

WOMEN INTO LEADERSHIP COACHING PLEDGE

Coaching Female Leaders to Thrive



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The West Country Teaching School Alliance and Dartmoor Teaching School Alliance are working together to deliver the desired outcomes of The Coaching Pledge. This work will support and complement the Women Leading in Education South West Network.

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ABOUT WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Women are underrepresented in school headship and leadership roles in England. In the South West there is evidence of a variability, which needs to be addressed. In Bristol and Plymouth, over 50% of head teachers are women. Whereas:

- Bath and North East Somerset is one of the lowest local authorities in the country with only 15.4% women secondary head teachers.
- North Somerset is also underrepresented with only 18.2%.
- **The overall percentage of women head teachers in the South West stands at 35.8%.**

As education providers, schools are expected to *“remove or minimise disadvantage...take steps to meet different needs...encourage participation when it is disproportionately low”* (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2012). Gender is the common protected characteristic across the region – particularly Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset, Devon, Bournemouth, Dorset and Wiltshire.

There is also a great need to engage primary schools. Often, due to geographical isolation – for example, Torridge District and North Somerset, primaries are falling behind because they are less likely to be engaged in leadership development.

The reasons for the gender imbalance at senior level are complex and not related to discrete but interrelated factors that affect women. We aim here to look at some of the key factors, so that coaches are equipped to effectively coach women when these factors arise as part of the coaching conversation.

CAREER PLANNING AND ASPIRATIONS

Occupational stereotypes

According to a recent survey by UCL 36% of children from as young as seven years old, base their career aspirations on people they know. For those who do not, 45% stated that TV, film and radio were the biggest factors influencing their choice.

Gender stereotypes influences children's choices: 34.1% of boys wanted to be sportsmen and 9.4% wanted to work in social media or gaming, while 18.6% of girls wanted to be teachers.

The survey also revealed that children's career aspirations have little in common with projected workforce needs suggesting that despite government interventions, young people aren't attracted by careers in future growth sectors and those where there are already significant skills gaps. The report shows the tendency for boys to be attracted to technical and physical occupations, and girls to be attracted to caring and creative jobs. These preferences (and later, choices) reflect the different life experiences according to gender to which children are still subject, and the impact these different experiences and resources continue to have on children's identifications and preferences, including school and HE subject choices, and occupational interests.

Sectors facing staff and skills shortages e.g. STEM are compounded by the lack of uptake by women and such trends suggest that many people are still having their ambition and potential capped by horizons that are narrowed by gender.

Occupational stereotypes are also relevant in career aspiration to senior level because the role of 'leader' is still perceived as masculine, taking charge assertive. Applied to leadership, gender role stereotypes suggest that female-stereotypical forms of leadership are interpersonally oriented and collaborative, whereas male-stereotypical forms of leadership are task oriented and dominating. To the extent that women who are leaders exhibit a masculine style, they amplify their role conflict and increase the chances of receiving unfairly negative evaluations. Society still holds the idea of the male 'hero' leader as a desirable archetype.

Gender stereotypes

The societal view of women as primary carer prevails. According to a Business in the Community report 69% of women said society expects them to put family above their career. 62% felt pressured to succeed at home and work and 72% felt conflicted in their ability to balance family and career. This pressure still impacts work done in the home women still do more housework and childcare than men, especially between the ages of 26 and 35. The Office for National Statistics said that, when it came to unpaid chores at home, women were doing almost 40% more than men on average. Men averaged 16 hours a week helping out at home compared with 26 by women, with those on maternity leave doing the most. The area men do more in is transport, such as driving family members around.

These factors impact women's beliefs and perceptions of career and in addition to intrinsic career motivation may accelerate and sustain women's engagement in their careers.

Role models, sponsors and networks

Role models are critical to women's belief about what is possible in their career. If women see a 'woman like me' succeeding at senior level, then the belief that 'I can be like her' has been shown to influence career aspiration. Whereas, a lack of role models in an organisation is a barrier to progression. For aspiring women, it is important to find a role model that they can relate to. If this cannot be done inside an organisation, then looking outside can help. This person may be a suitable mentor.

