



Brandon Hall Group™

# WOMEN **in**

# Leadership

MAGAZINE

SHAPING TOMORROW



Featuring research and insights from the Brandon Hall Group™ 2025 WIL Summit

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# Message from our Chief Operating Officer and Publisher

## Welcome back.

Those two words carry more weight than they might seem. It's been five years since Brandon Hall Group™ last held a Women In Leadership Summit and published a magazine — five years that changed everything and nothing all at once. We paused because of COVID. We pivoted. We adapted. And now, here we are again, proving what we've always known: Women don't just survive disruption, we lead through it.

This year's theme, "Shaping Tomorrow," isn't just aspirational; it's an imperative. As a human capital management research and advisory firm, Brandon Hall Group™ remains laser-focused on helping organizations become better at what they do. And the data continues to tell us that gender equity in the workplace isn't just the right thing to do (though it absolutely, positively is). It also makes companies better, more productive and more profitable for all stakeholders.

But our most recent research also tells us we're not moving fast enough. While we've seen some progress, too much remains stubbornly unchanged. Only 28% of organizations report being highly effective at developing women for senior roles. Just 14% have achieved more than 50% women in senior leadership. And only 26% of women feel their organizations offer adequate support for their advancement.

### Effectiveness at Developing Women for Senior Leadership

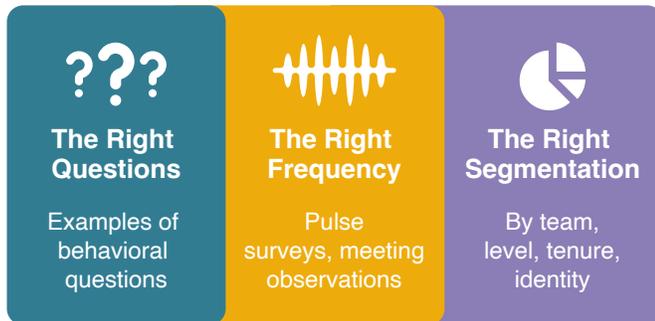


**44%** Somewhat or Not Effective



**Rachel Cooke**  
Chief Operating Officer  
Brandon Hall Group™

Perhaps most troubling: We're still not measuring – 74% of organizations reported limited or no measurement of leadership development for women. Without clear metrics, we cannot identify what's working, what's failing, or where to direct our efforts. This isn't just a gap in women's leadership programs — it's symptomatic of a broader failure to take measurement seriously across human capital management. And what doesn't get measured doesn't get fixed.



Yet there is reason for hope. Our research revealed that communities and networking consistently outperform traditional structured programs. Peer networks and mentoring circles create something structured programs alone cannot: A sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves.

This insight shaped how we designed our Women in Leadership Summit at the Boca Raton Innovation Center in Florida as an intentional circle of connection.

Throughout the event, we explored what it means to lead through disruption. Dr. Marline Duroseau, our Managing Director of HR and Leadership Development, shared powerful research on what she calls “leader morphology in the labyrinth” — how women develop what she terms EAR qualities through adversity: Emotional intelligence and

empathy, Adaptability and Resilience. These are superpowers to embrace.

We challenged ourselves to close the gap between intent and action. To move beyond saying we value inclusion to actually creating cultures where psychological safety allows for courageous conversations, where trust enables vulnerability and where every voice is not just heard but acted upon.

“And we reminded ourselves that leadership isn't about perfection — it's about presence through disruption.”

As I looked around the room that day — and as I hope you'll see reflected in these pages — I was reminded why this work matters. My daughter Sophia was there and I thought about what kind of workplace she'll inherit. What barriers will she face? What mountains will we have already moved for her?

We all have stories of setbacks and frustrations, but also of triumphs — how we learned, grew, overcame obstacles and made breakthroughs. These experiences are blueprints for action and change.

So as you read through this magazine, I encourage you to do more than absorb information. Join the WIL Network. Plan to attend the next summit. Say yes to connection, to growth, to sponsorship, to possibility. Because when we say yes, not just for ourselves but for each other, that's when real change happens.

*Together, let's shape tomorrow.*



Dr. Marline Duroseau

# Leading Through Disruption:

## Dr. Marline Duroseau on Women's Superpowers in Leadership

Dr. Marline C. Duroseau stood before a room of women leaders with a message that reframed everything they thought they knew about strength. These women weren't just professionals navigating their careers, she insisted; they were superheroes, though not the kind they imagined as little girls watching cartoons.

