How to Build a

Women's Leadership Development Program

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Introduction

According to the Women in the Workplace Report from McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.org, women make up only 21% of Senior Vice President (SVP) roles and 20% of C-Suite roles, and this challenge is particularly dire when it comes to women of color—who represent just 4% of SVP roles and 3% of C-Suite roles.

As organizations evolve to meet the needs of their workforce, it's becoming increasingly necessary to create opportunities for career advancement, mentorship, and diversity of leadership—especially for historically marginalized groups like women.

Women in leadership positions—or those who desire to become leaders—are often an underserved group in the workplace, meaning they many times do not receive the focus and resources they require to be successful.

Men represent 80% of the executive suite and are twice as likely as women to advance to an executive position.

Only 4.9% of Fortune 500 CEOs and 2% of S&P 500 CEOs are women.

Out of 100 men promoted to management, only 72 women are promoted.

Men have ended up holding 62% of manager-level positions, while women hold just 38%.

The stats are striking. For this reason, more women end up getting stuck at entry-level or individual contributor positions, leading to fewer women becoming managers.

But having women in leadership positions is not only good for morale, diversity, and creativity. It's good for business. Businesses with more women leaders have been shown to outperform their competitors by over a third; and strong representation of women in higher administrative positions leads to improved organizational health, global competitive advantage, responsiveness to stakeholders, and a better public image.

So, it should come as no surprise that many businesses are putting a large emphasis on developing their female employees into leaders.

But how exactly are they doing this?

Enter the women's leadership development program.

What is

a Women's Leadership Development Program?

Is a women's leadership program really different from any other development program, you ask? The answer is a resounding yes. Unlike traditional development programs, mentorships, courses, and trainings, a women's leadership development program is focused specifically on the needs of women in the workforce and the unique challenges they face on a daily basis.

This tailored approach can make these types of programs more complicated to build, launch, and run successfully. But we have you covered with all the steps you'll need along the way.

How to Build
a Women's Leadership Development Program

Building a women's leadership development program doesn't just happen overnight. It requires strategic planning and involves many people across your organization.

This process may seem daunting—but it doesn't have to be. From the initial planning stages to the actual execution, here are the 6 steps to building a successful women's leadership development program:

1 Determine the Format

To kick off your planning, you need to determine the format of your program.

In case you're not sure what options you have to choose from, here are the 4 most common types of women's leadership development programs:

Educational Courses

If you're envisioning a classroom-like setting, your women's leadership development program can consist of courses. These courses can be taught by leaders across your organization or guest speakers— or a combination of both. They can cover a variety of topics and have assignments, assessments, and presentations. If you want the curriculum to be cumulative throughout the program, you can design each course to build on one another and lead to a final project or exam.

Training Sessions

Similar to the format of educational courses, your women's leadership development program can consist of training sessions. Each session can be a "crash course" on a new topic. These sessions can be very interactive, hands-on, and fast-paced—which will make them very engaging to participate in.

Networking Events

From team leads to senior managers, chances are there are already many effective leaders across your organization. By building your program around networking, you can enable participants to meet women in different departments and learn about their roles, career paths, and secrets to success as leaders. From luncheons to happy hours, these networking events can give participants the opportunity to teach each other leadership skills in an interactive, collaborative setting.

Mentorship Programs

If you're looking to offer participants a one-on-one learning experience, your women's leadership development program can be a mentorship program. Like any mentorship program, you can partner participants up with one another. Depending on your goals for the program, this matching process can be based on participants' job titles or the number of years they've worked at your company. This type of development program not only enables mentees to learn directly from a leader at your company, but also helps mentors strengthen their leadership skills even more.

After you choose what format you want your program to be, you need to decide how often the program will meet. Will the program's sessions be weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, or quarterly? Will the program wrap up after a month, quarter, or year? Determining the cadence and length of the program will help you plan accordingly when it comes to the application process, topics covered, and overall goals.

