to do it yourself – so you may end up continuing the cycle of doing, which limits growth potential.*”

“*What makes it easier is having those trusted relationships with your team and with the people above you, knowing they’ll support you if something goes wrong. Failure is not necessarily a bad thing. It’s how you learn. You need to use it to make you stronger.*”

Listening skills are a further vital attribute for a manager. To attain the position, you'll have learned to speak up. You now need to become much more attuned to the art of knowing when to speak up and knowing when to listen first. *"Listening becomes so important. It's difficult when you first become a manager because you feel that you have to run the team, that you have to exert power. Listening isn't something that comes naturally for a lot of people, so you need to be able to hold yourself back. Listen before you speak. That's something I learned along the way."*

At the same time, you need to think hard about the signals you're sending out. Early in your career, you've got to find your voice to build your confidence. By contrast, at the manager stage you need to leverage your confidence to hone your voice and project the signals you want. It's important to realise that you may not be demonstrating what you think you're demonstrating – and that while you may believe it's clear that you're across all the details and eager to have an input, the perception might be very different. So, you should communicate your readiness and seize the opportunity for you to share your voice in big 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:** Being excellent at executing has led to your promotion to manager – but now you must be ready to shift gears and negotiate the step-change required for you to thrive in your new role. Actions that will help you achieve this, while creating further capacity for you to grow and be successful, include:

- Continue to build trusted relationships both upwards and downwards – and lean on those above you for guidance and support as you transition into this new position.
- Actively seek constant feedback from all of those around you to keep you on track and help you grow.
- When you are in the transitional phase, consciously move out of the execution space to focus on your team. Grow their capability; delegate by giving direction, monitoring and support; recognise that work can be approached differently and still lead to great results; foster equity of opportunity; and look out for team members' aspirations, growth and wellbeing.
- Learn the art of listening in order to understand, not listening simply to respond.
- You will make mistakes, but mistakes handled properly will be some of your biggest learning moments.
- Find your voice – and your own way to contribute your knowledge and capabilities to greatest effect in the meetings that matter.

## Client-focused

The importance of being client-focused is identified as an essential theme in growing your career. It's crucial to have a deep understanding of your clients' business, their broader industry, and how they operate within their ecosystem. This knowledge becomes increasingly important as you advance in your career. You need to have a broad understanding of various business aspects by expanding your knowledge. For example *"you might be a tax specialist, but you need to be aware of the implications and opportunities that digital disruption, like AI, will have on your client."* Broad business acumen is very important, as are human skills. You need to be authentic and show a deep interest in your clients – as humans first – because strong relationships are key. Work to truly understand the client's needs, goals, and pain points. Empathy, authenticity, and interest are essential.

*“This is when you really need to start thinking more broadly than just the core business you work in. Broad business acumen becomes so much more important. Read everything you can to broaden your knowledge base.”*

*“I constantly feel like I learn something new every day and I believe that kind of learning mindset enables me to build great relationships with clients because I’m genuinely interested in them. You build a connection that would be impossible if you work in a more transactional way.”*

*“I’ve a reputation built on growing client revenue. I haven’t achieved this through hard-selling our clients; it’s because of my genuine interest in them as people, their challenges and opportunities, and their business.”*

**Key takeaway:** Being client-focused is fundamental to your impact. You need to develop the business acumen and human skills essential to achieving success with and for your clients.

## Role models and the next step

Among most of the women interviewed in this research, there was recognition that when they were at the manager stage it was not unusual for them to see that there weren’t always many women in senior positions. They also acknowledged that things have changed radically since then, and the reality will not be as stark for women at this stage of their career today. Most of our women were trailblazers, and often the first females in many of the positions they held, so they want to stress *“that you can be what you can’t see”*. However, they also recognise the importance of role models and having people to look up to, inspire you, and watch and learn. *“Look up at those people who are operating one and two grades more senior than where you are now. What is it that you admire about them? What is it that you like about the way they operate? How do they behave? What resonates with you? Identifying those leadership qualities that resonate the most with you will help you figure out what kind of leader you want to be.”*

**Key takeaway:** Being candid, it helps if you can look up and see people like you. But the absence of relatable role models didn’t stop the leaders we interviewed from achieving their full potential, so don’t let it limit you. Look up and around at senior leaders who may be different from you and identify key aspects of each of them that you can learn from and emulate. Then weave all of that together to become the leader you aspire to be in a way that lets you be authentically yourself. And yes, you might have only just made that transition to manager – but continue to look at the next grade and focus on what you need to do to get there.

## Everything else

We’ve shared a lot of powerful advice already. As you take on more responsibility, it’s important to remember to blend a focus on driving and managing your career with remaining very good at what you do. To do both well, you’ll need to continue to show up, be a curious and a hungry learner, focus actively on your own upskilling, hone your voice and build your confidence, enhance your brand, grow your network, and nourish and build new trust-based relationships.

**Key takeaway:** Don’t focus all of your energy into performing your core role. You must remain mindful of – and continue working on – everything else.

# Progressing your career: Key reflection questions to ask yourself

What does success look like to me at this moment in my life and career?

Have I tried anything new in the last six months?

### Am I saying 'yes' to the right opportunities?

Am I growing my network with the right people and in the right way?

Do I have trusted relationships with the right mentors?

Am I achieving self-development across my portfolio of work?

What upskilling and development opportunities do I actively need to pursue?