"What we do, what we go through, what we endure and what we accomplish, that's no easy feat," Duroseau told the audience at the Women in Leadership Summit. As Managing Director of Leadership Strategy and Human Resources at Brandon Hall Group™, she has spent years studying how women lead through the storms that would break others.

But even superheroes need rest, she reminded them. Sleep helps you recharge, reset and shake off whatever tried to be your kryptonite that day. "We shouldn't minimize it because it really is a big deal," she said, asking the audience to reframe their understanding of superpowers not as the cartoons depicted them, but as something more nuanced and real.

Her own leadership journey began in fifth grade with a teacher who left an indelible mark. The teacher, Ms. Williams, had a reputation for being very strict, but that didn't faze young Marline. She was drawn to her teacher, who always dressed nicely, smelled good, had sparkly nails and wore her hair short and stylish. Ms. Williams had a firm, "but still warm and inviting" energy, Duroseau recalled. Looking back, Duroseau realized that children often thrive on structure, gravitating toward people who lead with love and clear boundaries.

One day, Ms. Williams handed her a folder, her cumulative record from kindergarten. Inside was a note from her kindergarten teacher, Ms. Cox: "Marline is an outstanding student and a natural leader." When young Marline protested that she wasn't a leader, just someone who liked to help, Ms. Williams smiled and offered wisdom that would stay with her forever: "A leader sets the tone. A leader is an example. And that's you."

“Who would ever think that you want to be a parent, but then on the other hand, you’re being penalized for it?”

Yet life had other lessons in store. For 15 years, Duroseau carried what she calls “the invisible weight” of trying to build her family while building her career. Like so many women, she showed up polished, prepared and productive while silently grieving inside.

“That’s one of the ironies of leadership that we don’t talk about enough,” she reflected. “We lead other people, but yet inside we’re breaking.” This paradox sparked her curiosity and became the foundation of her doctoral research: How do women continue day after day to lead through disruption? How do we do it? Why do we do it?

Her research uncovered a conceptual framework she calls “leader morphology in the labyrinth,” which examines how women adapt to personal and professional storms, such as infertility, gender bias, caregiving responsibilities and grief, while still managing to get things done. The data was clear: When women integrate these disruptions into their leadership rather than hiding them, they develop what Duroseau calls “EAR qualities.”

EAR stands for Emotional intelligence and Empathy, Adaptability and Resilience. Women develop emotional intelligence because they’ve been there and know the pain or have experienced it firsthand. They learn adaptability because they constantly have to pivot. And they build resilience because, despite everything, they rise again and again. “These EAR qualities aren’t weaknesses,” Duroseau emphasized. “They’re superpowers. And when organizations learn to recognize and support these qualities, the organizations thrive as well.”

Building on the earlier discussion of circles, those spaces where women find themselves sometimes fully included and sometimes on the edges, Duroseau urged the audience to widen their circles to include their disruptions rather than hide them. “Oftentimes, even though we’re part of a circle, we’re still not quite there all the way, right? Because of something. Something’s going on.”

All women belong in this circle, she said: The executives, the mothers, the caregivers, the dreamers. There’s a place for everyone. “The real superpower in leadership is not perfection. It’s presence through disruption.”

Duroseau then addressed the barriers in the labyrinth that women navigate: Infertility, gender bias and what she called the parenthood penalty.



### **“EAR” Qualities as leadership superpowers.**

Women who integrate their disruptions into leadership develop Emotional intelligence and Empathy, Adaptability and Resilience.

**Presence over perfection.** The real superpower in leadership isn’t achieving perfection but maintaining presence and effectiveness through life’s challenges.

**Self-care is non-negotiable.** Taking time to recharge, reset and shake off the day’s challenges is essential for sustained leadership.

**Address the parenthood penalty.** Organizations must recognize and eliminate the paradox where women are penalized for wanting to be parents, a barrier that keeps women from advancing in leadership.

“Who would ever think that you want to be a parent, but then on the other hand, you’re being penalized for it?” These obstacles try to keep women out of the circle. Her solution? “We should close that circle and patch that thing up with some glue, some grace, some empathy. Make sure we’re all solid together.”

Duroseau challenged attendees with what she called “a small, courageous project.” She asked them to create a circle by inviting a woman who may be struggling — someone who hasn’t dared to speak up — and asking, “How are you really? Like, how are you really doing?”

