

Why it's time to rethink female leadership

Psychometrics have long been a trusted tool in identifying leadership potential in HR. They offer rigour, objectivity and a shared language for assessing preference, behaviour and style. Used well, they reduce bias and support evidence-based decision making. But, while psychometrics show us the 'what' of leadership, lived experience, relationships and resilience reveal the 'why'. Without that second lens, we risk overlooking a significant proportion of leadership potential.

I conducted research on a cohort of 41 female leaders spanning 24 sectors. Their backgrounds were strikingly diverse. What was consistent was not where leaders came from, but how leadership capability was developed and reinforced over time.

A clear majority of the cohort grew up with multiple siblings. This suggests that negotiating shared environments, collaborating and competing contributes to the early development of leadership behaviours such as adaptability, confidence and influence.

Many leaders were working mothers, particularly those whose children were aged over 16 when they reached senior roles. This suggests leadership potential is not constrained by motherhood, but that leadership emergence often coincides with later parenting stages when pressures potentially ease.

Degrees and MBAs were common across the cohort but focus group insights revealed a high prevalence of mature learners and career pivots supported by later-stage education. Leadership, it seems, was rarely ignited by education alone, but education played a vital role in legitimising and accelerating it.



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Sport emerged as one of the strongest formative influences. Nearly two thirds (61 per cent) of the cohort participated in team sports, and among those 40 per cent held captaincy roles. These experiences provided early exposure to leadership behaviours that HR professionals later seek to measure teamwork, accountability, communication and performance under pressure.

Psychometric analysis revealed a significant preference among female leaders for visionary leadership (58 per cent female vs 44 per cent male). Male leaders, by contrast, showed a stronger preference for results leadership (32 per cent male vs 22 per cent female). Yet across both genders, relationship and centred leadership preferences were lower, reflecting the reality that senior leadership roles demand delivery, change management and strategic communication, regardless of style.

Psychometrics capture these preferences effectively, but what they cannot capture is how those leadership capabilities were cultivated through early responsibility, sport, lived experience and navigating bias related to class, accent or gender.

Women show up differently on paper. If HR and leadership professionals continue to focus on points in time – fixed qualifications, rigid career milestones and static psychometric profiles – it's no surprise that gender parity remains stalled.

Here are five key takeaways:

- 1. Look at the full leadership narrative, not just the snapshot.** Recognise progression over time, including mature learning, career pivots and leadership cultivated outside formal pathways.
- 2. Broaden talent identification criteria.** Value visionary and relational leadership styles alongside traditional results-oriented profiles.
- 3. Invest in ongoing sponsorship and support.** Enable women to grow into leadership through flexible development and supportive networks – especially through transitions such as caregiving or career shifts.
- 4. Champion leadership that is strategic, long term and influential.** Ensure promotion criteria reflect the diverse ways women lead, rather than forcing conformity to narrow archetypes.
- 5. Embed nurture into culture and systems.** Create environments where leadership can be practised, supported and recognised in all its forms.

Women's leadership potential is a story of growth, shaped by experience, nurtured over time and realised through opportunity. If we want to break through the barriers to gender parity, we must start by seeing leadership as a journey, not a single moment.