What strategies can I use to make sure my efforts and achievements are visible?

Am I being proactive enough in pursuing developmental feedback, and how am I using feedback to improve?

## Am I doing enough to vocalise my career aspirations?

Have I done the work to make sponsors want to advocate for me?

## Have I mastered the art of active listening?

Do I clearly understand what is expected of me at the next level?

# My reflection notes

# Chapter 3: Career advice on leadership readiness

Many of the women we interviewed said they'd been surprised to be offered their current or past leadership opportunities, while others had been very clear in articulating their desire for such roles. However, all of them stressed that the advice shared up to now in this toolkit had been instrumental in getting them to the point where leadership became a viable option. They also highlighted the importance of continuing to draw on all of those prior experiences and skills in becoming an effective leader. In this chapter, the career advice we provide centres on our interviewees' observations and insights around preparing to take on leadership roles and overcoming any mental hurdles that might hold you back.

## Brand perception

Picture this scenario. You've spent your career up to this point establishing and building your personal brand. As you consider moving towards leadership, it's important that you pause, take a step back, and look to identify any potential variances between how you view your own personal brand and how your brand is actually perceived by others. Why is this so important? Because, as our leaders highlight, "*your brand walks into a room before you do*" and "*brand perception is essentially brand reality*".

*"As a woman who can come across as enthusiastic and casual, [I know from experience that] these attributes can mean I am sometimes underestimated. This became more of an issue for me as I became more senior. To overcome this while remaining my authentic self, I use a technique I learned through a development programme. When I walk into a professional situation, I think of three words that I want people to walk away thinking about me. I am my total authentic self through these words".*

Adopting this approach has enabled this leader to add a small but significant layer of additional polish and energy to her natural demeanour. This makes sure she is perceived in the way she intends – allowing her to

balance being her authentic self with projecting the leadership qualities she wants others to see.

Another leader highlighted that when coaching others, she "*challenges talent to write down three words or phrases that they think articulate their own personal brand at work, and then to ask five colleagues to do the same for them. Comparing the two often reveals a mismatch between how a person thinks they come across and how they're actually perceived.*" Understanding these gaps is a great enabler for self-reflection and more authentic leadership, helping you to work out the small tweaks or things you might do differently to bring your true self to every situation and make your intended impact.

**Key takeaway:** Explore whether you have a brand belief/perception gap, and – if you have – work to close it.

## Visibility elevation

Networking, relationships, mentors and sponsors have all been identified by our interviewees as hugely important in advancing your career. However, something else that it's vital to be thinking about at this juncture is elevating your visibility. The leaders highlighted that a lot of women in PwC are respected by their colleagues in their area of the business and among their clients, but that there is also a need to work actively on increasing their visibility, so they're known beyond their immediate business area and across the firm – and not just respected by their clients but recognised as an expert across the broader market.

Several interviewees highlighted this greater visibility as a further key aspect of readiness for senior leadership positions, particularly in professional services. "*I believe the fundamental condition of taking up a leadership position is excellence in your professional area. First and foremost, you have to be good at what you do. You also need to be recognised for that both internally in the firm as well as externally with clients and in the wider industry.*"

Another leader recalls that as she progressed towards promotion, a current leader commented to her “*that in an organisation you can be one of thousands, and that makes it very easy to get lost. People need to know who you are, recognise your abilities and what you bring to the firm and then they'll nominate you for certain roles and positions.*” Another added: “*You have to catapult your networking. Get to know people in the different lines of service across the firm. But it's also essential to network outside the firm. If you're in a particular industry, whether it's oil and gas or financial services, you have to get out there and network with players in that industry and become known as a 'go-to'.*”

**Key takeaway:** Intensify your networking efforts and grow your leadership skills to elevate your visibility.

## Leadership tactics

The women we interviewed shared lots of tactics they'd learned along the way to help them act like – and be perceived as – a leader in any room. They stressed the importance of using techniques that enable you to still be your authentic self while also demonstrating your leadership competence. These tactics can be relatively subtle and involve only minor behavioural tweaks, but they send clear signals to everyone else.

*“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.

## The career pivot

An experience shared by the leaders participating in this research was that of the career pivot. These pivots vary widely in nature and scope, starting with shifts to new areas of the business and technical expertise, and then extending to moves between employers, between different industries and sectors, and between continents. When it comes to navigating a career pivot, the key themes covered earlier in this toolkit such as being curious, saying ‘yes’, taking risks, seeking out broader opportunities and experiences outside of your comfort zone are all critical to success. What's more, career pivots – while often involving challenging adjustments at the start – were acknowledged by our interviewees as experiences that accelerated their development, broadened their mindset and perspectives, and raised their visibility and exposure. They also credited changes in direction as critical steps in preparing for and putting them “*in the running*” for their various leadership positions.

With all of this in mind, our women leaders encourage you to lean into the career pivot. They stress that career trajectories are no longer linear – and that having varied professional experiences will be pivotal in shaping your trajectory. It can be hard to take the risk, and it can be even harder to move away from a role you really love and shine in. But in most cases, it's worth making the leap – as several of our interviewees highlighted.

*“While working in audit, I was asked to help coordinate and eventually lead a technology-focused group. That was quite a tough pivot to negotiate, but I 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 are no longer linear. So accept that to get ahead, you’re most likely going to have to undergo some career pivots along the way. Take the risk!