Alternatively, she encouraged them to schedule 15 minutes in their calendar each day to pause, breathe, reflect and journal, a practice she described as “extremely therapeutic” and a way to reset and reconnect with one’s superpower. “Sometimes you just need to get it out.”

Reflecting on that red-lettered word “leader” she saw as a little girl, Duroseau offered a final insight: “I didn’t think or know how true it would become. I was a little girl back then. But I’ve learned that leaders, real leaders, don’t always look for the perfect circumstance. We pause, we rise, we juggle and ultimately we lead unapologetically.”





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# Authenticity, Sponsorship, Courage:

## Women Leaders Share Their Transformative Journeys

Women in Leadership Advisory board members reveal the pivotal moments that shaped their leadership philosophy and commitment to elevating other women.



**A**t the Brandon Hall Group™ Women in Leadership Summit, three members of the organization’s Advisory Board shared deeply personal stories about the experiences that transformed their thinking about leadership, authenticity and the responsibility to open doors for others.

## Choosing Authenticity Over Conformity

Rachel Bolton, a leadership development executive, recounted a career-defining moment that occurred when she was just 23 years old. A male mentor pulled her aside with what he thought was helpful feedback: “You’d be really dynamic if

you would tone it down a notch.”

At the time, Bolton was expressing herself through vibrant colors: Pink eyeshadow, pink earrings, pink heels. As a young African-American woman in corporate America, she faced a choice: Mute her personality to fit in, or double down on her authentic self.



“I said, oh, if I want to be taken seriously, I’ve got to take it down a notch. Well, what if I want to be taken really seriously and I take it up two notches?” Bolton explained. “That became a signature shift in my



From left to right: Rachel Bolton, Rachel Cook, Radhika Paul and Karla Martinez

“ Sponsorship is saying yes when someone invites you to be part of a conversation. Just say yes. What do you have to lose? But most importantly, invite other women to say yes. That is how we can change the world. ”

career. I was known as the hot pink blazer girl.”

Bolton, who still wears purple lashes and bright colors, emphasized that her decision to amplify rather than diminish herself became her superpower. “I don’t believe that you have to shift who you are, who you have always been, to rise through the ranks of corporate leadership,” she said. Bolton remains in contact with that mentor, who now admires her choice to stay true to herself.

## Understanding the Distinction Between Mentorship and Sponsorship



Karla Martinez, Global Vice President of Talent Pipeline Management at Pfizer and a former ballerina, drew on her dance background to frame her understanding of intentional movement in leadership. “As a ballerina, every step matters. Every step tells a story,” she explained, connecting this principle to how she approaches career progression and helping others advance.

Martinez offered a clear distinction between mentorship and sponsorship that resonated



## Key Takeaways

**Authenticity is your superpower.** When feedback suggests you should “tone down” who you are, consider whether amplifying your authentic self might actually be the path to more effective leadership.

**Mentorship and sponsorship are different.** Mentors provide guidance and advice; sponsors put their reputation on the line to create opportunities for you.

**Sometimes the best opportunities look like rejection.** The role you don’t want or the invitation that disrupts your plans may be the exact opportunity you need.

**Permission comes from within.** The most transformative career moves often happen when you stop waiting for permission and give it to yourself instead.

**Paying it forward is non-negotiable.** If someone opened a door for you, you have a responsibility to open doors for others, especially for people who may not even realize they want or deserve the opportunity.

throughout the room. “A mentor is someone who will give you advice. A mentor is someone who’s going to guide your growth. A sponsor is someone who will see you in your next opportunity,” she explained. “Most importantly, a sponsor is going to put his or her reputation on the line because he or she believes in what you can bring to the table.”

Several years ago, Martinez was thrilled to be in what she considered her dream job as a global HR business partner doing acquisitions. Then Pfizer’s head of HR at the time offered her a completely different role.

“I said, like, no, no, you don’t get it. I don’t want that job. I got the perfect job,” Martinez recalled. But the leader insisted and told her plainly: “I’m ready to retire. So I’m not going to be your manager. I’m going to be your sponsor. It’s going to be the most difficult job you ever, ever have done.”

What followed was a year and a half of intensive development, with Martinez’s sponsor positioning her in front of the board of directors, the CEO and leading the CEO transition.

