

Centered leadership: How talented women thrive

A new approach to leadership can help women become more self-confident and effective business leaders.

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Women start careers in business and other professions with the same level of intelligence, education, and commitment as men. Yet comparatively few reach the top echelons.

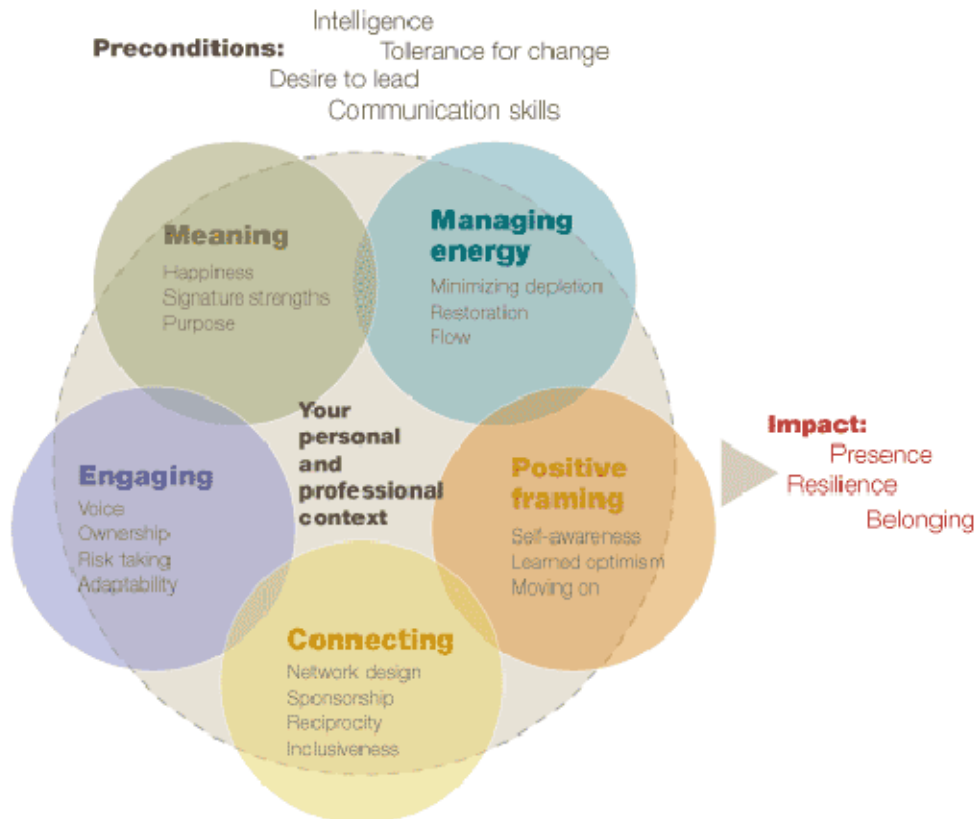
This gap matters not only because the familiar glass ceiling is unfair, but also because the world has an increasingly urgent need for more leaders. All men and women with the brains, the desire, and the perseverance to lead should be encouraged to fulfill their potential and leave their mark.

With all this in mind, the McKinsey Leadership Project—an initiative to help professional women at McKinsey and elsewhere—set out four years ago to learn what drives and sustains successful female leaders. We wanted to help younger women navigate the paths to leadership and, at the same time, to learn how organizations could get the best out of this talented group.

To that end, we have interviewed more than 85 women around the world (and a few good men) who are successful in diverse fields. Some lead 10,000 people or more, others 5 or even fewer. While the specifics of their lives vary, each one shares the goal of making a difference in the wider world. All were willing to discuss their personal experiences and to provide insights into what it takes to stay the leadership course. We have also studied the academic literature; consulted experts in leadership, psychology, organizational behavior, and biology; and sifted through the experiences of hundreds of colleagues at McKinsey.

