

## TOOL 1.21

### Guidelines for Developing Women’s Careers and Leadership<sup>175</sup>

- » **GOAL:** Support gender-equitable career development and mobility
- » **TARGET UNIT:** Training

While many tools in this tool suite focus on creating opportunities and an inclusive work culture, it is equally important to develop a cadre of leadership-ready women candidates who can take advantage of a more inclusive work culture. Investments in training and activities to support women’s career development will help ensure that your company will be able to take advantage of the gains from a gender-diverse workforce and management team—and that you will be successful in attracting and retaining women with management potential. Such efforts are particularly important in areas where gender gaps have been identified.

Actions to support women’s leadership development and advancements can include:

- Ensuring that women have equitable access to leadership development programs already being offered
- Offering programs specifically targeted at developing women leaders by helping women to step into leadership roles and take advantage of professional opportunities
- Creating programs that raise awareness about the challenges women face so that supervisors/ managers are equipped to proactively support training programs and women leadership candidates
- Offering company-wide inclusion training to create a more positive environment for diversity

Activities to support women leaders can be undertaken in-house or by external partners and can draw on successful examples piloted by other companies.

### Ensure High-Level Support and Management of Training Programs

For training and development to be successful, there should be clear, visible high-level support for the program. The gender equity champion should report directly to the company’s senior executive, preferably the CEO, signaling a clear commitment to the goals set out by the organization and removing bureaucracy that may impede programing. The board should also be kept informed and involved in the development and rollout of a women’s leadership program—ideally to complement gender-diversification efforts at the board level as well—to ensure buy-in from shareholders.

<sup>175</sup> This tool was developed for the [Unlocking Opportunities for Women and Business toolkit](#) by The Humphrey Group, a Canadian-based firm specializing in leadership communication training.

## Build Key Support Structures for Training

In addition to high-level support, leadership training and development initiatives require support across the company. In addition to support from the board and CEO as described above, and leadership from the gender equity champion, support structures should include:

- Executive leadership
- Human resources department
- Participants' supervisors

## Support Activities

Leadership development and training programs cannot succeed alone. Training women leaders and supportive male champions will only lead to changes in the face of corporate leadership when they are supported by:

- Consistent communication about initiatives within the company, using mechanisms such as companywide quarterly emails, annual progress reports, and town halls, among others.
- Continuous engagement/visibility in training programs, using techniques such as program kickoffs, welcome letters, conferences, and summits.
- Changes in incentive structures; for instance, creating manager KPIs that include gender-inclusive promotions and upgrades, support for staff development, and flexible work.

In addition to these general recommendations, companies should implement concrete activities to support women's participation in trainings, depending on the specific challenges associated. For instance, where training takes place in a different location than work or outside of work hours, women may face particular childcare challenges. To facilitate women's participation in leadership training, consider giving women time off work to participate in trainings during work hours or provide stipends for additional childcare.

## Specific Skill Focus for Women's Leadership Development

Training content should be developed to support leadership development for women, as well as training male champions to better support women leaders.

## Leadership Training for Supervisors and Leaders of Women (Often, Male and Female Champions)

In order to support women's leadership development, women's managers need to understand the importance, challenges, and ways to support the development of women leaders. While male champions are often the focus of programs to improve inclusive workplace cultures, female managers may also need capacity building. When women

overcome challenges to become managers, they may have a keener perspective for challenges other women face, but they may also have unique blind spots that prevent them from seeing challenges that they did not personally experience—or they may consider that they made it, so others can as well.

To help both male and female managers become allies for women's leadership, training needs to highlight both implicit and explicit challenges women may face to becoming leaders, as well as presenting the benefits of a more diverse and inclusive leadership pipeline. Challenges may include workplace culture and stereotypes, broader cultural constraints, and 'gender-intensified constraints'—issues that theoretically affect both women and men but typically weigh heavier on women (for instance, childcare). Supervisors also need to understand the ways in which their own leadership and communication styles impact others and whether under their supervision feel supported.

Among the areas to cover in such programs:

- How women's managers may have certain unconscious biases regarding female leaders
- Examination of the cultural context, and how this informs workplace culture
- Awareness-raising for 'gender-intensified constraints,' which managers may not recognize as overly burdensome on women
- Leadership communication training

### Leadership Training for Women

To create a corporate culture in which women have a strong leadership identity, women's leadership initiatives should be multifaceted and mutually reinforcing. Program design should be based on barriers and needs identified by women within the organization.

The activities proposed here focus on women already in the workforce. As part of these efforts, also consider reaching out to local communities to raise awareness about potential industry careers and to encourage younger women into STEM sectors.