She admitted that every meeting brought something new and challenging. “What mattered to me at that moment was that he saw something in me that I didn’t see myself — and he carried that belief with him,” Martinez reflected.

After her sponsor retired, Martinez received her first promotion to vice president and

was put in charge of Pfizer’s largest acquisition, the very opportunity she thought she was losing when she initially resisted the role change.

Martinez challenged the audience to embrace the same philosophy: “Sponsorship is saying yes when someone invites you to be part of a conversation. Just say yes. What do you have to lose? But most importantly, invite other women to say yes. That is how we can change the world.”

## The Courage to Reinvent



Radhika Paul, CEO and founder of LuminAI Consulting, brought her extensive experience from the Latham & Watkins law firm, Manpower, American Express, Genpact, GE Capital, plus her expertise as a Six Sigma master black belt, to her perspective on leadership coaching.

She shared a story about working as a coach and mentor to a young Harvard Law School associate at a law firm. “I started

seeing her light get diminished,” Paul recalled. Through months of “the what, the how and the why conversations,” Paul learned that despite the associate’s impressive credentials — Princeton undergrad, Harvard Law, working at one of the world’s best law firms — she no longer wanted to be in the legal profession.

Over six to eight months, Paul coached her through conversations about “courage, about reinvention, inventing yourself, about taking the next step, believing in yourself.” The associate ultimately pursued her true passion: The crypto world. Today, she is the first woman to create a crypto agency and, with her husband, Devin, runs OpenSea, one of the multi-billion dollar companies in the space.

“It has been phenomenal to see how far people can go when they believe in themselves. Have that courage. You don’t ask for permission — you give yourself that permission — and doors start opening one after the other,” Paul said.

# Paying It Forward as Purpose

**A common thread throughout the leaders’ stories was their commitment to opening doors for women.**

“What’s important to me about being on this advisory board is I feel like I’m really fulfilling a prophecy in my life, what my mother cast on me and what I believe I saw in myself,” Bolton shared. Her mother, a vice president at Blue Cross and Blue Shield in Jacksonville, Florida, was her superhero and inspiration.

Martinez issued a direct challenge to the audience: “Movement means we must pay it forward. If someone opened a door for you, you’d better open another door for someone else.” She emphasized that paying it forward means not only multiplying what we’ve received but also “giving someone else a chance that they didn’t even know they wanted, or they had an opportunity.”

