

# Supporting & Retaining Women Leaders

OUR POINT OF VIEW, RESEARCH, AND SOLUTIONS



# Introduction



Across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath caused women to experience unprecedented job loss, both voluntary and involuntary. Women’s departures from the workforce outpaced men’s across nearly every function, level, industry, and country. In 2021, when millions began leaving their jobs, some dubbed it “The Great Resignation,” and the sharp increase in unemployment and slow economic activity pointed squarely at a recession. But some called it a “*SHEcession*,” noting that the service sectors hardest hit by the pandemic — hospitality, education, healthcare, and retail — were disproportionately female. In the U.S., it was the first recession in history to cause substantially more job loss for women than men.<sup>1</sup>

**The gains made by women in the workforce over the past 3 decades were erased virtually overnight.** Women’s labor force participation dipped to its lowest levels since 1988, with nearly 1.1 million fewer women in the U.S. labor force in January 2022 than in February 2020.<sup>2</sup> More than 4 in 10 women reported they considered leaving their companies or switching jobs in 2020-2021,<sup>3</sup> and 35% of the women who left or lost their jobs during the pandemic were still unemployed as of Feb. 2022.<sup>4</sup>

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**The good news is that the tide has been turning back — with overall employment for women of prime working age in the U.S. returning to pre-pandemic levels by Jan. 2023.**<sup>5</sup> Women are also making strides in the boardroom, comprising 45% of all new Fortune 500 board appointments.<sup>6</sup> And over 10% of Fortune 500 CEOs were women in 2023, an unprecedented high.<sup>7</sup> This recent progress is especially noteworthy because just 3 years prior, less than 3% of Fortune 500 CEOs were women — and all of them were White.<sup>8</sup> And as recently as 2018, there were fewer S&P 1500 companies led by women than by men named John.<sup>9</sup> **But gender imbalances persist, and the playing field remains uneven.** Only 1 in 4 C-suite leaders is a woman, and only 1 in 20 is a woman of color.<sup>10</sup>

In the U.S., significant gaps persist in employment rates and working hours between mothers and fathers.<sup>11</sup> American women who work full-time spend 22% more time than men on unpaid household and care work.<sup>12</sup> In fact, on every continent, women spend more time than men in unpaid caretaking activities, while men have more leisure time than women.<sup>13</sup> After the stress of the pandemic years, 1/3 of women report they are looking to downshift their careers or leave the workforce entirely.<sup>14</sup> Women are simply **burned out**: some 43% of women leaders say they're burned out, as compared to just 31% of men at the same level.<sup>15</sup> The global gender gap — that is, the gap between men and women across health, education, politics, and economics around the world — was set to close within 100 years, prior to the pandemic. But according to the World Economic Forum, after the losses of 2020–2021, if progress continues at the current rate, the gap will now take 132 years to close.<sup>16</sup>

**We do not need to change women — we need to change systems.** There are no easy fixes for the global gender gap, and the pandemic further highlighted and exacerbated the already untenable **systemic imbalances** that impact women, organizations, and larger society. While disappointing, these realities provide a powerful opportunity for organizations and HR professionals. Now more than ever before, there's an opening **to provide women resources and support** to start turning back the tide.







# The Challenge for Organizations

Change is complex. Organizations that want to support women need to start by looking at the larger systems in which they operate to **find the root causes** of women leaving or not being promoted. Before addressing women leaving the workforce, companies must recognize and acknowledge the following realities:

- **Women’s leadership challenges are embedded within and tied to larger systems**, including country and cultural influences, educational and healthcare systems, and social norms and expectations. For example, during the pandemic, one of the root causes of women leaving the workforce was unequal access to healthcare, the unavailability of childcare, and the widespread move to virtual learning.
- **Women face exclusion based on their social identity and often have intersecting identities**, such as race, class, age, religion, sexual orientation, family/caregiver status, language, etc. These identities may face great bias in one culture but little in another, so different women face different challenges — some cumulating across identities — depending upon their context.
- **Women are treated differently at work because of conscious and unconscious bias.** Here are just a few examples to consider, all of them backed by research:
  - Women face a **double-bind** of being seen as either competent or likable — but not both.<sup>17</sup>
  - Women receive fewer stretch assignments<sup>18</sup> and more vague, personal, and unhelpful feedback than men<sup>19</sup> — preventing them from getting actionable information about their performance that would push them to learn, grow, and improve.
  - Women are expected to be more qualified than men for the same positions,<sup>20</sup> and are often hired based on their experience and accomplishments, whereas men are frequently hired based on their potential.<sup>21</sup>
  - Leadership opportunities for men often come with more resources (funding, supervisor support, team size) as compared to women’s leadership opportunities.<sup>22</sup>
  - Women are more likely to get **“glass cliff” positions** — leadership opportunities that are high stakes, are precarious, and have a high likelihood of failure.<sup>23</sup>



# Recommendations for Organizational Leaders

After acknowledging all these difficult realities, how can your organization respond to the challenge of retaining talented women leaders? We suggest you embrace the complexity and recognize that **it all starts with your culture**. Here are 3 steps we recommend:

## STEP 1

### **BUILD GREATER EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION INTO YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE.**

It will take some time for your organization to transition and transform. Make space for people to become aware, understand, and then process the changes needed for a successful future state to evolve. This is the foundation upon which to build organizational development initiatives.

- **Focus first on increasing equity** to ensure your organization's diversity & inclusion initiatives are successful. (Putting equity first is why we prefer using the acronym EDI, rather than DEI.) Review formal and informal organizational practices and procedures to ensure there aren't inequitable impacts. Look at how your systems and processes may unintentionally benefit some and burden others. How do these play out among hybrid workers? Fully remote teams? Primary caregivers?
- **Review your organizational mission, vision, and values statements.** Is EDI a focus? For lasting change, it must become infused into your organizational culture and demonstrated by leaders at all levels. Often, you'll need to refresh and revise these statements to ensure

that EDI is included as part of the foundation, and then evangelize the changes, while showing clear and measured ways for achieving your stated goals within a certain period of time. Create metrics and targets to ensure traction in the specific areas where your organization needs to improve — from hiring to promotion, retention, and employee satisfaction.

- **Educate everyone in the organization about how to recognize and respond to unconscious bias** — practices and behaviors that appear to be neutral, but which actually harm marginalized groups. Develop widespread bias awareness so that, across the organization, people are conscious of it and know how to take action to address it.
- **Build a more inclusive culture by expanding mindsets.** Once bias is widely understood, you'll need to reshape systems to ensure they align to the values of an inclusive culture. Teach leaders practices to solicit various perspectives, promote psychological safety, and shift the collective mindset to value and welcome differences. A message is only as strong as the executive team sending it, so ensure all are leading with practices and behaviors that align to your objectives.

## STEP 2

### **CONNECT WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP TO EDI TO INVIGORATE INITIATIVES TO RETAIN AND PROMOTE WOMEN.**

With an EDI lens, your organization can focus on systemically creating more equitable opportunities for women.

- **Include women in the conversation.** This is hopefully obvious, but any discussion of tactics for attracting, retaining, and developing women leaders should include women's voices in the conversation.



- **Ensure equitable salaries and pay transparency across the organization.** In our experience, setting clear goals and measurable targets is a large predictor of lasting success around pay equity, gender representation, and employee engagement.
- **Review the way that challenging work assignments are distributed.** Ensure that they're given to men and women equally and intentionally across the team to encourage learning and developing the skills required for senior roles. These are key opportunities for development, but they're often overlooked, tending to become incidental or accidental.
- **Provide managers with training so they know how to give constructive feedback,** provide support as well as challenge, and hold developmental conversations. When women have equitable access to a variety of challenging assignments, and they get helpful feedback and the support they need to grow into that work successfully, it accelerates their development.
- **Connect women with more senior leaders** who, in addition to providing feedback and support, can open doors to opportunities for growth and promotion. Creating intentional

organizational mentoring and sponsoring programs gives women greater access to senior leaders who can help direct them to the right kinds of challenging assignments and help them recognize the opportunities and learning potential to be gained from them. As is often said, women tend to be “over-mentored and under-sponsored,” so attention to sponsorship is especially key for long-term success.