## Make your leadership ambitions known

In the previous chapter on progressing your career, we highlighted the importance of signalling your ambitions to progress and seize new opportunities. Turning to the stage of moving into a leadership role, our interviewees highlighted once again the importance of vocalising your aspirations to the right decision-makers. Excelling in your current role is very important in making your case for a leadership position, but so is sharing your aspiration to lead. It’s a mistake to think that because you’ve risen up the ranks so far, your leadership aspirations are assumed by those above you in the organisation.

As a well-regarded and relatively experienced partner, one of the leaders we interviewed shared a highly relevant experience. When she made a career pivot to take a strategic role on the team of her firm’s Territory Senior Partner (TSP), she thought she was sending a clear signal about her ambition to secure a prominent leadership role. Six months into the job, she was taken aback when the TSP told her he wasn’t clear on what it was she wanted next for her career. *“He had people coming into his office every week letting him know what roles they were after. I realised then that, even at that level, my actions weren’t sending the signals I wanted. I needed to be much more vocal about my aspirations.”*

Others agree on the critical 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 what 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.”*

*“The best thing you can do to get a senior role is to do the role you’ve got now super-well, and make sure – in a humble way – that people know you’re doing a good job. Then let people know you want the next job.”*

**Key takeaway:** While continuing to perform well in your current role, be sure to vocalise your leadership aspirations to the decision-makers that matter.

## Recognise that leadership isn’t easy

It’s important to be aware that “leadership is not for the fainthearted”. You need to know that *“you are constantly in the spotlight”* – something that can be an intimidating prospect when faced with your first leadership opportunity. A lot of leaders make it look easy, but for most, realising that leadership is not a walk in the park is important. *“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:** Know that leadership is a step-change, and that it’s difficult. To be successful you’ll need self-awareness, resilience and support. But don’t let that hold you back – this is simply the reality of leadership for everyone.

## Fear of making mistakes in the spotlight

You are potentially on the cusp of, or transitioning into, leadership. That means you’ve almost certainly had plenty of career highs. But it’s important to accept that every career journey will have lows, too. The leaders we interviewed talked about making mistakes and hitting low points. These

included experiences like making a wrong judgment or a mistake with a client, losing ‘followership’ because they changed things too quickly or without enough stakeholder input, being initially unsuccessful in their attempts to become partner, not getting a leadership role they were competing for, or finding that they weren’t being valued in a particular role.

A common theme in our interviews was that when women make a mistake, they can overanalyse. *“Leading my first major client as a partner, I made a miscommunication error with the client and this eroded trust. I struggled with the repercussions, but I was really reassured when several partners got in touch to share that they had similar experiences. One of my sponsors could see I was struggling to recover, and he told me I need to learn from it and 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, it’s important not to let setbacks define you or hold you back. *“I was deferred from the partner process twice, and that was tough. But then I stopped trying so hard. I essentially ‘promoted myself’, I started leading like a partner would, and the next year I was admitted.”* *“If you’ve made it onto the shortlist for a leadership position [but miss out] there will be other opportunities. Use the setback as an opportunity 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:** Realise that a career without lows does not exist. The reality is that any new leader is going to make some mistakes along the way. And when you make a mistake, what really matters in most cases is how you respond to it. So own up, be transparent, and course-correct. Handled well, mistakes and setbacks provide opportunities to learn, 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.” What that actually is will be different for each person and each 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 – and *“the opportunities for you could be huge”*. Don’t say you’ll think about it and get dragged into all the ‘why nots?’ Just say ‘yes’, reflect on what you’ll need to be successful in the position, and then ask for it.

## Why me?

One of the senior leaders we interviewed said she always encourages those who are approached with a leadership opportunity to ask, ‘*why me?*’. This was a great piece of advice in the context of many of the early leadership experiences shared by the women we spoke to during the research programme. *“In my first senior leadership position, I spent a lot of*

*energy trying to be the person I thought they wanted me to be and focusing on what my predecessor would have done.”* This can be an easy trap to fall into. *“When I finally asked why I had been given the job, I was told it was because I was creative, and they wanted me to innovate and do things differently. 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.”*

You can build on ‘*why me?*’ by asking further relevant questions when faced with that leadership opportunity. One interviewee mentioned that she always asks three questions when taking on a new leadership role: *“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 get-go why you’ve been chosen for the particular leadership role, so you don’t let preconceptions or what has gone before influence your approach or blur your potential impact.

# Leadership readiness: Key reflection questions to ask yourself

What does success look like to me at this point in my life and career?

What is the most valuable lesson I have learned in my career so far?

How am I balancing the demands of my career trajectory with a focus on continuing to develop and upskill myself?

Is my professional network big enough – and does it include the right people?

Do I have the right levels of visibility both internally and externally?

What kind of leader do I want to be? What do I need to do differently to get there?

Have I vocalised my leadership aspirations to the right decision-makers?

What do I need to ask for to be successful?

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

# My reflection notes

# Chapter 4: Career advice for leaders

The stark reality in the corporate world is that women continue to be underrepresented at the very top level. All the women in our research work in prominent leadership roles. Here they highlight how the transition to their first leadership position marked a significant step-change in their career.

As with previous chapters, we share career advice and takeaways from our interviews. Wrapped around these, we include more personal insights, in the hope of making these roles feel more relatable and more attainable. Overall, our interviewees emphasised the opportunity to and importance of demonstrating leadership at each stage of your career. They also shared some specific advice on holding leadership positions, which is set out below.