Mentoring someone is different to a sponsoring, although it may be the same person who is a mentor and a sponsor. Women tend to underestimate the role sponsorship plays in their advancement, many feel that getting ahead based on "connections" is not necessary or correct and that hard work alone will result in progression. Yet taking on a new opportunity or a project or new role will increase skills, knowledge and experience and this is a key part of career progression. A sponsor can open doors that women wouldn't necessarily know existed and for women sponsorship by a senior leader has been shown to help women progress.

Sponsors are normally senior leaders who look for opportunities for aspiring women to progress their careers, this may be taking on role extensions, projects or just being supportive and encouraging women to go for a more senior role. A sponsor could also be a senior leader outside of school who can offer similar opportunities.

Making connections through networking can also be an effective way to explore opportunities and increase knowledge, observe role models and seek a mentor or sponsor. Participating in women's networks can help build belief and confidence to progress. Effective networking has been shown to be beneficial to organisations.

CONFIDENCE AND RESILIENCE

Women and confidence

It is widely believed that confidence is a key barrier to women's progression, but important to recognise that confidence is not a key barrier for all women. Nevertheless, research on Western samples shows significant gender differences in self-esteem with men having higher levels of self-esteem than women. Research into whether genetically based mechanisms play a role in the development of men's and women's self-esteem is ongoing alongside research that gender differences are largely influenced by universal sociocultural factors e.g. socially learned gender roles and stereotypes. Several studies have shown that male attributes are positively correlated with self-esteem for both men and women, whereas the link between female attributes and self-esteem has been much weaker and less consistent.

While men often overvalue their strengths, women too frequently undervalue theirs, research suggests:

- Women tend to overestimate the minimum qualifications for success.
- Women tend to underestimate their own ability, skills, and experience.

Confidence is not a simple attribute and comprises at least two elements:

- SELF EFFICACY: Strength of belief in your ability to complete tasks and reach goals
- SELF BELIEF: Belief in your own worth

Confidence is important for leaders because confident people inspire confidence in others. The good news is that confidence can grow and for women this can include:

- Working with strengths,
- Purpose and direction.
- Managing emotions.

Resilience and leadership

Leadership positions in most organisations inevitably involve high levels of pressure. As well as helping leaders to adapt positively and thrive under pressure, resilience can affect someone's leadership style and the impact they have on their staff. Leaders also have a role to play in directly influencing the resilience of their employees. By providing positive support, motivation and guidance, leaders can help employees to adapt positively to challenging circumstances and develop coping strategies to overcome obstacles.

A leader's resilience is drawn from a number of different, but related, attitudes, thinking styles and behaviours. Used in combination, these characteristics will help the leader to have a mindset and the emotional reserves to rise to challenges and thrive under pressure.

1. **SELF BELIEF:** A critical part of resilient leadership is strong self-belief that means leaders will be more willing to tackle problems head on and persist with them even when things get difficult. Demonstrating strong self-belief in the face of adversity will help to reduce panic and increase confidence in others.
2. **OPTIMISM:** It is important for leaders to be optimistic and stay positive in difficult situations. An optimistic leader can impact the mood and outlook of those around them.
3. **DIRECTION:** It is critical for leaders to show a clear purpose and direction in challenging circumstances and keep themselves and their people focused on the end goal. This ensures that setbacks are kept in perspective and are recognised as just part of a journey to achieving desired outcomes and results.
4. **ADAPTABILITY:** Leaders benefit from adapting quickly to change, particularly external changes, but also to individuals around them. An effective leader must be able to flex their behaviour to changing situations and find different ways of achieving their objectives if obstacles get in their way.
5. **PROBLEM SOLVING:** This is important for leaders, as they need to be able to clearly establish underlying causes and generate solutions to ways out of challenging situations. They can also support others by helping them think about alternative strategies to overcome the problems they experience.
6. **CHALLENGE ORIENTATION:** Enjoying experiences which are challenging is an opportunity to learn and develop. This can increase an individual's motivation and persistence in the face of obstacles. By adopting this attitude, leaders can also transfer this mindset to their employees and encourage them to view problems in a more positive way.
7. **EMOTION REGULATION:** Leaders need to be able to regulate their emotions effectively to ensure they make good decisions and continue performing when under pressure. Projecting a sense of calm 'under fire' is important as others will be aware of how their leader is reacting to challenging circumstance. If a leader shows signs of panic, others will quickly pick up on this and it may increase their levels of stress.