- **Invest in formalized leadership development opportunities for women leaders** focused on the leadership competencies needed to thrive in your organization's particular context and culture, and importantly, ensure senior leaders give women the “air cover” needed to put their day-to-day responsibilities on hold to make space for their development.

### STEP 3 PROVIDE FLEXIBLE LEARNING SOLUTIONS FOR EVERYONE.

Create space for all employees to access learning and development opportunities that help them think and act differently, sustainably over time. Leaders of all genders will benefit from increased flexibility in development and equitable access to it.

## EQUITY TRENDS IN DEVELOPMENT

During the pandemic, women not only left the workforce — they also left leadership development opportunities behind. At the Center for Creative Leadership, we witnessed this in the form of a dramatic shift in our program participation rates for men vs. women. Before COVID, women represented approximately 30–50% of participants in our flagship global, in-person Leadership Development Program (LDP)<sup>®</sup> sessions. But in 2020, during the early

months of the pandemic, this dropped to just 10–15% — a signal that the pandemic seemed to be disproportionately impacting the accessibility of in-person learning for women leaders.

When we launched a live online version of LDP in June 2021, women made up 88% of participants in the first program, confirming that women were eager for leadership development in an accessible format. Since then, we've continued to see solid and stable enrollment of women in the program. Post-pandemic, women now represent about 50% of our participants across both virtual and in-person LDP sessions.



# Our Solutions



At the Center for Creative Leadership, we've been **trailblazing women's leadership development** since 1987. We conducted some of the earliest research on breaking the glass ceiling and pioneered leadership training programs for women. We've produced dozens of white papers, webinars, and publications on the subject, and have crafted custom organizational solutions for building greater equity, diversity, and inclusion at hundreds of organizations. Driven by client demand, we've helped thousands of women leaders navigate workplace challenges and prepare to take on systemic issues, working in partnership with clients across industries and around the globe.

That's why we support **transformative change and learning across the enterprise**, from working with executive teams on defining and implementing organization-wide efforts; to crafting supporting development initiatives; to our proven, transformative workplace learning solutions that are available in standardized or customized versions, and in online, in-person, or blended learning modalities.

We offer **women's leadership development solutions at both the individual and enterprise level**, and recommend that organizations leverage both as they seek to support, develop, and retain their women leaders.

## OUR HISTORY ON GENDER IN LEADERSHIP: PROGRAMS & PUBLICATIONS





# ORGANIZATIONAL SOLUTIONS

**Our enterprise-wide solutions address systemic and culture-based challenges to drive change collectively, for everyone.** Our experts can help your organization understand the skills, behaviors, and capabilities that are most important to your future, given your unique context and challenges; ensure your senior leaders can work together effectively, redefining roles and expectations as needed; create and nurture a culture that supports and capitalizes on the benefits of the way women lead; and build capacity to foster your organization's peak performance.



We can help with **developing a leadership strategy** for your organization. This provides the opportunity to engage in a structured process, taking a systemic view of the skills, behaviors, and practices needed to support the organization's business strategy and to create the culture needed for success. Recognizing and acknowledging the capabilities of the current talent across the organization and identifying development needs and opportunities for all can ensure an approach to preparing leaders that is both inclusive and deliberate.

➤ **Lean more:** [ccl.org/leadership-strategy](https://ccl.org/leadership-strategy)

## OUR FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION ON EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION: REAL™

Our REAL™ framework helps organizations bridge the gap between raising awareness of EDI and taking meaningful action to create inclusive leadership in an organization. It's designed to shift mindsets, behaviors, and practices toward more equitable and inclusive leadership for individuals, teams, and organizations.

Specifically, the REAL framework involves a 4-step process:

1. **Reveal** relevant opportunities.
2. **Elevate** equity.
3. **Activate** diversity.
4. **Lead** inclusively.







Approaches include long-term **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) solutions**, which create a culture that provides more equitable opportunities for women and any non-majority group, using our proprietary REAL™ framework. We can help ensure your people are equipped to recognize, respond, and move beyond bias so that everyone in the enterprise knows how to act as partners, allies, and advocates.

