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Human Leadership

Women at the top:

**How do they role model human leadership?
And what can we learn for our rising
women leaders?**

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Human leadership has a foundation in Emotional Intelligence focused on helping everyone to keep their “human switched on”.

Post-pandemic our leaders and managers have remained our arms into organisations, the ones that work with and through others and keep organisations on track. Yet their roles have grown and extended in how this is done, beyond how they impact people’s performance and now stretching into how they impact people’s wellbeing.

This has placed more responsibility on leaders and managers to lead with a human-first approach that helps their teams work well and even extends into client and customer relationships.

The advancement of technology at a rapid pace with generative AI has led companies everywhere to seek to further understand their human differentiators. We need to be our best human selves and that means knowing what makes us special and unique as humans and to do that deliberately.

Human Leadership is more than just leading with empathy and compassion or making errors, it’s about how we know and manage ourselves, and how we know and manage our relationships with others. Going a step further in each area of EQ, we need to:

- not just be aware of ourselves, but to demonstrate authenticity
- not just to know others, but be inclusive
- not just manage ourselves, but be great role models
- And not just be great at managing our own relationships but connecting and supporting others in their relationships

New generations coming into the workforce may be attracted by the latest gimmicks and trends like sleep pods, 4-day weeks, yoga classes, but year-on-year research consistently shows the reason people stay in organisations and be their best human selves is having opportunities for development and growth, stewarded, guided and coached by great managers and leaders.

Humans as living beings have a tendency to grow naturally and it is this driver in us all that leads us to continually seek learning that helps us understand more about ourselves and those around us so we can navigate our world as best we can to thrive and flourish.

At Bailey & French, we have been working on Human Leadership for many years and have launched learning that is universally applicable to leaders in any organisation, industry or indeed country (our Human Leadership online course has been used by thousands of leaders in 155 countries across the world). Since launching this two years ago we have further explored leadership in this new era and how a human approach has a positive impact on both performance and wellbeing as well as all areas of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

We had the opportunity to work with a rare group of senior women who all currently sit in Board Chair, Vice Chair, or Lead Director roles (many with dual Exec roles in addition) of a range of organisations from different industries with revenues from \$5m to over \$5bn.

We discovered what women in such senior roles do as Human Leaders that we can learn from to input to future intervention design. Specifically, we wanted to ensure that this learning is fused into the development experience to support women rising from middle/exec management fairly in any leadership development work. Currently, despite the positive outcomes of having women on boards (on average, companies with the highest percentages of women board directors outperformed those with the least by 53 percent. [Women on Boards](#)), women are still underrepresented at this level (28% women at C-suite McKinsey [Women in the Workplace 2023](#)).

So, what is it that these senior women do as human leaders?

We looked at Human Leadership from four topic angles:

1. Authenticity
2. Inclusion
3. Role Modelling
4. And Connecting others


Authenticity is self-awareness, how well do we know ourselves? Our values, strengths, skills, and purpose? Being aware and letting others know who we are and what we believe in helps build trust over time. When people feel they know you as a leader and how you will respond to future situations it significantly reduces anxiety in workplace scenarios.

So, how do Women on Boards behave authentically in their roles?

Authentic behaviour, stereotypes, psychological capital/resilience

We all battle with anticipated judgement from stereotypes and a typical stereotype at this level is the expectation of behaving in a “male” way believed to be direct, decisive, command, and control versus being the “good girl” – nice, kind, listening, agreeable, and people-pleasing.

This is a common experience for women leaders to feel they are going against the grain to be directive, particularly if in a crisis when people are looking for clarity under pressure.



This can be greeted positively but women leaders are aware of the subtlety of how to be direct and assertive without being labelled as aggressive.

These women leaders were clear that they had learned the stereotypes they had experienced spoke more of the other person than themselves, and the sooner they accepted this the more confidence in their own authenticity grew. Some had used a therapeutic route to support this development and help clarify the stereotypes/bias/discrimination they suffered were unjustified, should not be internalised, and developed methods to minimise the impact of others' perspectives and associated behaviours/micro aggressions.