8. **SUPPORT SEEKING:** A willingness to ask others for support when dealing with difficult situations is often beneficial to gather different perspectives. Support seeking provides a buffer against challenges and stress at work. It can be very valuable for leaders to have a couple of discrete colleagues or an external advisor/coach with whom they can share specific challenges or problems.

To sustain resilience leaders, need to make space I their busy diaries to stay psychologically fit and reenergise. Leaders working long hours week after week under pressure risk impacting their mental and physical health. The ability to know when to stop and to say “no” is crucial and role modelling this is important to support staff to avoid stress.

Regular physical exercise, alternative mental stimulation, emotional support and meeting spiritual needs have been shown to build resilience.

NAVIGATING SELECTION PROCESSES

Biased selection decisions are one reason for the gender gap in organisations. Gender bias arises from gender stereotypes. Jobs where males are the majority of the workforce e.g. senior leadership roles, are especially prone to the gender discrimination. In these roles, research confirms that people tend to select male applicants for these roles. For example, there may be a belief that assertiveness and emotional toughness are typical characteristics of a headteacher, these are typically masculine traits. These expectations may lead to biased thinking such as a belief that women are not dominant or emotionally tough, so they can't be as good in the headteacher role. Biased thinking leads to biased decisions, so the search may unconsciously benefit male applicants.

During the selection process, these expectations come into play and this occupational bias may manifest in the use of gender biased e.g. masculine language in job advertisements. Therefore, it is important in recruitment to pay attention to information about credentials, skills and relevant experience. When decision makers are given information that clearly shows candidate's competence, they pay less attention to gender-related information.

The use of valid and reliable selection methods, which measure the candidate's qualifications and predict future job performance is helpful in reducing bias. Good methods help extract the most relevant information to demonstrate the candidate's suitability for the role, regardless of gender. As a rule, the following will reduce bias in selection decisions:

- **The quality of job descriptions.** These should include clear and comprehensive information. This will help them to focus on relevant data during a selection process.
- **Applicants should be able to provide clear, job-related information.** This will demonstrate suitability for the role e.g. being very specific about the information needed, such as key responsibilities or specific technical expertise and qualifications.
- **Standardised selection tools and procedures.** Methods that are resistant to bias and will provide clear information about applicants' qualifications are best. Structured interviews, work-based exercises and psychometric tests are good examples.
- **Blind auditions.** For example, to eliminate gender bias during the selection process, orchestras use blind auditions: raters can hear musicians performing but can never see them. Hiding gender related information that can bias judgement helps raters to base their decisions only on relevant information i.e. music performance.
- **Hire by committee.** Team decisions can be more resistant to biases than individual decisions. Ensure interview panels and raters are gender balanced.

Coaching women to navigate selection processes

Dealing with gender bias can be difficult. A start is to raise women's awareness of potential bias in the recruitment and selection process.

Candidates: Is there a mix of male and female candidates?

Job advertisements: Check for gender biased language. Also, **unequal pay**, benchmarks the pay offered with others in your organisation, do you spot any unexplained differences?

Application forms: Is there space to demonstrate your skills, knowledge and experience.

Selection process: Will applications be evaluated blind?

Interview questions: Are questions such as "Do you have children?" or "do you plan to have children?" being asked. These are not appropriate in the interview situation.

Decision makers: Is there a balanced panel?

Encourage women to raise any areas of concern with the person running the recruitment and selection process.

Focus on providing decision makers with extensive evidence of the skills, knowledge and experience required. Provide extensive evidence of any gendered skills or attributes spotted in the job description.

Respond to gendered questioning at interview can be awkward and is inappropriate, however, an emotional or combative response will not be helpful. Instead, respond to the question with a question, this will help the interviewer clarify their questioning and/or move them on.

Check out the current gender balance at senior level. If there are few women, then talk about the benefits of diversity at senior level.

Negotiate desired working patterns after being offered a job – this increases the chance of success and you can always say 'no' to the job!

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS & GETTING A SEAT AT THE TABLE

Unconscious bias

Unconscious bias (or implicit bias) is a prejudice or unsupported judgement in favour of or against a thing, individual, or group in a way that is typically considered unfair. Unconscious bias affects every area of our lives. Unconsciously, we tend to like people who look like us, think like us and come from backgrounds similar to ours. Everyone likes to think he or she is open-minded and objective, but research has shown that the beliefs and values gained from family, culture and a lifetime of experiences heavily influence how we view and evaluate both others and ourselves. These thought patterns, assumptions and interpretations or biases built up over time help us to process information quickly and efficiently. From a survival standpoint, bias is a positive and necessary trait, however, bias can be costly, it can cause people to make decisions that are not objective; and to miss opportunities.