➤ **Learn more:** [ccl.org/edi](https://ccl.org/edi)



Other organizational solutions may be shorter-term, but foundational and supportive, like our **Better Conversations Every Day™ suite**. These solutions help lay the groundwork for people across your organization to have candid, respectful, constructive conversations with one another using a standard set of communication tools and practices.

➤ **Learn more:** [ccl.org/better-conversations](https://ccl.org/better-conversations)



We also offer a variety of **research-based leadership topic modules** you can use individually or mix-and-match together as part of a custom solution, to provide targeted skill-building, broaden understanding across groups, and build stronger relationships. Offerings include our proven content on Authentic Leadership, Boundary Spanning, Communication, Emotional Intelligence, Influence, Psychological Safety, Self-Awareness & Social Identity, as well as our core framework for effective leadership based on Direction, Alignment, and Commitment.

➤ **Learn more:** [ccl.org/leadership-topics](https://ccl.org/leadership-topics)



We can provide a **blend of organizational and individual solutions to help you make the greatest impact on your organization with CCL Passport™**, a subscription that lets you unlock unlimited use of our research-based leadership development content, programs, and tools to customize and scale development equitably for everyone in the entire organization.

➤ **Learn more:** [ccl.org/passport](https://ccl.org/passport)



# INDIVIDUAL SOLUTIONS

**Our development programs for individual women leaders are offered around the globe and promote capability development.** Participants have an opportunity to grow their leadership skills and network, either inside or outside their organizations. Learning outcomes include increased agency; greater self-clarity; an understanding of how to elevate their brand, both internally and externally; improved executive presence and ability to communicate with impact; stronger strategic networks; and sustained momentum with peer support.

We offer **both mixed-gender open programs**, available in a wide variety of dates and formats, and **women-only leadership development programs, custom-designed for organizations.**

## OPEN, MIXED-GENDER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS FOR INDIVIDUAL WOMEN

These research-based global programs are open and available to leaders of all genders. Aimed at helping participants address the common challenges faced and skills needed at each level of the organization, these highly personalized leader development programs build self-awareness, influence, and communication skills. Custom versions, scale-up options, and group discounts may be available; please inquire.



### For First-Level Leaders

#### **Maximizing Your Leadership Potential**

Format: Online or in person

One of the most difficult transitions for any new leader to make is the shift from successful individual contributor to effective manager of people and projects. Maximizing Your Leadership Potential is an in-depth training for first-level leaders — particularly those identified as high potentials — to help them grow their new manager skills and effectiveness. Personalized assessments and executive coaching sessions are included.

➤ **Learn more:** [ccl.org/mlp](https://ccl.org/mlp)



### For Mid-Level Managers

#### **The Leadership Development Program (LDP)®**

Format: Online or in person

The longest-running program of its kind in the world, our pioneering, transformational, flagship Leadership Development Program (LDP)® addresses the specific challenges faced by those leading from the middle of the organization. With over 100,000 alumni worldwide, LDP is built around developing the 6 vital skills that mid-level leaders need to make an impact on a diverse and changing world. Personalized assessments and executive coaching sessions are included.

➤ **Learn more:** [ccl.org/ldp](https://ccl.org/ldp)





### For Senior Executives

## Leadership at the Peak

Format: In person

This prestigious, exclusive, highly personalized program for C-level executives provides individualized development in the context of advancing the entire business. Open by application only, Leadership at the Peak helps clarify vision and enhance executive image, while delivering feedback-rich development, a personalized fitness assessment and consultation, and executive coaching, all in the company of a rigorously vetted group of peers.

➤ **Lean more:** [ccl.org/lap](https://ccl.org/lap)

## CUSTOM, WOMEN-ONLY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS FOR CLIENT ORGANIZATIONS



### Women's Leadership Experience

This bold, multi-phased leadership training for women can be customized for your organization's unique context and culture. Partner with us to craft a development experience that equips your high-achieving women in leadership roles with the skills they need to advance even further, helping them increase their influence, grow their skills, build their networks, and shatter limitations.