2 Find a Leader

Now that you've determined the format of your women's leadership development program, it's time to choose someone to lead it. Depending on the format of your program, this role may look different. For instance, if your program consists of courses taught by several women across your organization, then the leader may be the person who owns internal communication leading up to the program, runs the introductory class, checks in with participants throughout the courses, and wraps up at the end.
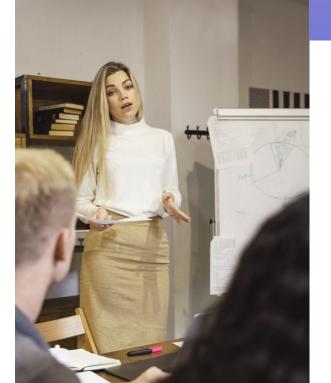
Before choosing someone to fill this role, you need to define what leadership means at your organization.

According to your employees, what makes an effective leader? Is it someone who excels at managing others, delegating projects, and hitting deadlines? Is it someone who embodies your company's mission and core values? Or is it someone who openly stands up for what they believe in and advocates for others?

With your definition of leadership in mind, think of a woman at your company who exemplifies it. Does anyone on your executive team come to mind? What about any directors or senior managers who stand out?

Depending on your definition of leadership, you may not necessarily be looking for a leader based on job title. If that's the case, look at the other leaders across your organization, like those who lead your Employee Resource Groups and other company committees.

Once you identify the best candidate, you should approach them with the opportunity by explaining what the program entails and why they would be the best person to lead it. Make sure you are transparent about the time commitment and what it would involve on their part.

3 **Set Overall Goals for the Program**

So you've chosen someone to lead your women's leadership development program—what's next?

It's time to set goals so that you can measure the program's overall success later on. Regardless of whether these goals are quantitative or qualitative, they should be "SMART".

Specific

Measurable

Achievable

Relevant

Time-bound

Quantitative Goals

To set quantitative goals for your program, you need to look at your organization's current metrics first. What percentage of leaders across your company are women? As for career advancement, what percentage of employees receiving promotions and/or raises are women? Now look at your company's turnover rates. What percentage of employees who leave your organization are women?

From entry level roles to your executive team, you should analyze these metrics at all levels of your organization. Based on your conclusions, you can set realistic goals to improve all of these metrics through your women's leadership development program.

Qualitative Goals

As for qualitative goals, think about what you want all of your participants to achieve on a high-level. Of course the overall goal of your women's leadership development program will be to empower participants and help them become effective leaders, but what specific skills do you want them to develop? Do you want them to become better communicators, collaborators, and problem solvers? What about adaptability, accountability, patience, and self-awareness? Since your program will involve women across your organization, maybe your main goal will be to establish cross-functional relationships and foster transparency between senior leadership and the rest of the company.

Since qualitative goals can be more challenging to track than quantitative goals, make sure you plan how you're going to measure the success of them. This will most likely depend on the format of your program. Here are some examples of ways you can measure participants' growth for each of the 4 types:

EDUCATIONAL COURSES	TRAINING SESSIONS
Throughout your program, you can give participants assessments and/or projects. At the end of your program, you can also assign a final presentation in which all participants can present what they've learned and how they're going to apply it to their career path. This can also be formatted as a final exam.	At the end of your program, you can ask everyone to teach the other participants about a topic they feel passionate about by running their own "crash course". This will exhibit the leadership and presentation skills they've developed throughout the program.
NETWORKING EVENTS	**MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS**
At the end of your program, you can conduct an open forum in which all participants can openly discuss what they've learned and how others have helped them become a stronger leader. You can also conduct peer assessments amongst your participants.	Since this type of program only matches up two participants, conducting one-on-one final assessments between mentors and mentees is the perfect way to measure growth.

Regardless of the format, self-reflection is also integral to the success of women's leadership development programs. In addition to measuring growth in the examples above, consider asking participants to complete self-assessments or fill out a survey at the end of the program.