## You don't need to have all the answers

The leaders we interviewed feel that women can sometimes put too much pressure on themselves. There can be a tendency to think “*they have to have all the answers*”, that they need to “*solve all the problems*”, and can “*try to carry too much on their own shoulders*”.

*“Thinking I had to know all the answers before I walked into a client or leadership meeting used to put me under real pressure. It took me too long to work out the reality – that it's actually much better to have killer questions than great answers.”*

As a leader, it's important to recognise that “*you don't need to be the smartest person in the room...if you are, you're in the wrong room*”; what is important is knowing how to ask the right questions.

Knowing that you don't need to take responsibility for every problem is important. “*It is a real skill to understand which are the problems that you*

*can help solve and which ones are not your problems to solve. You're going to waste energy if you try to solve everything, so you need to focus on the things that are within your control. [That realisation] has been very helpful to me to address things that would otherwise churn away at me. Of course, as a leader you stand up and take responsibility. But being clear about what is and is not your problem [to solve] is really valuable to help you prioritise.”*

*“Don't make important decisions if you're feeling stressed or negative [or you might regret them]. As a leader, it's okay to ask for more time.”*

**Key takeaway:** Realise that leadership doesn't mean you have to have all the answers. However, you do need to build proficiency in understanding which are the right problems to solve and asking the right questions.

## The authentic advantage

A resounding theme across all our interviews was the importance of authenticity. The feeling that they “*needed to play a part*” held many of the women back from being their true selves early on in their careers. “*For years, I wore a mask. I tried to think what a partner at PwC would be like, do and say, [then copy that]. I split myself into two versions: home me and work me. But actually, I realised there's just one me. I found it draining to keep up a professional façade all the time. I remember receiving some feedback from people saying I seemed cold and difficult to relate to. So I started to be more human and honest about what was and wasn't going well, and to talk about my home life and kids. Funnily enough, people liked me more and I built stronger relationships internally and with clients.”*

Recognising the strengths of who you are and what you bring as a unique individual are critical to being a successful leader. “*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."*

*Don't mistake being authentic with meaning that you have to be "a wide-open book in front of your work colleagues, with every flaw and vulnerability out there for everyone to see. But exposing who you are and showing a bit of vulnerability are very powerful tools to create connections and followership. If you're trying to create real leadership and not just a hierarchical manager set [command-and-control approach], you need to have that human connection."*

*When you're a leader you need to inspire, motivate and empower your team to achieve results. All of that is very hard to do if you're lacking authenticity or trying to fit a leadership prototype. "I'm not a big extrovert. And I'm very clear that I can only do things the way I can do them. So, even coming into my current leadership role, I was very clear with my predecessor that I would do it how I do it, not how he did it. And every time I've taken on a leadership position, I've had that discussion up front to say, 'Don't expect it to be what it was before. I have to be myself."*

**Key takeaway:** Empower and connect by being who you are and leading your own way.

## Team and support

Another theme that emerged strongly is that to be a good leader you need to have a strong support system around you. This starts with knowing what to ask for to be successful in your role, and stretches to include having and continuing to build the right ecosystem of support networks around you, as well as empowering your team.

*"Building a robust support network is essential. This means actively seeking out mentors who can offer guidance and perspective, establishing genuine connections with peers who understand your challenges and triumphs, and leaning on family and friends who provide unwavering support. These relationships are the backbone of a fulfilling career and personal life, offering advice when you need it the most."*

*"While you are ultimately responsible as a leader, you also need to remember that you still have the networks you've already built, and you can and should be leaning on those people for support as you evolve in a new role. Always remember that you have a network of people who will come in and help you and offer different perspectives."*

It's important to have mentors and sponsors who guide and advise, confidants you can trust to share the hard truths, relationships that expose you to broader thinking, and friends and family to lean on for support and encouragement. You also need to identify who your key stakeholders are. *"You need to know the people with whom you must absolutely build a trusted relationship, and then create a plan for how to keep those people onside and up to speed with what you're doing [and] what your role is."*

Leadership is about recognising that *"the team is more important than the individual"*, and focusing on building and empowering the right team. Unlike the step-change when you progress to manager level, leadership is much less about delegating work and much more about mentoring, coaching and empowering others. *"Focus on surrounding yourself with a strong team – build trust, listen to them, and create an environment where they feel valued and supported. Leverage diverse perspectives, celebrate wins, and*

*prioritise people skills. Great leadership is about empowering others as much as it is about achieving results.”*

*“You need to know your people, know what they're good at and which position to put them in so that they can fly and flourish. You need to be open-minded and give others the opportunity, and not just keep everything to yourself. The most important thing about being a leader is to do what's best for them, not what's best for you.”*

**Key takeaway:** Realise that no leader is an island. Focus on establishing the right supports and build and empower the right team.

## Harness your strengths

The importance of 'capability self-awareness' and leaning into your strengths was another key theme identified through our research. Knowing what you are good at, playing to those strengths, and understanding how to manage any weaknesses are all vital contributors to your success as a leader.