## CLIENT SUCCESS STORIES

### TECHNOLOGY & MANUFACTURING



We partnered with Ingersoll Rand to develop a custom Women's Leadership Program designed for mid-level managers aspiring to senior leadership positions

- **100%** of participants said gender-diversity awareness has increased company-wide.
- **88%** found greater visibility of women among top management.
- **88%** reported more women are under consideration for management positions.
- **86%** agreed there was improved mentoring and sponsoring of women.
- Participants were rated 22% higher in job performance, and the promotion rate for participants was 4x the average.

### NONPROFIT & HEALTHCARE



We partnered with the Carol Emmott Foundation to expand the individual leadership capacity, national visibility, and network of remarkable women leaders in health in order to make significant progress toward sparking change and improving gender equity in senior health leadership and governance.

- **88%** of participants said the networks developed during the program have been sustained, with many relationships enduring for 5+ years.
- **85%** said they had increased satisfaction with their careers in healthcare as a result of the relationships built in the program.
- **85%** reported improvement in their own national visibility as a result of these relationships.

**“I’m reflecting on my incredible experience with...the Women’s Leadership Experience. It was more than a training, conference, or class; it truly was an experience... It was the first time I felt energized instead of fatigued after 2 days on Zoom. [It] truly changed the way I manage, lead, and think.”**

-2020 Participant  
VP of Community, Healthcare Industry

**In 2020, 2021, and 2022, our partnership with Stellantis (formerly Fiat-Chrysler Automobiles) received Brandon Hall awards for excellence in the category of “Best Advance in Leadership Development for Women.”**





## Advancing Technical Women

Relying on decades of research about women's leadership, as well as our deep understanding of the challenges faced by women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), this intensive women's leadership development program is especially focused on retention and promotion of women in technical roles or at organizations in the technology industry. Designed by former women engineers, this program helps high-potential women with scientific or technical expertise develop strategic communication skills to break through mid-career barriers and rise to leadership roles. Whether your organization is a tech company or simply dependent upon a digitally-savvy workforce, the importance of retaining and advancing talented women and securing your leadership pipeline has never been greater.



MORE THAN HALF OF WOMEN WORKING IN STEM FIELDS LEAVE 10-20 YEARS INTO THEIR CAREERS.

## IMPACT

This bold, multi-phased leadership training for Participants in our Advancing Technical Women programs report satisfaction and lasting positive impact:

**97%** were satisfied with the program

**94%** reported making positive changes to their leadership behaviors

**92%** felt better equipped to advance in their careers

**37%** received a promotion within 6 months

**“The program I was in had a lot of strong women... so seeing and understanding others who were at similar places in their career was really rewarding. There was a sense of community. To this day, I'm still in touch with one of the women, 8 years later... It really helped me both professionally and personally to understand who I was, and to be more confident in that.”**

-VP of Client Engagement,  
IT Industry





# Determining The Best Format for Your Unique Context & Culture

## **Is it best to develop your women leaders through women-only experiences or through gender-diverse experiences?**

Both approaches can have a positive effect on retaining and developing the women within your organization. When making the decision, evaluate these factors:

- **Are women a demographic minority in the leadership ranks of your organization?**

If so, they may benefit from an all-women leadership development experience. The opportunity to connect and network with other women across their ranks can sometimes be more meaningful if it's less available in their day-to-day work lives.

- **Do you have executive-level support?** All-women programs are also most effective when they have the explicit support and involvement of executive sponsors. This sends a message to women leaders that their needs are seen and that the organization is investing in the value they are capable of creating.

- **Is the development hosted within your organization?** If so, consider including intentional and ongoing mentoring programs and sponsorship opportunities. Doing so can ensure women leaders are provided with guidance and support to help them integrate what they've learned into day-to-day operations.

- **All-gender leadership settings are also highly beneficial.** After all, women lead in organizations that are racially, culturally, socioeconomically, and gender diverse. Mixed-gender leadership development can help participants network, influence, and lead across demographics. And for women leaders struggling with burnout, it can be validating to hear that many of their challenges are shared across genders, functions, and even industries.