4 Define the Selection Critera or Application Process

Once you've set goals for your women's leadership development program, your next priority is to define the selection criteria and process for applying to the program. Clear program criteria will help participants make good self-selection decisions and provide them with a comprehensive overview of the program's requirements for submission.

When outlining the conditions for acceptance into the program, you'll need to think about showcasing the candidate's talent and development potential through the application process. There are a number of ways to approach this.

Here are some key points to consider:

- Incorporating your organizational values into the process is a great place to begin. Since your company's core values have such a strong impact on shaping company culture, it's essential for women leaders to be taught the importance of integrating company values into decisions about people management. An effective women's leadership development program will teach women leaders how to hire, coach, mentor, and empower their employees through upholding company values.

- Decide whether to have participants submit an essay, answer questions, or complete an online form that conveys their career strengths, experiences, and how they put company values into action. Some organizations prefer to interview each candidate individually for the program or use nominations to select participants. It might make sense to have applicants write a short bio or share their resume to get a better perspective on their overall qualifications. Depending on the program, they may even include a letter of recommendation from a mentor or manager.

- Be sure to inform candidates of the time commitment required for the program, as well as all of the documents needed to apply. Identify a timeline for the process and create a checklist at the end of the application to avoid any confusion or miscommunication around the criteria.

- Assign an application deadline that gives them enough time to prepare and gather the necessary materials. Let participants know in advance when they can expect to be notified of acceptance into the program.

5 Tailor the Program

To build out a leadership development program that speaks to the needs of the women at your organization, it's critical to tailor the program to women of all seniority levels.

This begins with recognizing that women across the organization do not all share the same professional goals and desires. For instance, one woman may have the goal of becoming a C-Suite executive, while another may prefer to manage smaller teams or explore only mid-managerial positions.

The most successful women's development programs **create space for flexibility and individual goal-setting**. For example, providing leadership coaching or mentoring enables women to identify what individual success looks like and track progress toward their specific goals, instead of trying to fit their goals to a predetermined standard. Individual assessments can also be a useful tool when working toward personalized career goals, as they provide deeper insight into the participant's strengths, weaknesses, and leadership potential.

Furthermore, the program's **content should be curated to specifically educate and support women,** address the problems they face, and enhance their leadership abilities and competencies within the workplace. This may include sharing general data about issues affecting women, such as gender-related skill gaps, attrition rates, salaries, or other demographic data. It could also mean discussing topics such as leadership identity, negotiations, career strategies, high impact communications, and leading change—as they pertain distinctly to women.

Keep in mind your tailored learning model can include many different elements, such as coursework, training, learning on the job, and building relationships. All of these components should come together to help each woman intentionally direct their career trajectory and increase their leadership presence and influence across the organization.

For there to be lasting developmental and behavioral **change, the program must take into account the unique needs, goals, and culture of your organization.** Strategic planning initiatives, such as recruitment, retention, succession, new client development, and long-term sustainability should be linked in some way to the program's goals. Employee engagement and diversity goals for the company can also be tied back to the program. This will help demonstrate the value of the program, and maintain its credibility so you can grow and improve it with each iteration.

6 Measure the Results

To fully understand the impact of the women's leadership development program at your organization, you'll need to determine how to measure the program's results and success.

You can begin by implementing a feedback process. This can be accomplished through sending out a feedback survey, or hosting an informal meeting after the program is completed to receive evaluations directly from participants. Be sure to ask employees what worked well, what didn't, and what they got out of the program. Take note of any themes or input on areas of improvement and any processes that need revising, and be sure to acknowledge this when planning for the next cohort of the program.

Along with analyzing feedback, there are several other measurement options to consider, such as:

- The number of participants who successfully completed the program

- The number of participants who receive a promotion after they graduate the program

- The growth of the participants' leadership responsibilities

- The increase in women leadership skills across the organization

- The company goals and objectives fulfilled through the program

These results will allow you to assess how beneficial and effective the program was for the women who participated. It will also give you a sense of what could be done differently to construct an even better version of the program for the next set of participants, and continue achieving the best possible outcome for the organization as a whole.

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