*“I'm a big believer in strength-based development. Understand what you're good at and make that a superpower but also know your limits and leverage your team.”*

*“It is very important to understand your strengths and weaknesses. [...] You need to lean on strengths in how you lead and deliver, so for example I am very relatable and strong at relationship building and management – I've honed those skills and it means that I am really able to work with everyone in a way that builds trust and also [delivers] results.”*

*“I try not to forget to look at my strengths and weaknesses from an objective third-party perspective. Where are my weaknesses? What do I need to do to manage for those weaknesses in this leadership role?”*

*“When it comes to how I work with my team, my belief is that if you don't empower people, they will never feel confident enough to grow. One common piece of feedback that I get from my people is that they appreciate the fact that I know when something's not my strength and I ask them to handle it because I know that they can. As a leader I lean more on my people today than I used to lean on partners on my way up the firm.”*

**Key takeaway:** Leverage your strengths, be aware of your weaknesses and consider both when focusing on how you will achieve success as a leader.

## Overcoming imposter syndrome

Imposter syndrome is a reality for most leaders. However, the impact of both internal and external noise that can stem from *“not being the obvious choice”* for a role, or if you look very different to the people who traditionally held it before can intensify the feeling of imposter syndrome. The best way to deal with imposter syndrome is to recognise it when it emerges, find tactics to overcome it, and use it to drive self-improvement.

*“I found myself struggling in one of my first very big leadership positions. I felt a bit small during the first year. My husband kept telling me 'Let go of any doubts, you know you can do this', but it still took me a year before I found the button in my head. Then I just clicked it off. Then I became myself again and my impact became a lot bigger.”*

*“I remember the Territory Senior Partner said to me 'you are good enough'. At that point in time it really resonated with me because the fact is we all have some kind of imposter syndrome, we all sometimes wonder whether or not we're good enough.”*

*“I've always found that feeling well prepared has been an excellent tool in mitigating my imposter syndrome battles.” “I have imposter syndrome every single day. And I think having it is a good thing – as long as you keep it in check, as long as it doesn't start to erode your confidence, as long as it*

*keeps you sharp, and as long as it keeps you pushing to be better than you were yesterday. If you don't keep it in check, it will destroy your confidence and your self-image. And that's a really dangerous place to be."*

**Key takeaway:** Imposter syndrome is a reality, remember you are good enough, draw on it to turn it into imposter advantage.

## Contending with bias

There was a recognition across the research interviews that a lot of bias is unconscious and not ill-intended, and the reality is we will all exhibit aspects of homophily (the tendency to bond with people who are similar to ourselves). It's important to focus on what you can control. If you do encounter bias, address it head-on where needed, and use it as an opportunity to educate others. *"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 it's not or it's 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 what you can control, show people what you can do, build your resilience and when needed address it head on.

## Role model impact

Role models exist at all levels, but as a leader you're expected to set the standard due to your heightened visibility. You need to reflect this through the values and behaviours you model and in thinking about the leadership legacy you want to leave behind.

*"With everything that you say and do, others around you are watching. This means it's vital to always think about how you're coming across, so even if a situation feels really challenging, focus on keeping calm." "Modelling the right demeanour is absolutely critical because if you're coming across as worried and stressed your team will be worried and stressed [too]."* Be positive in the face of challenges: there are always solutions, but you can only find a good solution if you're thinking positively. You have to 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.”*

**Key takeaway:** Be aware that leadership means being a visible role model. Set the tone by leading through example with consistent behaviours and actions. Be aware of your impact on others. And focus on how you can continue to lift up others.

## Continuous learning

It is clear from the experiences and insights shared throughout this toolkit that the interviewed leaders all embody a growth-mindset and a passion for continuous learning. This focus on continuous learning is emphasised as essential when holding a leadership position and is recognised as the one area a leader cannot delegate. *“Having a real thirst for learning and curiosity to learn more are both vital.”* This will set you apart as a leader who can innovate, be agile and adaptable, build credibility and trust, and who has the broader focus required for more effective decision making.

**Key takeaway:** Make continuous learning your mantra and learn fast so you can be a participant, not an observer.

## Leadership: Key reflection questions to ask yourself

What does success look like to me at this moment in my life and career?

What do I need to continue to ask for to be successful in this role?

How am I balancing my career trajectory demands with a focus on continuing to develop and upskill?

Is my professional network big enough?

Do I have a strong enough understanding of my strengths and weaknesses?

Am I building the right levels of trust with my team, clients and stakeholders?

How can I think more strategically?

What strategies can I engage to effectively communicate my vision and goals to garner followership?

What do I need to do to empower my team on the journey with me?

How will I balance being approachable with maintaining authority?

Am I showing up as my authentic self?

Am I soliciting feedback from all levels?

What support systems do I need to build and maintain as a leader?

How can I be a positive role model and lift others up behind me?

# My reflection notes

# Chapter 5: Career advice on managing career and personal life

There was clear consensus across the women we interviewed that you can't have it all, certainly not at the same time, but that you can have what you choose and that recognising what you want to prioritise is a valuable skill. Our leaders acknowledged that, without doubt, in the corporate world your commitment and how hard you work are important factors for your career establishment and trajectory – however, this isn't to be confused with success equalling overwork.

The importance of boundaries, space, personal focus and wellbeing were critical issues raised across the board. There was also a recognition that many workplaces have come a long way with regards to flexibility and autonomy, and that we need to collectively continue that progress.

In this chapter you'll find the key pieces of advice that our leaders shared for managing the blend of both your personal life and career.

## Personal identity

Amongst the women we interviewed we had artists, authors and dancers, plus sports, yoga, meditation and travel enthusiasts, as well as a pilot. A key message was that your career will absolutely form a large part of your identity – but it shouldn't be your everything. Hobbies and interests outside of work expose you to diverse perspectives and experiences. This in turn provides you with energy and a more rounded viewpoint – allowing you to further thrive at work.