Key features of leadership programs for women include:

- **Vertical and horizontal integration:** Leadership development programs should span the entirety of an organization, from senior to junior levels and across different business units. This approach contributes to retention, as well as recruitment when new hires can have immediate access to programs. The senior-most female leaders in business units should play an active and visible role in training programs—specifically in the context of delivery. In doing so, junior women will be exposed to senior female role models. This exposure will help them develop strong leadership identities within a given corporate culture.

- **Networking opportunities:** Development programs should include opportunities for women to formally and informally network. Networking opportunities provide women with the opportunity to connect with other women who may face similar challenges and can help them identify solutions. This could take the form of a formal organization-wide women's network, an annual women's leadership conference, or local women's chapters. Such networks should include an executive-level sponsor, country-level chapters, and yearly action plans.
- **Tiered training:** Typically, women are present at mid- and senior levels of leadership, in addition to a range of junior positions. As noted above, senior women should play an active and visible role in training; however, they too must be offered opportunities to develop their leadership competencies. Here, contracting for external training support is recommended, since professionals who specialize in leadership development can provide the greatest impact. This training should focus equally on leadership competencies for subordinates, peers, and more senior executives.
- **Mentorship and sponsorship:** Mentorships and sponsorships have proven an important element in the advancement of women in organizations. Your company's leadership development program should feature such opportunities as a component of the overall training initiative. Because mentorship serves as an important mechanism for retention, these opportunities should be made available to mid- to senior-level women in particular, since this is where attrition rates are typically the highest. Senior mentors should have accountability for progress of mentees, according to an agreed set of criteria. While these programs can be developed between senior and more junior women, also think about mentorship and sponsorship programs that work across gender to ensure that young women and men have equitable support in their career growth. Examples of successful programs include PepsiCo's Power Pairs, which teams up senior leaders with more junior women of color to increase racial and gender diversity in the leadership development pipeline.
- **Leadership opportunities:** Development programs also should include opportunities for high-potential women to showcase their skills and abilities to the executive leadership. Visibility is a critical component of career advancement. Many women, and mid-level female employees in particular, have little exposure to the upper echelons of leadership. Opportunities such as presentations to senior leaders heighten promising women's visibility while providing valuable experiences that build confidence.

Leadership training programs should cover a range of topics and subject matter. Communications and career management are among the key areas.

## Effective Communication Skills

Strong communication skills are a fundamental leadership competency. To navigate corporate culture, women must have the tools to advocate for themselves and their

ideas in a manner that resonates with those in power. Cultural norms—and the resulting socialization—often discourage women from doing so, either in the home or in the workplace. Leadership communication training gives women the tools to influence at all levels of an organization, from delivering presentations to chairing meetings. By developing effective communication skills, women are perceived as leaders. This training should include:

- An understanding of optimal ways to address diverse and often male-dominated audiences in an influential manner
- Tools to speak and write in an effective and organized fashion—for instance, how to avoid habits that position women as subordinates
- Vocal training that encourages women to speak more effectively when surrounded by men
- Tools to help eliminate minimizing behaviors that reinforce traditional dynamics of power, such as confident body language, conversational eye contact, measured pace, and confident expression

By encouraging the application of these skills on a daily basis, training can help reinforce positive leadership perceptions, which are critical to women’s advancement through the career ranks.

## Career Management

Career management is an important area of leadership development, and women should have access to formal training. Career management is often supported by the human resources department, but supervisors also should play an active role in helping women build their short- and long-term career plans, as well as developing strategies that balance work goals and personal responsibilities. This training also might include ways to communicate career goals to senior leaders. In addition to comprehensive career planning, women should have opportunities for out-of-office experiences, such as job shadowing.

Because women consistently cite tension between work and personal responsibilities as a barrier to advancement, the issue of work-life balance should be included in career management planning. Training in this area should include guidance on ways to navigate responsibilities and communicate effectively about personal and professional needs.

## Hard and Soft Skills

In rapidly changing technical industries, it is critical that women have access to technical training to keep them at the cutting edge of the sector. Training programs should consider cultural norms which may mean that women have a relatively low level of baseline knowledge. They also should involve creating opportunities for women to pursue additional technical education, in either internal or external settings—and supporting them as they take advantage of such continuing education programs.

If there is a gender disparity in the ways in which employees make use of such programs, consider undertaking an assessment to understand the reasons for the disparity. Following the assessment, you can design interventions to increase women’s participation, such as childcare subsidies to support women’s participation in continuing education. The training programs should be integrated into career planning and prioritized by supervisors. Integrating this type of training into annual objectives for women, tied to performance, is another way to ensure that hard skills development remains a priority.

Soft skills training also represents an important area of development, particularly in the context of leadership competencies. It is critical to ensure that those responsible for women’s development know how to support them and to ensure that women who have been identified for advancement can advocate for themselves and their abilities. Such training includes the leadership training for women and supervisors and leaders of women described above.