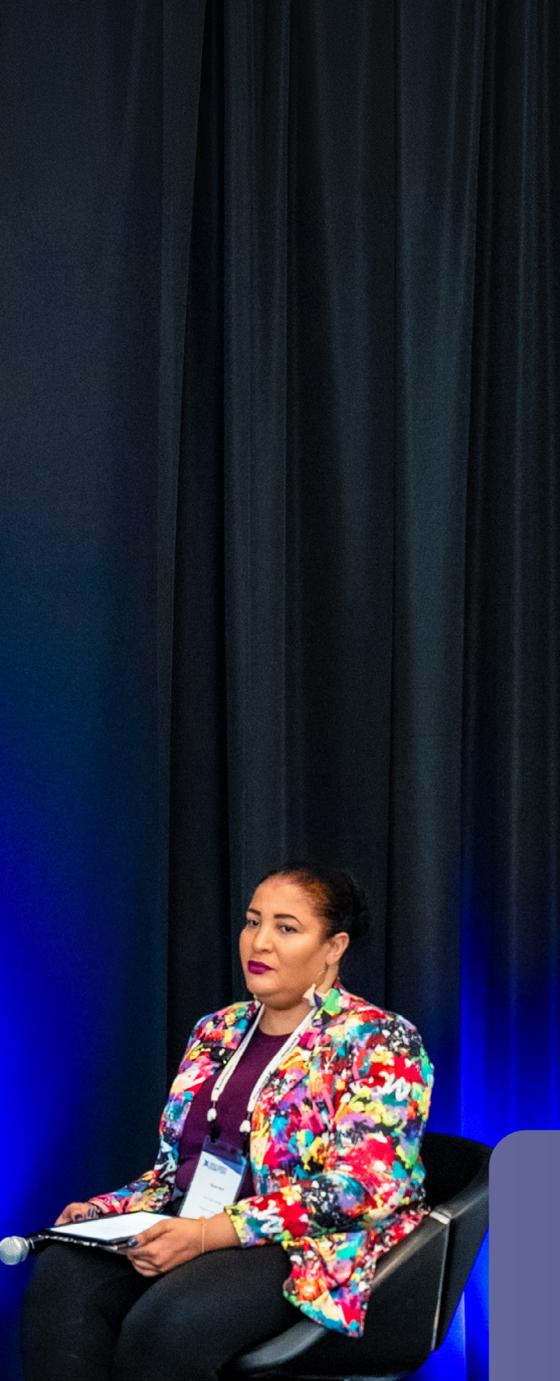


# How Empathy and Innovation Shape the Workplace



From left to right: Colette De Nardo, Barb Potter and Renee Birch

Three dynamic speakers — Colette De Nardo, Barb Potter and Renee Birch — explored how women leaders can build thriving workplace cultures through empathy and innovation. Their discussion moved beyond traditional metrics to focus on what sustains organizations when structures shift and goals change.



## The Foundation: Culture as Architecture

De Nardo, Senior Learning and Development Specialist at Weatherby Healthcare, a staffing consultancy for healthcare networks and hospitals, opened with a powerful personal story about a hiring manager named Mary who looked beyond traditional criteria to see potential. Years later, at Mary's retirement party, De Nardo discovered she had been the subject of Mary's story about taking a hiring risk. The revelation demonstrated how culture-building moments often start with individual acts of courage and vision.

Birch, Senior Manager of Sales at Weatherby Healthcare, expanded on the concept of culture,

noting that women naturally lean into setting the tone for their teams and organizations. Drawing from her experience as a mother of a neurodivergent son, she explained how that journey shaped her leadership philosophy: "It really blessed me with the opportunity to be able to see the world from the eyes of somebody that's neurodivergent. And that has shaped me as a leader."

This perspective enabled her to embrace an empathetic approach in all interactions. "I try to meet people where they are," Birch explained. "And in doing so, it does create a culture of collaboration. It does create a culture of innovation when people are free to be their most authentic selves without fear of reprisal or being judged."



## Key Takeaways

**Throughout the discussion, all three speakers emphasized that effective leadership isn't about avoiding difficult conversations or "playing nice."**

As Potter put it: "As women, we need to dive into those conversations and not avoid them. Not play nice and get along like we were told growing up, but be real with each other."

**The message was clear:  
Women leaders create lasting cultural change through:**

- » Consistent acts of empathy
- » The courage to innovate beyond traditional boundaries
- » Willingness to see and elevate others

# Transforming Culture Through Simple Changes

Potter, Go-To-Market Enablement Program Manager and Partner at software developer SailPoint, shared three practical examples from her tenure as president of ATD South Florida that accidentally revolutionized their organizational culture.

- **Restructuring meetings.** Potter and her team created collaborative agendas where board members shared their wins and articulated what they needed from each other. “We didn’t just change our momentum, we changed our culture,” Potter reflected. The result? Awards, bigger sponsorships and improved finances.
- **Member spotlights.** The organization featured member stories monthly. These spotlights became their most popular posts, creating a sense of belonging and validation within the community.
- **Safe spaces for learning.** Their AI work group, despite meeting on Saturdays, became their best-attended event by promoting it as “a place where you are safe to create and you’re safe to discuss.”

The testament to these changes: 90% of the board stayed on for the following term.

## The SEE Framework: Strategic Empathy in Action

Potter introduced a practical framework called “SEE with your I’s” for building up women in the workplace:

- **See:** Ask questions to understand someone’s perspective.
- **Empathize:** Look at the human side of their answer.

- **Elevate:** Speak your observations aloud.

Birch illustrated this framework with a story about a struggling Black female consultant in her predominantly male sales organization. Rather than accepting her surface-level observations about the woman’s disengagement, Birch took the consultant to lunch with a genuine desire to understand.

Through conversation, Birch discovered the consultant had difficulty with social awareness in meetings, often interrupting others. By asking the consultant to describe her future leadership self and comparing it to her current behavior, Birch helped her recognize the gap. The outcome: The consultant made adjustments and moved on to bigger opportunities, still applying lessons from that pivotal conversation.



# Innovation: Not Just for R&D

Addressing the common directive to “innovate” without actual training, Potter shared how she and an HR leader tackled this challenge at a medical device company. They rolled out design thinking training and launched an innovation contest, hoping for five participating teams. They got 30.

Each cross-functional team of up to four people had one month to develop their ideas, supported by managers from different departments. The approach challenged the traditional notion that innovation only happens in R&D. “Really, there was so much talent across the organization,” Potter noted.