## CONTACT US

We would love to discuss the challenges, competencies, and context for women leaders at your organization. We are ready with a team of solution designers, project managers, evaluation experts, and other skilled individuals to begin planning your initiative. Contact our leadership experts today:

[ccl.org/women](https://ccl.org/women)



# Recommended Resources & Further Reading from CCL

## ARTICLES

- [5 Powerful Ways to Take REAL Action on DEI \(Diversity, Equity & Inclusion\)](#)
- [Retaining & Developing Women Leaders: 5 Steps for Success](#)
- [Inclusive Leadership: Steps Your Organization Should Take to Get It Right](#)
- [Making Gender Equity in the Workplace a Reality](#)
- [Why Companies Struggle to Tap the Power of Women's Leadership](#)
- [Transforming Your Organization](#)

## WHITE PAPERS

- [Glass Doors to the Corner Office](#)
- [Overcoming Barriers to Women's Leadership and Unlocking the Power of Diversity](#)
- [A Three-Step Strategy for Advancing Technical Women and Your Business](#)
- [What Women Want — And Why You Want Women — In the Workplace](#)

## WEBINARS

- [Women and Leadership: A Panel Discussion on the Imperative to Support Women Now](#)
- [Beyond Mentoring: The Critical Need to Sponsor Women in the Workplace](#)

## BOOKS

- [\*Beyond Bias: Move From Awareness to Action\*](#)
- [\*Beating the Odds: Winning Strategies of Women in STEM\*](#)
- [\*Kick Some Glass: 10 Ways Women Succeed at Work on Their Own Terms\*](#)

## WORKBOOK

- [Sponsoring & Mentoring Women Leaders for Success](#)



# Endnotes

- 1 <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/shecession-she-recession-2020-causes-and-consequences>
- 2 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/24/us-hiring-jobs-women-shecession>
- 3 <https://womenintheworkplace.com/2022>
- 4 <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/16/35percent-of-women-who-left-or-lost-their-jobs-during-the-pandemic-are-still-unemployed.html>
- 5 <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/fact-sheet-the-state-of-women-in-the-labor-market-in-2023/>
- 6 <https://www.axios.com/2022/05/04/women-fortune-500-boards-record>
- 7 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizeltng/2023/01/27/new-year-new-glass-heights-for-the-first-time-in-history-over-10-of-fortune-500-ceos-are-women/>
- 8 <https://fortune.com/2020/08/10/a-new-low-for-the-global-500-no-women-of-color-run-businesses-on-this-years-list/>
- 9 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/24/upshot/women-and-men-named-john.html>
- 10 <https://womenintheworkplace.com/2022>
- 11 <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/fact-sheet-the-state-of-women-in-the-labor-market-in-2023/>
- 12 <https://iwpr.org/providing-unpaid-household-and-care-work-in-the-united-states-uncovering-inequality/>
- 13 <https://hdr.undp.org/content/time-use-across-world-findings-world-compilation-time-use-surveys>
- 14 <https://womenintheworkplace.com/2022>
- 15 <https://womenintheworkplace.com/2022>
- 16 <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/>
- 17 <https://www.catalyst.org/research/the-double-bind-dilemma-for-women-in-leadership-damned-if-you-do-doomed-if-you-dont/>
- 18 <https://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/256769>
- 19 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0149206310365902>
- 20 <https://hbr.org/2017/10/research-objective-performance-metrics-are-not-enough-to-overcome-gender-bias>
- 21 <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00755/full>
- 22 <https://hbr.org/2012/11/study-women-get-fewer-game-changing.html>
- 23 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycaprino/2015/10/20/the-glass-cliff-phenomenon-that-senior-female-leaders-face-today-and-how-to-avoid-it/>



# CCL Locations

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The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)<sup>®</sup> is a top-ranked, global, nonprofit provider of leadership development. Over the past 50 years, we've worked with organizations of all sizes from around the world, including more than 2/3 of the Fortune 1000. Our cutting-edge solutions are steeped in extensive research and our work with hundreds of thousands of leaders at all levels.