Building psychological capital as resilience is also a way of creating those resources to remain resilient in the face of any challenge. Equipping rising women leaders with this learning offers an immediate and personal method of minimising the impact of others' bias particularly when there is no opportunity to challenge it in the moment. For many women investing personally in their own development, they have the opportunity to choose a therapeutic professional or coach to target this strength-building. For those who are offered "business coaching" through their organisation, it would be critical for full anonymity to be granted as well as the choice of coach offered.

Maintaining a constant focus on fair and transparent performance assessment when in succession planning/promotion conversations is another way we can support women into lead roles and by maintaining a curious mindset when people might offer perceptions that deviate into stereotypical judgements. Could simply having more women leaders present in those conversations be one of the reasons we see three more women in leadership roles for every woman in a Lead Director/Board role?


Authentic expression in physical appearance, whole self, sharing vulnerabilities

Women can face the hurdle that they feel they need to build competency and credentials before they can relax and express their authentic selves. Examples are that senior women will show their authenticity in how they dress; for instance with colour/style and that demonstration of their personality increases the more their competency develops. This stems from a fear of being judged by what they wear and what that says about them as a leader before being considered for their actual professional contribution (example: Dressing like a leader).

In some cases, this extends beyond clothing to other items and status symbols such as jewellery, homes and cars.

"I kept my life private – I did not wear my engagement ring as I would have been kicked off my career track. And the result of this was being given feedback that being quieter and maintaining personal privacy about my life makes me unapproachable as a leader, I can't win."

This focus on judged appearance is understood and recognised as an issue in most workplaces and something we can and need to help rising women leaders to overcome.



We can do this by challenging judgements when we hear them and being more curious with everyone. Thankfully increasing curiosity without judgement is a core aspect of most inclusion programmes that now lean towards creating psychological safety in the workplace. We need to ensure that we offer a safe space for rising women leaders to be able to share what helps them to be authentic and open with their values, their purpose, and their personalities.

“I am happiest when I am myself. I am miserable when I can’t be myself, and my performance isn’t good either.”

This quote just shows how important authenticity is to focus on for future women leaders as it affects performance directly which can then be a blocker for progression and/or a career derailer.

Workplaces have advanced and continue to evolve with new generations and new work practices such as working remotely, and this raises the question of how much this will continue to be an issue in the future for women?

We don’t expect people working remotely to be dressed in a suit or formally for virtual calls and meetings and this offers the environment for women to be less concerned in expressing themselves authentically when others are less formal.


How much more performance could we release into our organisations if we could boost women’s confidence to feel more comfortable expressing their authentic selves?

Having parameters and simple frameworks helps people who are holding back due to being concerned about oversharing. Focusing on extending what we do share in a safe and respectful space to include our values, knowledge, skills, strengths and our personal purpose offers a step for rising women leaders who may be holding back due to not knowing what to or what not to share. Bringing our “whole selves to work” can lead to oversharing of vulnerabilities that negatively impact our working relationships regardless of gender. Guidance on this broadly for all future leaders gives the foundation for everyone to learn how to do this as a leader effectively and positively.

Learning can come from training and development, peer learning groups, mentoring or simply observing how other leaders share parts of themselves in order to influence and create engagement in strategy or other communications.

Authenticity, perceptions of self

As humans we are living beings and we all have a tendency to grow, learn and evolve. The research on Emotional Intelligence suggests that as we age and experience more of life every day our EQ increases. And yet we often feel held back by what our family, friends, or colleagues know of who we are and the subsequent labels that can be associated with us. People like consistency as it creates trust and therefore people like to feel they know another person and associate words and labels with them. Over time this can mean that people feel held back by historical perspectives that don’t take into account the amount which we may have evolved and changed. In organisations where turnover is low, tenure



is high and where generations of family ownership exist this can make it difficult for leaders to step up and succeed when others are expecting particular behaviours associated with previous versions of oneself. With families in business, this can also be problematic when personal relationship issues leak into the more formal work environment. The distribution of power, wealth, shares, and votes in family businesses also creates complexity and sometimes rivalry and resistance amongst family members that impact how comfortable they are being authentic in the boardroom. Many family businesses utilise family therapy transparently to establish ways of working that support effective board behaviour and find it critical for board/organisational success.