From the interviews and other research, we have distilled a leadership model comprising five broad and interrelated dimensions (exhibit): *meaning*, or finding your strengths and putting them to work in the service of an inspiring purpose; *managing energy*, or knowing where your energy comes from, where it goes, and what you can do to manage it; *positive framing*, or adopting a more constructive way to view your world, expand

your horizons, and gain the resilience to move ahead even when bad things happen; *connecting*, or identifying who can help you grow, building stronger relationships, and increasing your sense of belonging; and *engaging*, or finding your voice, becoming self-reliant and confident by accepting opportunities and the inherent risks they bring, and collaborating with others.



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We call this model centered leadership. As the name implies, it's about having a well of physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual strength that drives personal achievement and, in turn, inspires others to follow. What's particularly exciting is that we are starting to discover ways women can actively build the skills to become more self-confident and effective leaders. Centered leadership also works for men, though we have found that the model resonates particularly well with women because we have built it on a foundation of research into their specific needs and experiences.

Centered leadership emphasizes the role of positive emotions. A few characteristics particularly distinguish women from their male

counterparts in the workplace. First, women can more often opt out of it than men can. Second, their double burden—motherhood and management—drains energy in a particularly challenging way. Third, they tend to experience emotional ups and downs more often and more intensely than most men do. Given these potentially negative emotions, centered leadership consciously draws on positive psychology, a discipline that seeks to identify what makes healthy people thrive. Although none of the women we interviewed articulated her ideas in precisely those terms, when we dived into the literature and interviewed leading academics, we found strong echoes of what our female leaders had been telling us.

Meaning

‘To love what you do and feel that it matters—how could anything be more fun?’

Meaning is the motivation that moves us. It enables people to discover what interests them and to push themselves to the limit. It makes the heart beat faster, provides energy, and inspires passion. Without meaning, work is a slog between weekends. With meaning, any job can become a calling.

It starts with happiness. Positive psychologists (including Tal Ben-Shahar, Jonathan Haidt, and Martin Seligman) have defined a progression of happiness that leads from pleasure to engagement to meaning. Researchers have demonstrated, for example, that an ice cream break provides only short-lived pleasure; in contrast, the satisfaction derived from an act of kindness or gratitude lasts much longer. Katharine Graham, the first female CEO of a Fortune 500 enterprise (the Washington Post Company), famously said, “To love what you do and feel that it matters—how could anything be more fun?”

Why is meaning important for leaders? Studies have shown that among professionals, it translates into greater job satisfaction, higher productivity, lower turnover, and increased loyalty.¹ The benefits also include feelings of transcendence—in other words, contributing to something bigger than yourself generates a deeper sense of meaning, thereby creating a virtuous cycle. Finding meaning in life helped some of the women leaders we interviewed take new paths and accept the personal risks implicit in their goals.

Shelly Lazarus, the chairman and CEO of the advertising firm Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide, described how she “just followed [her] heart, doing the things that [she] loved to do.” This sense of meaning inspired her, early in her career, to jump from Clairol to Ogilvy. Lazarus commented that everyone she knew thought that her decision to go from the client side to

the agency side was a strategic move. But “it wasn’t really like that,” she says. “I just loved the interaction with the agency because that was the moment I could see where the ideas came to life.”

People seeking to define what is meaningful can start, as one interviewee put it, by “being honest with yourself about what you’re good at and what you enjoy doing.” Building these signature strengths into everyday activities at work makes you happier, in part by making these activities more meaningful. Although there is no simple formula for matching your strengths to any single industry or function, you can look for patterns in jobs that have and haven’t worked out and talk with others about your experiences.

The connection between signature strengths and work can change because priorities do; sometimes, for example, a job is better than a calling, especially for young mothers. Our interviews show that this ebb and flow is natural and that the key to success is being aware of the shifts—and making conscious choices about them—in the context of bigger goals, personal or professional.

To read more on meaning:

Tal Ben-Shahar, *Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007.

Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, New York: Free Press, 2004.

Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*, New York: Penguin, 2007.