*"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:** Find personal interests outside of your career that give you energy and joy.

## Recharge to excel

Many interviewees candidly discussed times when they had given in to overwork. For a few, this was severe, leading to instances of burnout. The prominent theme that you need to realise is that consistent overwork is not sustainable. You need time for rest, time for recovery and time for distance from what you do. All of these are essential to thriving at work.

*"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."*

Simply put, you have to recharge to excel. It's vital to longevity and success. Developing these habits early in your career is important. They include being kind to yourself, knowing when things are 'good enough' and recognising the importance of building trust and an impact-focused mindset – especially as you become more senior and are managing others. *"Do what you can as well as you can but, at the same time, show kindness to yourself and understand the power of being 'good enough.' While we strive for excellence every day, that should never mean destroying ourselves to achieve it. Sometimes good enough is good enough and you just need to let some things go."*

*"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:** Focus on the habits that will enable you to deliver sustainable high performance, and make sure that rest, recovery and space all form part of your routine.

## Set boundaries and stick to them

It's vital to realise early in your career that you have to know yourself and what's important to you, as well as put boundaries in place so you can focus on the things that matter to you. *"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 be transparent about what your boundaries are, communicate them 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 laying down 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 make pivots in your career. Overall, you need to be adept at planning your time – as well as developing the agility you need to take decisions – big and small – when life throws you a curve ball.

To sum up, you need to become an ‘agile planner’, marrying planning with agility to manage personal and career commitments. It’s crucial to 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 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

The majority of the leaders we interviewed are mothers – most to more than one child, and some to multiples (including one set of triplets). Some are part of blended families, some are currently experiencing (or have experienced) single parenting, some have young children, some are parents to teenagers, and some to grown-up children.

There’s a real variety in how these dynamics have manifested in the women’s careers. Some of them took career breaks of up to three years, others worked reduced schedules for as much as a decade, and others maintained a full-time working schedule throughout. But the common theme was *“People don’t want to think you’re a superwoman and that you’re always available and always working. That’s not inspiring, and nobody wants to be that, because nobody can be that.”*

Here are the key pieces of career advice they shared for women juggling career and motherhood, and to parents more broadly.

**Don’t wait:** Don’t let your career trajectory dictate the timing of your personal aspirations. If you want a family, try to have a family. Yes, this might mean your career does not move as quickly as you initially hoped, but it also means you won’t be living with regret.

*“The very first piece of advice that I would give for managing both a career and personal life is to never decide when to get married or when to become a parent based on your career. My experience has shown me that it’s always possible to build a career that aligns with personal aspiration.”*

*“I had a conversation with a woman at director level who was considering putting off kids so she could focus on making partner. I said, ‘Well, what happens if you don’t get to partner? What happens if you’re in your 40s and you struggle to have kids? You’ll look back on this day and massively regret how you gave up something that’s going to be so amazing for you.’ You can have both. It might take you a little bit longer, but just because you’re going to go and have a baby doesn’t mean you won’t be able to make partner in a*

*couple of years. I still think there's a mindset that you've got to choose. And I think that's wrong."*

**Engage in early discussions at home:** There's a very real "double burden" phenomenon at play globally – where women work but simultaneously shoulder the majority of childcare and domestic responsibilities.

When you're in the privileged position of doing motherhood with a partner, many of the women in our research emphasised the importance of having open discussions at home, having them early, and agreeing 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 we spoke about kids, my husband shared that it was important to him that one parent stays at home. I knew I wanted to be a mother and have a career, so we made the choice together that he would stay at home and he stepped away from work until the kids started school. We had discussed and agreed all that up front, which made things much more manageable."*

**Trade-offs:** The leaders we interviewed were very candid and honest in highlighting that while it's vital to accept that yes, you can have it all, you should recognise you can't necessarily have it all at the same time. You need to have a very clear understanding of what matters to you and what compromises you're willing to make and this will be unique to each parent.

It's important to feel comfortable with the trade-offs you'll have to make, as well as having a choice when it comes to making those trade-offs.

*"The key is to stop chasing the illusion of 'having it all' in perfect harmony at all times and instead focus on being present where you are needed most in each moment. Give yourself permission to make choices that align with your priorities in the moment, knowing that priorities can shift over time. Give yourself grace to adjust without guilt."*

*"What is absolutely crucial is to know yourself and to understand what's truly important to you, what you're willing to compromise on, and what you're not. That's essential to avoid frustration. You also need to recognise that what that looks like can evolve over time. For me, there were periods when it was absolutely key for me to spend specific times with my children. Nothing, I mean nothing, could happen at work that would take me out of those times with my children. But you make compromises along the way, and what that looks like will be different for everyone."*

*"I always knew that I wanted to have a family, and I also wanted to work on the most iconic clients and do the big, challenging roles. So, I had to work out how I was going to achieve that, and decide what I was not going to do. There are cases where I've made trade-offs at home. I love baking, for example, but I have never baked one of my children a birthday cake – I don't have the time. But we have fun picking a birthday cake together. I'm also a social person, but I never went to Friday night work events, because that's home time. While I did work long hours at times, my family always knew that I'd be there when I said I would be."*

*"One of the biggest lessons is that balance is not a fixed state, but a constant recalibration and that success looks different at different stages. There will be times when your career demands more of you, and times when your personal life takes priority, and believe me, that's okay."*