Authenticity, Voice and Communication

Having a voice and using it wisely and authentically seems to be a skill senior women learn early on in their careers.

Guidance from mentors on when to speak and what to say focuses on gaining credibility through only speaking to add beneficial input and prioritise focus on profit and productivity as well as shareholder needs. At a board level, it is expected the majority of input is tied to these in some way. Not only using voice at the right time and with the right topics but also using silence is an important method. Great Board Chairs will ensure that all voices are heard, yet in practice this doesn't always happen and leaders have to find or make the space to be heard. By creating the reputation of adding valuable input women leaders find their impact increases over time in such circumstances once they have developed the respect for their unique contribution.


Aligned to this good board practice will ensure that there is clear communication of what each individual not only brings to the board but also what is expected in terms of contribution. By ensuring this onboarding best practice upfront it may decrease the time and any delay it takes for individual women to have an impact on joining a board or senior leadership team.

Authenticity, Determination, Grit, Resilience

Today's women leaders demonstrate personal determination and resilience as when questioned about this, most, if not all, can offer an example of a negative message given to them in their early career about how far they were likely to go and what they could achieve.

"If you work really hard, you could even be an Executive Board Admin.....(and now I'm Board Chair)".

We can help rising women leaders develop grit and resilience to face into this type of limiting commentary with determination but perhaps consider more broadly how everyday career conversations may damage/limit ambition for everyone.



We need to ensure that career development conversations in our organisations are uncapped and limitless to not dampen or damage the dreams, that with a plan can become strategy.

In many organisations when people are negotiating a pay increase, they often cite their achievements against their goals and comparisons with other peers to justify and negotiate a raise and in many circumstances, their manager may have differing perceptions of their performance leading to a “difficult conversation”. How this is fed back to people along with timelines for growth needs to take into account the potential negative impact this could have if phrased in a way that damages confidence.

Whilst this isn’t a gender-specific solution, it is possible that biases/stereotypical views creep into the feedback given, albeit subtly, but that negatively impacts women from building confidence to strive for more influential leadership roles. This could be linked to the common notion of the “broken rung” on the career ladder.

Inclusion is creating the conditions and environments where people can be themselves, have a voice in what they care about, and be recognised and valued for their contribution so they feel that they belong.

How do we increase inclusion in our boards and organisations particularly in traditionally male industries?


Women leaders in top roles appear very comfortable and experienced in talking about inclusion in general and often not only advise on this but take positive action themselves in their organisations.

The first response highlighted the research that having a woman Chair and/or CEO equates to three further women in exec/senior level roles in an organisation. This is suggested to be an effect of attracting more diverse candidates from a smaller pool to the open roles, as they see it is possible to achieve C-suite careers, rather than positive discrimination at the selection/assessment stage.

This seems to be just as prevalent in traditional male industries as in others.

Inclusion, amplifying voice, creating Psychological Safety

Another common action taken amongst women leaders was giving voice to all employees, creating platforms for people to be heard, and asking more and more frequently to continuously encourage open communication regardless of what changes were taking place in the organisation. It is common for organisations to time requests for feedback with changes, both positive and negative, and particularly employees in large organisations can feel manipulated if they don’t have the freedom to share what they want to share and are only asked about the organisational interests or feelings associated with the specific change.



As a woman leader, people often assume a level of greater empathy and seek you out as a messenger to help with particular issues of inclusion. Owning this role honourably and diffusing fear makes a huge difference within organisations where there isn't widespread psychological safety to speak up and women leaders find this an additional responsibility and privilege to make time for, but which isn't always recognised or valued. Finding networks that can further support this inner open conversation and reinforce psychological safety to share vulnerabilities could be an avenue for organisations to explore further and identify how to create opportunities for everyone to promote this dialogue continuously. It seems platforms for discussion and dialogue are critical in all organisations for DEI as well as other strategic priorities such as greater collaboration and innovation.