Managing energy

‘Flow’—a sense of being so engaged by activities that you don’t notice the passage of time

a “second shift”—92 percent of them still manage all household tasks, such as meal preparation and child care.³

Actively managing energy levels is crucial to leaders. Today’s executives work hard: 60 percent of the senior executives toil more than 50 hours a week, and

10 percent more than 80 hours a week.² What’s more, many women come home from work only to sign onto

We’ve found that work–life balance is a myth—so the only hope women have is to balance their energy flows. This means basing your priorities on the activities that energize you, both at work and at home, and actively managing your resources to avoid dipping into reserves. Burnout is a

reality for men and women alike, but for women who can opt out, so too is throwing in the towel.

But work doesn't have to be exhausting. Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, a founder of positive psychology, studied thousands of people, from sculptors to factory workers. He found that those who frequently experienced what he called "flow"—a sense of being so engaged by activities that you don't notice the passage of time—were more productive and derived greater satisfaction from their work than those who did not. Further, it energized rather than drained them.

Zia Mody, a top litigator in India, described how she gained energy from a life that most people would see as exhausting. Even when her three daughters were young, she put in 16-hour days to prepare her cases. A woman among thousands of men at court, she lit up as she told us, "I love it! I love winning. I love being in court. . . . It excites me—I cannot tell you how much."

One useful tactic is to identify the conditions and situations that replenish your energy and those that sap it. Self-awareness lets you deliberately incorporate restorative elements into your day. It can also help you to space out your energy-sapping tasks throughout the day, instead of bundling them all into a single morning or afternoon. A particularly useful tip, we have found, is to give yourself time during the day to focus without distractions such as blinking lights and buzzing phones. Your productivity will benefit several times over.

To read more on managing energy:

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, New York: HarperPerennial, 1991.

Edy Greenblatt, "Work/Life Balance: Wisdom or Whining," *Organizational Dynamics*, 2002, Volume 31, Number 2, pp. 177–93.

Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal*, New York: Free Press, 2003.

Positive framing

No matter how pessimistic you are by nature, you can learn to view situations as optimists do

The frames people use to view the world and process experiences can make a critical difference to professional outcomes. Many studies suggest that optimists see life more realistically than pessimists do, a frame of mind that can be crucial to making the right business decisions. That insight may be particularly

critical for women, who are twice as likely to become depressed, according to one study.⁴ Optimists,

research shows, are not afraid to frame the world as it actually is—they are confident that they can manage its challenges and move their teams quickly to action. By contrast, pessimists are more likely to feel helpless and to get stuck in downward spirals that lead to energy-depleting rumination.

Martin Seligman, a psychologist who was an early proponent of positive psychology, found, for example, that optimists are better able to deal with the news that they have cancer. Confident that they can handle the prognosis, they immediately start to gather facts and dive into treatment plans; pessimists, on the other hand, become paralyzed with fear. Seligman also shows that optimism can be learned—an important insight that underlies positive framing.

Positive framing and positive thinking, we would emphasize, are two different notions. The latter tries to replace adversity with positive beliefs. The former accepts the facts of adversity and counters them with action. Talking yourself into a view contrary to the facts has a temporary effect at best.

The experience of Andrea Jung, the chairman and CEO of Avon, suggests how useful positive framing can be. In late 2005, Jung recalls, she found her company in a decline that temporary factors could not explain. Recognizing that she was the leader who had created the strategies and the team responsible for the downturn, she listened to the counsel of her executive coach and promptly “fired herself” on a Friday night. The following Monday, Andrea showed up at work as the “new” turnaround CEO. She proved herself to be a “glass half full” optimist, and the recovery plan her management team adopted after a quick diagnosis led to a steady improvement and a return to growth.

No matter how pessimistic you are by nature, you can learn to view situations as optimists do. The key is self-awareness. If a meeting goes badly, for example, you should limit your thoughts about it to its temporary and specific impact and keep them impersonal. It helps to talk with trusted colleagues about the reasons for the poor meeting and ways to do better next time. These discussions should take place quickly enough for you to make a specific plan and act on it. You should also undertake some activity that will restore both your energy and your faith in yourself—perhaps having a hard workout, going out with friends, or spending time with your children.

To read more on positive framing:

Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, New York: Basic Books, 2006.

Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, New York: Pocket Books, 1998.

Connecting

‘We were supporting each other, and there was power in the many’

People with strong networks and good mentors enjoy more promotions, higher pay, and greater career

satisfaction.⁵ They feel a sense of belonging, which makes their lives meaningful. As Mark Hunter and Herminia Ibarra have noted in the *Harvard Business Review*, what differentiates a leader from a manager “is the ability to figure out where to go and to enlist

the people and groups necessary to get there.”⁶ Yet not all networks are equal. Roy Baumeister, a social psychologist who studies social belonging and rejection, believes that men tend to build broader, shallower networks than women do and that the networks of men give them a wider range of resources for gaining

knowledge and professional opportunities.⁷ This theory is a matter of substantial debate among academics. Our experience with hundreds of women at McKinsey, however, offers additional evidence that women’s networks tend to be narrower but deeper than men’s.

The experience of Dame Stella Rimington, who in the late 1960s joined MI5, the UK’s domestic intelligence organization, offers an example of the power of broad networks to get things done. Rimington, later the agency’s director general, says that “women were definitely second-class citizens” in those days. They weren’t allowed to do fieldwork, for example, yet “many of the women were completely indistinguishable from the men: they had the same kind of education.”

She continues: “So we women—there were quite a few of us by then—we sort of ganged up and did a kind of round-robin thing and said, ‘Why is it that we have a completely different career than men who are exactly like us?’ And for the first time, the powers that be started to scratch their heads because they suddenly had to find an answer. . . . And in the end, of course, they decided that they would have to promote a few women.” She later concluded that “no one of us would have asked that question on her own. We were supporting each other, and there was power in the many.”

The leaders we interviewed also talked about the importance of having individual relationships with senior colleagues willing to go beyond the role of mentor—someone willing to stick out his or her own neck to create opportunity for or help a protégée. Such a person is what Ruth Porat, a vice chairwoman at Morgan Stanley, called a “sponsor.”

A number of studies have shown that women who promote their own interests vigorously are seen as aggressive, uncooperative, and selfish. An equal number of studies show that the failure of women to promote their own interests results in a lack of female leaders. Until one of these conditions changes, sponsors, we believe, are the key to helping women gain access to opportunities they merit and need to develop.

Porat explained how a managing director took a chance on her when she was a second-year associate, asking her to present to a client's board of directors. "The consumer client wanted a woman to be present. I had never been in a boardroom, let alone presented in a boardroom. 'Sink or swim,' he told me. 'You're in.' I still remember to this day a mistake I made and that it was, overall, a good presentation. He took a real chance on me."

One surprising thing we learned as a result of talking with female leaders was that they often fail to reciprocate and find expectations that they should do so distasteful. A senior partner at McKinsey noted that men naturally understand that you must "give before you get," but women don't. This tendency—which other leaders have described to us as well—combined with the sometimes awkward sexual politics, real or perceived, between senior men and younger women, makes it harder for women to find sponsors.

Yet women can learn reciprocity. To start, it's important to assess your comfort level with the people you know through work, as well as how influential they are professionally. Most women we've worked with typically find that the colleagues they are close to are not influential—and vice versa. Explicit planning and some risk taking are needed to change this.

One approach is to provide and ask for help on a regular basis. Finding ways to forge connections through interests outside of work is another. Over and over, we heard, "Make it personal," in the sense that others will get along with you more easily if they see your human side. You can express this in all kinds of ways at work, without inappropriately blending your professional and personal lives. The female leaders we interviewed acted on this insight both to find sponsors and to build networks.

To read more on connecting:

Catalyst, *Creating Women's Networks: A How-To Guide for Women and Companies*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

Monica Higgins and Kathy Kram, "Reconceptualizing Mentoring at Work: A Developmental Network Perspective," *Academy of Management Review*, 2001, Volume 26, Number 2, pp. 264–68.