While senior managers genuinely agree about the need for diversity at leadership levels, they still tend to fall back on unconscious beliefs when making decisions about women at work and at senior level and tend to recruit people like them.

Getting a seat at the table

Unconscious bias affects women too and gender stereotyping can hold them back from progressing their career and reaching their potential. One impact of this is that women tend to be more reluctant than men to put themselves forward e.g. for promotion, new jobs, even leadership development programmes. In fact, women are shown to hold back from jobs when they cannot meet all or most of the essential criteria. Whereas men are happy to put themselves forward for roles when they meet far less of the role criteria.

To begin a real process of change, women need to explore their own unconscious bias and move away from these potentially damaging beliefs. In her book, *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg states that women need a “seat at the table”. Aspiring women need interactions with their employers about their personal career paths, and organisations need to be sure that they understand their workforce if they are to provide the right programmes to develop their leadership pipeline. Participating in structured development programmes are essential for helping promising female talent to make the transition to senior leadership, and they must also be combined with viable opportunities for progression.

Once women have a seat at the table they may find themselves to be a minority in a room of men and ‘finding voice’ can be difficult. Being assertive and navigating tricky social situations is essential to get heard a few pointers are:

- *Someone believed in you enough for you to be where you are. That's a good enough reason to keep your voice strong at every stage of your life, honour the fact that they advocated for you, make good use of that seat.*
- *Don't confuse having a seat at the table with having a voice. Many people with a position of influence don't speak up. If you're given a seat, it is your duty to speak up when the time calls for it.*
- *No matter where you are or what your role is, there is so much to learn from others. Use your learning to inform your content when you do "speak up". Share lessons.*
- *Make it a habit to ask others to give you feedback; that is one of the best ways to continually hone your voice.*
- *The more you speak up and the more feedback you receive, the more comfortable and confident you become in finding your voice*

A note about those who see themselves as introverted

In a culture where being social and outgoing in leadership are expected it can be difficult to be introverted. Introverted leaders like extroverted leaders may be socially adept, the only difference is introverts need time and space to reenergise internally, so pacing is important. Whereas the extroverted leader is more likely to reenergise from their surroundings.

LEADING AUTHENTICALLY AS A FEMALE LEADER

The pull to conform to stereotypes of leadership can make it difficult for women to be authentic in leadership. 'Masculine' leader behaviour e.g. taking charge, being assertive are at odds with feminine societal stereotypes as caring and non-dominant. This conflict means that sometimes women in leadership positions take on behaviour that does not reflect their values, priorities and natural style. This takes a lot of energy to do this when in fact female leaders who act authentically are more likely to be successful.

Women who are authentic have a good understanding of themselves and their priorities. They pay attention to what is important to them rather than what might be important to other people. They are clear about how they feel and what they need and prefer, and this promotes growth, learning, and psychological well-being.

Authentic leadership is also:

- Being genuine
- Being fair
- Doing the right thing
- Keeping promises
- Straight talking
- Simplicity
- Showing integrity
- Acting ethically

It is challenging work to remain authentic. Constantly reviewing priorities and choosing behaviours that match those priorities as circumstances change means that authenticity is a key factor in leadership development.

People who are authentic bring their whole selves to work and participate fully and honestly in the workplace. Organisations that place a premium on conformity at the expense of authenticity may be incurring hidden costs. Managers who struggle with feelings of inauthenticity risk losing interest in their work and inauthenticity can cause uncertainty and distrust. Organisations that foster authentic behaviour are more likely to have engaged, enthusiastic employees and workplaces that are open and promote trust.

ENABLING SUCCESSFUL RETURN TO WORK

Whilst the effect of career breaks on professional progression aren't necessarily indicative of a gender bias, maternity leave remains the most common reason for career breaks amongst women.