*"We cannot take away the fact that there's going to be some sacrifice. Because as a working mother, something has to give. For me it wasn't going to be a career and it's certainly not my kids. The fact that I'm juggling*

*all of that, it's still worth it. I've accepted that for this period of their lives I have had to give up certain other things like hobbies that I might want to do for me, but that's okay, I'll get that time back."*

**Ask for what you need:** The mothers in our research used a whole range of approaches to flex and manage their time, particularly when their children were young. It's important that you think about what you need to achieve, and what success means to you – both at home and at work. Asking for what you want can be scary. But remember, first, people are human and understanding; second, what is hard to ask for can be very rewarding; and third, having children might mean things take a little longer, but as demonstrated by this group of leaders, your career goals remain well within reach.

*"Asking for help when it's needed is essential. Women often refrain from asking as they are apprehensive about simply making the request in the first place. But it's essential to use your voice to ask for what you need, no matter how scary it may feel."*

*"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."*

*"Women still often feel they need permission to make decisions about their lives and careers, and I think that's wrong. If you're a talent, you're in it for the long term and the firm is not going to want to lose you. And if you have competing priorities, then working part-time is completely acceptable."*

*"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 put too much pressure on yourself. *"We want to do it all. We want to be the best mother. The best employee. The best everything. Knowing we can't do this all the time is hard. But it's the reality."*

*"Being kind to yourself includes accepting that you can't be all things to all people all the time, and making use of the support you have. Everything we do in work is team-based, so you should make sure you've got the right supports there, and family life really is no different. It's a team sport, and you have to lean on people where you can to help support you through things."*

**Know your non-negotiables:** Be very clear in knowing what your non-negotiables are, establishing and communicating those boundaries, and sticking to them. Identifying what's important to you so you are clear about

when and what you need to say ‘no’ to, including what’s needed to protect family time.

There's always work to do. Anyone can very easily work 24/7 if they want to. But you have to establish the boundaries that will make you feel happy – both as a parent and in your career. Quality over quantity is key. *“You've got to try to be fully focused in work, and fully focused when [you're] with your kids. There's no point being distracted at work or answering emails when you are with your kids.”*

*“One tactic I established after becoming a mum is to set two annual plans: my work goals and my personal plan. My personal plan sets out the most important things that are going to happen in my personal life that year, like a milestone school year for a child or a landmark birthday for a parent.*

*Drawing up these plans enabled me to identify what my ‘non-negotiables’ were for the year at work and at home – meaning I knew what I was comfortable saying ‘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.”*

**Get help:** Being a parent is hard, whether you're a stay-at-home parent or balancing parenthood and a career. If work gives you purpose and having both is the choice you make, recognise that you will need help and support. Ask for that help, and focus on what you can do to make things easier for

yourself. Having open discussions with your support systems, whatever they may look like, is essential.

*“You need a village – whether it's family, friends, colleagues, or a combination of all three – because support is essential. Asking for help isn't a weakness; it's a sign of 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 often raise their heads when you become a parent. Well-intentioned people might think they're doing you a favour by not putting you on a big client engagement, not suggesting you for a conference that requires travel, or making assumptions about your progression aspirations – particularly in the early years of parenthood. Advocate for yourself by vocalising your aspirations, whatever they might be during this stage of your career. This will mean that people are doing you the right favours and not making incorrect assumptions about your availability, interests or aspirations.

### Key takeaways on managing career and parenthood:

If you want to have a career, you must be realistic and accept that it will come with an element of sacrifice. Recognise there is no single right answer. Don't make personal sacrifices that you'll regret later on. It comes back to prioritisation. Don't waste time on the things that don't add value to you. Instead, direct your time and energy into those things that matter to you personally and professionally.

Get comfortable with the trade-offs you need to make and be very clear in establishing your non-negotiables. Plan as best you can but recognise that your plan will evolve each year, and that there will be certain times when

you'll need to be much more agile in deciding what takes priority. Try not to be too hard on yourself, and put the structures and systems in place to get the help you need, including asking for support when necessary.

## Managing career returns

Many people will face extended periods away from work at some point during their career, be that a sabbatical, illness leave, or parental leave.

The most common break for women is, of course, maternity leave.

Depending on where you live in the world, maternity leave can be anything from 12 to 86 weeks, so for most women it can be a substantial period away from work.

The advice of our leaders was to recognise that this is a unique moment in your life and to fully immerse yourself in the time you've taken off – whether that time is spent focused on parenting, pursuing a hobby, or recovering from an illness.

Our leaders also urge you to understand that, especially in the current landscape, a lot can change during a period of leave. So when you return to work, take time to get comfortable in your role and new dynamic – whether that's balancing family commitments, managing physical recovery, or coping with emotional loss.

Reconnect with your role, and be ready and willing to upskill so you can catch up with developments, particularly digital progressions, and rebuild your network and connections. Recognise that the return-to-work “self-confidence crisis” is a reality for most returners. “*It can be daunting, but within a couple of weeks you'll be as sharp as ever.*” Lean on colleagues and family for support. “*I completely switched off from work during my 11 months off, but I draw energy from relationships, so I did stay in touch with people from work. It meant that when I returned, I felt like I had this really strong support network waiting for me.*”

**Key takeaway:** Don't let a 'confidence crisis' overwhelm you. Put in the work needed to find your feet, rebuild, upskill, and catch up in a way that works for you.