Lois J. Zachary, *The Mentor's Guide: Facilitating Effective Learning Relationships*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Engaging

‘You did the work, so you’ve got to talk about it’

Many people think that hard work will eventually be noticed and rewarded. That can indeed happen—but usually doesn’t. Women, our interviewees repeatedly told us, need to “create their own luck.” To engage

with opportunities by taking ownership of them, you must first find your own voice, literally. Julie Daum, a prominent Spencer Stuart recruiter who specializes in board placements, told us that even senior women on boards still lose out by not speaking up: they hang back if they think that they have nothing new to say or that their ideas fall short of profound.

One senior woman we interviewed told us how she learned to join in:

“Every Monday, we had a senior-management meeting. In the beginning, I just listened. I learned from the guys because they were all there. And after a while I started to speak up. You did the work, so you’ve got to talk about it. And I did.”

Women who want to grow as leaders should also take ownership of their professional development. Mary Ma, Lenovo’s former chief financial officer, said that she drew inspiration from using the Japanese auto industry as a metaphor, reshaping herself to become more competitive by identifying what she had to change and then actually changing it. As Ma noted, she didn’t complain to her boss or to her colleagues but rather looked inward to see how she could be a more effective leader. Instead of waiting for someone to tell her what to do, she took a systematic approach to self-improvement.

Engagement is equally about risk taking. The women we interviewed accept risk as a part of opportunity. Some have the confidence and courage to dive in; others use analytic problem solving to assess risks and then proceed to action. Psychologist Daniel Gilbert says his research indicates that people who make a choice for risk and work with it, rather than avoid it, report a greater degree of happiness than others do.

Shona Brown, Google’s senior vice president of business operations, described how she handles opportunities and the risks that accompany them. “I’ll use a skiing analogy because I like to jump off cliffs,” she says. “But I generally jump off cliffs from which I’m relatively confident I’m going to land—or if I don’t, it’s not dangerous.” Brown said she enjoys risk. “I like to be at that point where you’re about to jump. Your stomach is kind of going ‘woo’! It’s not so simple that you’re sure you’ll succeed. But you’re not in a life-threatening situation.”

Our interviews have shown us that to embrace opportunity, people must often take sharp detours and that the risks of unexpected changes commonly seem more obvious than the benefits. Reaching out to others—not to avoid making decisions yourself but to learn the best outcome from change can often help you see opportunities in the right frame and decide whether to go for them.


To read more on engaging:

Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling On Happiness*, New York: Knopf, 2006.

Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: The High Cost of Avoiding Negotiation—and Positive Strategies for Change*, New York: Bantam, 2007.

Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, Encinitas, CA: Puddledancer Press, 2003.

Within McKinsey and in the corporate world, our work on centered leadership continues (see sidebar, “Initial results”). To understand how men and women practice it across tenures, industries, and regions, we are interviewing more female and male leaders and launching large-scale surveys—again, with female and male respondents.

Our research is exploring the hypothesis that today's leaders can become even more effective through the model of centered leadership: a shared purpose with deep meaning for the people involved, explicit awareness and management of energy, positive framing, strong informal and formal networks, and the collaborative creation of opportunities. In time, we hope to help increase the number of female leaders significantly by giving them the tools to build leadership skills for any playing field. 

About the Authors

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Initial results

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Notes

- ¹ Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, New York: Free Press, 2004.
- ² Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce, “Extreme jobs: The dangerous allure of the 70-hour workweek,” *Harvard Business Review*, 2006, Volume 84, Number 12, pp. 49–59.
- ³ Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007.
- ⁴ See Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain*, New York: Morgan Road Books, 2006.
- ⁵ See George Dreher and Ronald Ash, “A comparative study of mentoring among men and women in managerial, professional, and technical positions,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1990, Volume 75, Number 5, pp. 539–46; and Terri Scandura, “Mentorship and career mobility: An empirical investigation,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 1992, Volume 13, Number 2, pp. 169–74.
- ⁶ Mark Hunter and Herminia Ibarra, “How leaders create and use networks,” *Harvard Business Review*, 2007, Volume 85, Number 1, pp. 40–7.

⁷ Roy F. Baumeister, "Is there anything good about men?" *American Psychological Association*, invited address, 2007. The full speech can be found [online](#).

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