It is in employer's interests to promote a culture that supports working mothers, to enable their career progression and to develop structures that enable them to reach their full potential. Despite this, some employers don't think positively about women returning to work after their maternity absence and do not expect women to return to work after maternity. Some do not actually want female employees coming back after their maternity leave due to a fear that mothers would have a reduced level of concentration once they returned to work and would lack enthusiasm compared to a newly hired member of staff.

Many women find it hard returning to work after maternity leave. Not only do many mothers experience physical barriers to returning to work (perhaps because they are often responsible for rushing back from work to collect children from childcare) but having a child is a life-changing event, which can change the way women feel about aspects of their lives. Many mothers report reduced levels of confidence after having children, which can affect their ability to slot back into their former working role.

Offering the right support to women is paramount to enabling a successful return to work. Often most support is offered once women return to work with little given during the career break itself. Yet beginning the process of support before maternity leave begins is crucial to enabling a successful return to work. Conversations between line managers and the woman can set expectations for both parties about options on return to work. This does much to avoid unrealistic expectations on both sides.

Inclusion and communication methods during the career break itself also to allow for an easier return to work. There are likely to be many changes throughout the career break, and without regular updates the employee could feel out of the loop; potentially impacting their ability to progress. Fear of being kept out of the loop and forgotten about is key and by updates, or work meetings, organisations can help to support those employees on a career break keeping them motivated for their return.

It's important for organisations to speak to their employees about what they're comfortable with, and to encourage them to make full use of KIT (Keeping In Touch) days. Often women on maternity leave are not made aware of career and other opportunities which they may wish to take advantage of. Being a parent does not mean 'opting out of career'.

Returners benefit from specific support on return to work, this might be offered as coaching or specific check ins with their manager to ensure that return is working for both parties.

INFLUENCING & NEGOTIATING WORKING PATTERNS

Flexible working policies help to recruit, retain and motivate teachers, provide the basis for sound financial and personnel planning within schools and minimise the risk of grievance and discrimination. There is significant evidence that shows that effective flexible working arrangements deliver positive benefits, such as increased employee motivation, commitment, less absenteeism and better employee relations. Organisations that can accommodate flexible working increasingly attract and retain the best talent and are more productive. This message has not yet reached many organisations. To challenge the perception that flexible working is less conducive to productivity, it helps if male and female senior leaders role model this so that employees witness senior professionals working flexibly, performing well, and achieving results. They are then likely to be more open to flexible working themselves, and less judgemental about those adopting flexible working as standard practice.

Often working patterns are described as part time OR full time with the result that women working part time can be unconsciously 'opted out' of career opportunities. A mindset of flexible working in terms of hours, pattern and/or location, employers and employees are more likely to agree a working pattern that meets the needs of both parties.

Technology such as video conferencing is one of the greatest tools for those looking to encourage more women into leadership roles. Many senior managers are often expected to travel at awkward times, and those that have family commitments may be deterred from taking a step into senior management. Reducing travel requirements, using modern technology, and being more inclusive, attracts a higher number of women to senior roles.

Coaching women to negotiate working patterns

- It's important for women (and men) to raise awareness of the government flexible working initiative for schools and the link between flexible working and productivity.
- Changing working patterns must benefit staff and the school. Treat this as a strategic priority e.g. work with male and female allies to scope options for flexible working patterns and present this as a business case.
- Conversation is key. Research shows that informal arrangements between women and their managers (if this is possible and appropriate) is the most effective way to do negotiate working patterns. Focus on outcomes and benefits for the school.
- Supporting women to have conversations at home about changing working patterns is key. If partners working patterns are inflexible this will be a barrier to working parents.
- The World is moving to flexible working, enter conversations with the mindset of 'how do we do this in our school?'

'Myth busting' flexible working

Myth	Relevance (or not) to your school
The teaching profession simply does not lend itself to flexible working.	
Flexible working is for other sectors – working at home and staggered hours just can't happen in teaching.	
If I advertise a teaching job part-time, I won't get any applicants.	
Flexible working is too expensive, especially at a time when school budgets are tight.	
Children's learning in primary school benefits from having one consistent class teacher.	
Splitting classes between teachers leads to worse outcomes for secondary school pupils.	
Working flexibly does not ease workload – teachers & leaders are paid less but do the same of work as full-time colleagues.	
Flexible working is impossible to timetable.	
It is not possible for part-time teachers to have middle or senior leadership positions in schools	
Part-time teachers and leaders just aren't as committed	