There are huge variations in levels of inclusive behaviour both within and between organisations meaning that whilst some are focusing on sophisticated initiatives to address specific challenges such as the impact of menopause on career development, others are still very much at the early stages of understanding what inclusion is and so repeated exposure for enhancing other awareness and encouraging curiosity of others is critical to move forward in the long term. Offering the benefit of the doubt to others at a senior level also diminishes the fear of failure or potential offense when people try new behaviours but “trip up” and get it wrong.

Inclusion, starting young with girls

Many women leaders encourage and pave the way for women-empowered workplaces, creating pathways for girls in their lives into leadership opportunities to see it and believe it's possible for us all. This begins early and starts with school age parenting by not tolerating put-downs in front of other family members/generations but handling discrimination openly and with gentle firmness of what is acceptable.

Our brains absorb everything like a sponge from ages 0-17 years old and much of the neurological hard wiring is being done through a myriad of human interactions/challenges/experiences we navigate and get a response from throughout our formative years and in school in what is expected to be an “equal” environment.

This follows into how younger women enter the workforce, helping them to increase their visibility, presence, contribution, and recognition by being the voice that asks the questions, picks them in the group to speak, and gets them to come up front and not shrink in the back of the room. This can be done to reinforce the safety of being brave and courageous with mentorship and sponsorship support.

Inclusion and local community

Board members are encouraged to get involved in the local community in which their business operates whether that be through philanthropic opportunity or joining non-profit boards to share expertise and insights. Many of the women in this roundtable group sat on multiple boards including nonprofit to share and enhance their continued curiosity to

learn about and support others. This was more important where the employees are a significant population within that local community to stay closely connected to the culture within and context of the organisation.

For rising women leaders, additional time constraints of multiple board roles may be challenging and despite wanting to, it may be impossible, so finding time in regular work before women take on board roles could be supportive of their impact once there and could be incorporated into leadership programmes.

Role Modelling is a key part of any leadership role and its importance increases with seniority as responsibility and accountability increases. People look to leaders to follow and expect them to live the values and expectations of the organisation demonstrating integrity.

What do we do to role model integrity and consistency in our behaviour that inspires other women?

Follow through/living the values

Following through when you're not sure if you said enough or explained actions/mistakes adequately.


"Many times, in groups when time is pressured it can be hard to say the right thing at the right time or when you notice a vulnerability and it's been afterwards that I've gone back to someone to explain a comment further or say something I should have said that I didn't get a chance to and reinforce my thinking. The thanks I've had in those moments have proven it's an important action even if it's a short email or text it demonstrates the understanding and connects you meaningfully as a human. The moment does not always have to be lost and words can be explained and sometimes if needed can be undone."

Living the values is often professed to be impactful but examples like this for rising senior leaders regardless of gender are helpful insight and an easy practice to implement and encourage.

Storytelling, sharing vulnerabilities

Storytelling is a top response for role modelling leadership in general and this group of women leaders identified that it means so much more when you openly share a specific experience that you have a feeling others are going through and experiencing as it demonstrates a "knowing" that connects and bonds people.

Linked to the storytelling, it is recommended to only share with appropriate transparency regarding struggles and vulnerability: knowing *how* to share work relevant vulnerabilities (including personal issues affecting work) is important ensuring it's related and contained. Leaders need to be cautious to not load the listener with emotional turmoil that they may feel overwhelmed and unable to process it or feel expected to respond



somehow beyond their capability. This is a skill that can be developed through repetitive practice in a non-judgemental environment making it more likely to have a positive outcome when used appropriately and learning what is appropriate with peers.