# Managing career and life: Key reflection questions to ask yourself

What does personal and career success look like to me at this moment in my life and career?

What in my professional or personal life energises me? And am I making time for what gives me energy?

What priorities are most important to me in both my professional and personal life?

Am I clear in understanding my non-negotiables and what I will say 'no' to?

Am I employing tactics that allow me to recharge?

What tactics do I need to use to establish the right boundaries and protect my personal time?

Have I established the right support systems? How can I utilise them more effectively?

Am I asking for what I need to realise my aspirations?

Am I communicating and being transparent about my boundaries?

Do my team members feel comfortable communicating their flex needs and boundaries to me?

What do I need to change to create a more balanced schedule that accommodates both work and personal time? How can I help my team to do the same?

### Am I making decisions I am proud of?

# My reflection notes

# Chapter 6: About the research and the leaders who took part

To prepare for this research programme, we began by identifying women holding prominent global and member firm leadership positions across the PwC network and inviting them to take part. The vast majority agreed to participate, and the interviews took place throughout January and February 2025. The aim was to elicit career advice based on the interviewees' own experiences, lessons learned and coaching. In some cases, women have shared advice they wished they had received years ago, as they built their careers and personal brands.

During the interviews, we sought to make the responses from our collective of amazing women leaders as candid and honest as possible. With this in mind, we have anonymised the insights they shared.

A total of 42 women took part, all of whom hold prominent leadership positions across the PwC network. Located in 31 countries, they were able to offer nuanced insights based on the varying working and societal influences at play in different territories across the globe. Their roles include positions on PwC's Global Leadership Team, Regional Leadership Teams and Territory Leadership Teams and beyond. Their job titles include Territory Senior Partners, Global Client Partners, Line of Service Leaders, Strategy Leaders, Chief Operation Officers, Chief Commercial Officers, Chief People Officers, and more.

A major common thread is that many of these women have been trailblazers. Our interviewees have been the first partner admitted in their member firm on a part-time basis, the first women holding a Business Unit Leader role in their respective business area, the first women holding a seat on their respective Territory Leadership Teams and the first women Territory Senior Partners in their respective firms, amongst other notable 'firsts'.

Another experience that many of them share is that of navigating a career pivot, including industry moves, international moves and moves to new parts of the business. They are united in saying that curiosity and saying 'yes' have been critical factors in fuelling their career development, trajectory and sense of fulfilment.

Many of the women have spent their whole career with PwC 46%, while others have joined PwC from different industries and sectors 44%.

We would like to thank each and every one of the participating women for their valuable input and perspectives that we have no doubt will help the careers of others. Thank you all!

# The leaders who took part



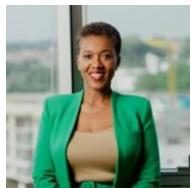
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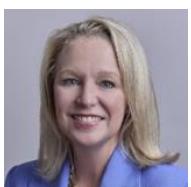
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# Index

Use this index to help you zero in on specific advice and insights shared throughout this toolkit.

Career advice theme	Page	
Show up from the start (Chapter 1)	03	Leadership tactics (Chapter 3) 14
Be a curious sponge (Chapter 1)	03	The career pivot (Chapter 3) 14
Find your voice (Chapter 1)	03	Make your leadership ambitions known (Chapter 3) 15
Build your confidence (Chapter 1)	03	Recognise that leadership isn't easy (Chapter 3) 16
Raise your hand and say 'yes' (Chapter 1)	04	Fear of making mistakes in the spotlight (Chapter 3) 16
Learn to network (Chapter 1)	04	Ask for what you need to be successful (Chapter 3) 17
Find mentors (Chapter 1)	04	Why me? (Chapter 3) 17
Develop your personal brand (Chapter 1)	05	You don't need to have all the answers (Chapter 4) 19
Think about the next step — not the final one (Chapter 1)	05	The authentic advantage (Chapter 4) 19
The strategic 'yes' (Chapter 2)	07	Team and support (Chapter 4) 20
Make your efforts visible (Chapter 2)	07	Harness your strengths (Chapter 4) 21
Make your ambitions known (Chapter 2)	08	Overcoming imposter syndrome (Chapter 4) 21
Take risks (Chapter 2)	08	Contending with bias (Chapter 4) 22
The importance of mentors and sponsors (Chapter 2)	08	Role model impact (Chapter 4) 22
Chase constructive criticism (Chapter 2)	09	Continuous learning (Chapter 4) 23
Recognise the step-change (Chapter 2)	09	Personal identity (Chapter 5) 25
Client-focused (Chapter 2)	10	Recharge to excel (Chapter 5) 25
Role models and the next step (Chapter 2)	11	Set boundaries and stick to them (Chapter 5) 26
Everything else (Chapter 2)	11	Be an agile planner (Chapter 5) 26
Brand perception (Chapter 3)	13	Parenthood (Chapter 5) 27
Visibility elevation (Chapter 3)	13	Don't wait 27
		Engage in early discussions at home 28
		Trade-off 28
		Ask for what you need 29
		Be kind to yourself 29
		Know your non-negotiables 29
		Get help 30

Make sure people are doing you the right favours	30
Key takeaways on career and parenthood	30
Managing career returns	31

# Acknowledgements and contacts

We thank each and every one of the participating women for their valuable input and perspectives that we have no doubt will help the careers of others.

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