

# Women in Leadership: Navigating Challenges and Obstacles

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Lia was a sales manager at a successful software company and she was on track for a big promotion. Having been at this level for over two years, she had discussed her desire for growth with the sales director many times, and the two had worked closely together to create a career path outlining the activities, skill development, and milestones she'd need to hit before they would consider giving her more responsibility.

Lia had remained dedicated to this path, completing every activity, learning every skill, and hitting every milestone identified.

But, when senior roles opened up, they went to individuals from outside the company. That stung. Lia had done everything right but still hit a wall.

Instead of letting this get her down, Lia decided to take action. She knew she had to do something to amplify her own career – it was clear no one would do it for her.

Lia turned to mentorship and networking. She connected with women who had been in her shoes, who'd climbed the ranks and knew a thing or two about getting ahead. The conversations she had with these women weren't just pep talks; these mentors put Lia's name out there, recommended her for new roles, and introduced her to new circles.

One of these introductions led Lia to be able to showcase her skills on a bigger stage. It wasn't long before she started getting noticed, and not just by her own company. She was recruited for a job at a new organisation, one that was committed to female empowerment and excited about what Lia brought to the table.

Lia's journey shows that sometimes it's not just about working hard; it's about making sure the right people know your name. Sometimes, a setback is just the nudge you need to look bigger and go further.

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Hello and welcome to our lesson on *Navigating Challenges and Obstacles*.

Today, we'll explore the incredibly diverse landscape of women's leadership, shedding light on the common hurdles faced by women in leadership roles and sharing practical strategies to navigate these challenges.

Our objective is simple yet profound: to empower you with knowledge and tools that not only address the barriers head-on but also pave the way for a more inclusive, equitable workplace where women leaders thrive.

Our exploration begins with an understanding of the unique obstacles women leaders face. These barriers often manifest in three distinct but interrelated forms: unequal opportunities, lack of confidence, and the often-discussed glass cliff. [1]

Let's start with opportunities. Women have the same opportunities as men, right? Wrong.

Studies and experiences shared by women in the workplace paint a pretty vivid picture: when it comes to climbing the corporate ladder, women often feel like they're running on a treadmill while their male colleagues take the lift.

This isn't just talk; the numbers back it up. For instance, even before the pandemic shook things up, research from the Centre for Creative Leadership highlighted a frustrating reality. Despite making up nearly half the workforce, women are less likely to be in leadership positions. In fact, out of 500 Fortune 500 CEOs, only 33 (just 6.6%) are female. [2]

When we look at other leadership roles, the picture gets brighter - but just a little bit. Women face barriers to getting promoted at every stage, even from an entry-level position to a manager role. In 2023, for every 100 men promoted from entry-level to manager, just 87 women were promoted [3].

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What's behind this gap? It's a mix of old-school, unconscious biases and workplace cultures that haven't caught up with the times. These biases aren't always obvious; sometimes, they're woven into the very fabric of how companies operate. Unconscious bias encompasses everything from ingrained gender stereotypes to subtle preferences regarding how women should act, speak, and dress [4].

Women report having to jump through more hoops and work harder to get the same nods of approval their male counterparts might receive for similar achievements. This isn't just about not getting credit where it's due; it's about missing out on opportunities for growth, advancement, and leadership roles.

In simpler terms, women are often playing the game on a harder difficulty setting, not because they lack skill or ambition, but because the rules themselves are skewed. This is a reminder that for real change to happen, it's not just individual efforts that need to ramp up; the systems and structures in place need a serious overhaul to level the playing field.

To counteract this, organisations must intentionally create an environment where women's achievements and potential are recognised and rewarded equitably. This includes transparent criteria for promotions, ensuring women are considered for high-visibility projects, and actively challenging stereotypes that hinder women's advancement.

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Another hurdle is the internal struggle with confidence many women face. Doubts about qualifications or impostor syndrome can significantly hamper one's ability to see themselves as leaders. [5]

To overcome this, women are encouraged to engage in self-affirmation practices, seek out role models and mentors, and embrace opportunities for leadership development. Organisations can support this by offering leadership training tailored to address these specific challenges, reinforcing women's self-efficacy and leadership identity.

The final barrier we'll discuss before getting into strategies to move past them is the glass cliff.

Sometimes, when women are promoted to executive leadership roles, they are actually being set up for an uphill battle filled with stress and a low likelihood of success.

The concept of the glass cliff suggests that women are more likely to be appointed to leadership roles during crises, placing them in more precarious positions than men. The precarious nature of these positions often leads to shorter leadership stints for women, highlighting a significant challenge in the pursuit of gender equality in the corporate world. The glass cliff adds another layer to the barriers women face in achieving and maintaining high-level leadership roles.

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So now that we know about these common challenges, what can women do to overcome these barriers and succeed as leaders?

Let's start with mentorship and networking like Lia did in the story we told at the start of this lesson. A robust support network that includes both mentors and peers is invaluable for women navigating leadership paths. These networks provide not only guidance and advice but also opportunities for advocacy and visibility. Organisations can facilitate this by establishing mentorship programs and encouraging the formation of professional networks for women.

Organisations also have a responsibility to promote equity and inclusion. The path to leadership should not be a solitary journey for women. Creating a culture of equity and inclusion involves everyone in the organisation. It means challenging biases, fostering an environment of support and respect, and ensuring that policies and practices reflect a commitment to diversity.

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Throughout today's session, we've examined the challenges women in leadership face, from systemic barriers to personal hurdles. By understanding these obstacles and implementing strategic interventions, both women and organisations can create a more supportive, equitable workplace. Remember, the goal is not just to navigate these challenges but to dismantle the barriers altogether, paving the way for future generations of women leaders.

As we wrap up, let's reflect on actionable steps we can all take. For the women leaders among us, let this be a call to embrace your leadership journey with confidence, seek out and offer mentorship, and advocate for equity in every space you occupy. For organisations, the challenge is to fundamentally change the practices that limit women's leadership potential, fostering an environment where diversity is not just celebrated but integrated into the fabric of the organisation's culture.

Thank you for joining today's session. Together, let's commit to making the workplace a site of opportunity and growth for everyone, irrespective of gender.

[1] Overcoming Obstacles in Women's Leadership and Unlocking the Power of Diversity, Sophia Zhao (2020)

<https://cclinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/overcoming-barriers-womens-leadership-center-for-creative-leadership.pdf>

[2] Overcoming Obstacles in Women's Leadership and Unlocking the Power of Diversity, Sophia Zhao (2020)

<https://cclinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/overcoming-barriers-womens-leadership-center-for-creative-leadership.pdf>

[3] Women in the Workplace, 2023. Emily Field, Alexis Krivkovich, Sandra Kügele, Nicole Robinson, and Lareina Yee (2023)

<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>

[4] 7 Challenges Female Leaders Face in the Workplace – And How to Combat Them, Andy Botwin (2022)

<https://www.strategypeopleculture.com/blog/challenges-female-leaders-face-in-the-workplace/>

[5] Overcoming Obstacles in Women's Leadership and Unlocking the Power of Diversity, Sophia Zhao (2020)

<https://cclinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/overcoming-barriers-womens-leadership-center-for-creative-leadership.pdf>