Behavioural response to work events/Communication styles

Demonstrating consistent behaviour with regard to energy level and offering a measured response and reaction to workplace events is important to learn early at a senior leadership level. Energy and emotion can be transferred and play out both positively and negatively. Keeping a measured response helps others have the greatest connection to you over time rather than bringing them through the peaks and troughs that can cause rollercoaster communications with exaggerated impacts. If a follow-up communication is missed, it can cause a lack of consistency in overall longer-term messaging and clarity.

For example, passion for work can be energising for others when demonstrated well, but excitement for the future can also be closely connected to anxiety as the behaviours can be connected and very similar. Helping leaders get real-time transparent feedback about their leadership style when communicating key messages is critical to learn how to find the perfect balance. This could be through simply getting someone to record you whilst communicating to an audience, recording a broadcast on a virtual platform, or simply asking someone in the audience for honest feedback about how they felt emotionally through the communication. Any of these can be incorporated into leadership development programmes if not already and are fundamentals that may reveal rich information about a leader on multiple levels beyond emotional impact.

Visibly supporting leaders, having leadership in place

Ensuring the right leadership is in place has a huge impact on how a leader at board level role models in their organisation to inspire others. If a leader is overwhelmed and not coping, their behaviour is more likely to be erratic and this reflects on senior leaders not supporting or even hiring the right people at the right level to manage the complexity of the team, department or function. Representing others who may be struggling to get the right structure and resources in place is a huge issue in a post-pandemic and economically uncertain world. Most organisations are as lean as they can be meaning that when people leave, the workload is distributed amongst others until a replacement is found, which can take a long time and increase stress on others. If unable to cover the resource requirements, then supporting these leaders to manage priorities and say no to particular demands is critical as their teams are listening and observing what may be the responsibility they take on if promoted. With many women at the top of middle management opting out of further career moves because of the fear of increased stress and responsibility as a major reason, this visibility of supporting other leaders when managing challenges of resource and workload is ever more important.

Demonstrating respect for your team as equals

Transparency equals fairness: giving people all the information you have even if the full picture isn't available yet and doing so without delay communicates respect for your team. Knowledge is power if wielded inappropriately and/or shared with particular people in a hierarchy without reason beyond simply a leadership privilege. People often know how long you've held onto that information when they hear it, and this is critical to trust which demonstrates and is fundamental to integrity.

Meaningful human connection is hard to create for ourselves and takes layers of emotional intelligence over years of life experience, yet great human leaders not only do this for themselves but also connect others across organisations. It is recognised that this ability to connect others and help them value each other and collaborate well will be a distinguishing feature of successful organisations of the future.

What it is that we do differently to help create connection and unity amongst others in our boards, our organisations, our networks?

Creating safe space

Do women leaders create more unity in networks and their organisations by being more approachable, polite, empathetic, and good listeners?


It is suggested this is why people come to them with all kinds of issues that they can explore and resolve if in a senior leadership role and avoid other leaders who are harder to talk to and might shut the issue down. This suggests that women take issues more seriously, and create safer spaces for those issues, perhaps with more awareness of the impact, having personally experienced any discrimination previously and therefore are more likely to understand and help. Do women leaders create more psychological safety for younger generations due to this perception, valid or not?

For rising women leaders, it could be critical for this to be "unhidden" and recognised in performance reviews as a significant contribution to the cultural development of the organisation and particular initiatives to embrace DEI strategies and more. Bringing questions about how often this unseen activity occurs into reviews and ongoing career/performance conversations may help to elevate and evaluate new indicators of impact for leaders more broadly in organisations.

Creating connections

"As a woman leader, I learned to be friendly but not friends"

Being careful about specific sharing to connect with others, women leaders learn to not overshare in the workplace and give too much, knowing that what you share can be used positively and negatively. It is worrying that the impact of being judged and not only by those who they see every day, but those they share with in much broader networks than ever before through social media channels and platforms really shuts people down, pushes people to hold back, not be their whole selves and then have to cope with all the



stress and isolation that withdrawal creates. Women leaders will help those they mentor, sponsor, and develop to be cautious with how they create connections for all these reasons.

Meaningful human connection is different than trying to fit in, we need to keep working on sharing this more broadly for women to be comfortable to be authentic with skill, to belong and be themselves. This feels like the greatest opportunity for those pioneering organisations supporting women leaders to continue to grow into board-level roles.

It is already widely recognised that supporting all leaders to discover their best human skills and keep their human switched on is critical. The advancing pace of AI threatens how we build confidence for success in the future with organisations moving into a new era of work. The level of uncertainty continues to increase and people question what their value is and will be going forward. Blending the human with technology focuses us sharply on human differentiators, which are universal regardless of gender, and the sooner we elevate this universality to organisational advantage the better.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Rarely do we get the opportunity to get groups of mixed women leaders from successful organisations in one room together sharing their insights and expertise on how they perform their roles and what has helped them.

Considering the low number of women on boards we still need to do all we can to learn what organisations can do to support rising women leaders to reach those top roles, not just for equal opportunities for women, but for a more diverse organisation overall.

Blending this learning into leadership development programmes to ensure that the fine-tuning makes a difference is critical and I highlight my key findings here as recommendations not just for supporting rising women leaders but for all developing leaders:

- Therapeutic support for women/people early on in their careers to learn techniques to deflect others' ignorance/stereotypical views and not internalise them (develop personal resilience) – could existing EAP programmes be asked to offer this explicitly?
- Have women present in career development conversations for rising women leaders at senior middle level within organisations
- Ask women what supports them to be authentic in a safe space where they can be honest and then act on it – it may be specific to the organisational culture
- Ensure leadership development includes space to practice sharing knowledge, skills, strength and purpose with parameters/frameworks that guide to a perfect balance without oversharing and feeling overexposed
- Family therapy in family boards to specifically address allowing others to grow and evolve beyond past perceived behaviours/versions of oneself

- Skill development to practice repetitively communicating with a board tying insights to the strategic priorities
- Ensuring board level roles have role profiles with expectations of the role communicated to all members of the board every time a new member joins
- Feedback in career development conversations should feel “uncapped” into the future and training for leaders should ensure feedback does not damage confidence but celebrates and recognises grit and determination as well as the ability to learn quickly
- Not just create platforms for employee voice, but elevate those platforms to ask more and more frequently and continuously across a broader variety of channels to catch people whenever and however they are ready to share
- Creating more opportunities for open conversations/dialogue through inner networks across all topics
- Invite and welcome women into the room differently, come up front, ask them questions, give them a voice, share names first and then ideas giving visibility and opportunity to those nervous to do it all on their own
- Take risks with people who may not have led a new initiative previously but have transferable skills and demonstrate belief and support for them in stepping up
- Carve space and time for all leaders in development to spend time in their community before coming into senior leadership roles to truly understand and connect with their main employee base as closely as possible
- Offering leadership development opportunities that emphasise peer learning where leaders can safely practice new behaviours such as communicating and get real time feedback to learn rapidly how to adapt their style for the best impact with different audiences
- Connecting leaders across the organisation so that they can support each other visibly and at the right time
- Learning the impact of knowledge as a leadership privilege and minimising negative impact by training leaders to communicate transparently
- Recognising the hidden roles that rising women leaders play in organisations such as responding to requests for unofficial employee support by discussing the impact on culture in performance reviews and conversations as indicators of performance
- Support leaders to be aware of their human strengths and how they are unique differentiators to be used well in meaningfully connecting others in organisations

We would like to thank Meghan Juday and the women members of the [Lodis Forum](#) who contributed to this qualitative research for their time, insights, and support. The aim of this paper is to highlight new, refresh existing, and reinforce effective ways to further evolve initiatives in all types of organisations to humanise work for everyone. People need to feel valued and respected for their unique and brilliant contributions and feel safe to be their best selves with opportunities to continuously learn and grow.

At Bailey & French, a woman owned organisation on a mission to humanise workplaces across the world, we provide human people solutions for the whole employee experience. To learn more about our work and discuss ways we can support you, your team, and your organisation get in touch [here](#).

Human Leadership Online Course available on an individual basis [here](#).