## The results were immediate and measurable:

- One team reduced a daily six-hour process to two hours.
- Another repackaged an over-engineered medical device to save thousands of dollars.
- A third reconfigured a product to open emerging markets.

Potter’s advice: identify who you need to collaborate with cross-functionally, determine who could sponsor your innovative idea and reach out to them.



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## Finding Continuity:

# How Your Younger Self Shapes the Leader You Are Today

In a packed conference room, Selena McLaughlin asked a simple question that stopped everyone cold: “How many of you have been heads down working, focused on performing?” Nearly every hand goes up. Then comes the revelation: “Performance is probably only 10% of the pie.”

For McLaughlin, SVP, Chief People Organization – Global Leaders Sponsorship Strategy Program at Bank of America and Taylor Williams, Manager of Corporate Training at The Haskell Company, an architecture, engineer and construction

consulting firm, the path to leadership excellence is about understanding the continuous thread connecting who you were as a child to who you are becoming.

## The Power of Looking Back

McLaughlin’s journey begins as a little girl nicknamed Lena. She was organized, rearranging furniture seasonally with her mother, color-coding her closet, decorating her bedroom

with pride. She worked hard at McDonald’s, earning the nickname “Big Mac” from neighborhood regulars. She loved music and had diverse friends who knew her from basketball and volleyball courts.

Today, those childhood qualities define her professional success. “I’m a program manager. I manage executive development programs. You have to be organized. You have to be punctual. You have to think ahead and anticipate,” McLaughlin explains. “So it’s all the things that I am that make me good at what I do.”



From left to right: Taylor Williams and Selena McLaughlin

“Performance is probably only 10% of the pie ”

Williams adds an important dimension to this reflection: “If we can look at ourselves holistically from younger until now and then into our future, we can see these parts of who we are that actually make us our professional selves that we don’t always give enough credence to.”



## The Courage to Ask for Help

Williams shared her own reckoning with her younger self, a heavily recruited volleyball player who arrived at college as an All-American, ready to be a hometown hero. Reality hit hard when she found herself on a team of collegiate All-Americans, redshirted to train harder and faster.

“I over-trained and I broke both of my shins. By my sophomore year, I was getting metal rods

“Be confident in ourselves. Be confident that when we do something, we’re going to kill it.”

put into my shins to save them,” Williams recalls. “I was injured physically. It took a long time to come back from that.”

But her deepest wound wasn’t physical. “I wasn’t asking for support. I didn’t want to come across as weak. I didn’t want to internalize the message that I had failed myself and maybe had failed Gainesville, my family. I mean, really, I’m sure no one was thinking that at all. But I was internalizing those lessons.”

Williams emphasizes that making meaning from difficult experiences requires slowing down, which the professional world rarely celebrates. “To be resilient people, we have to make meaning of our experiences. And if we don’t do that, we don’t learn from our stories in a way that allows us to take those into the future.”

## Beyond Performance: The PIE Model

McLaughlin introduced the PIE model (Performance, Image, Exposure), explaining that high performance is merely the 10% foundation. The remaining 90% comprises your executive presence, how people experience you and the exposure you create through networking and relationship-building.

“It’s not just who you know and how many you know and who are the right people you know, but who knows you,” she stresses. “Enough to speak on your behalf, enough to know who to call when they need you as a new opportunity. Enough that you’re being sought after.”

She shared her evolution from the girl everyone knew to a professional who makes genuine connections. When someone approaches her in the grocery store and she can’t remember them, she’s learned to be honest: “Let me just air my dirty laundry. Can you tell me your name again? Where do we know each

other from again?”

“I try to treat everyone well because they could be my boss one day. I could be their boss one day,” McLaughlin explains. “You never know the connections you make. You try to make every effort count.”

## Conquering Imposter Syndrome

Both speakers acknowledged battling imposter syndrome. McLaughlin said she felt it preparing for the WIL summit. “Women are the worst critics of themselves,” she observed.

“When you see that job application and you see those required and desired skills, and if you don’t hit every one of them, you’re like ‘nope.’ Why do we do that to ourselves? We’re stopping ourselves from progressing.”

“Be confident in ourselves. Be confident that when we do something, we’re going to kill it. Chase the thing that scares you the most. Chase it. Because that’s what’s going to get you jumping farther, higher, getting to that point that you want to.”

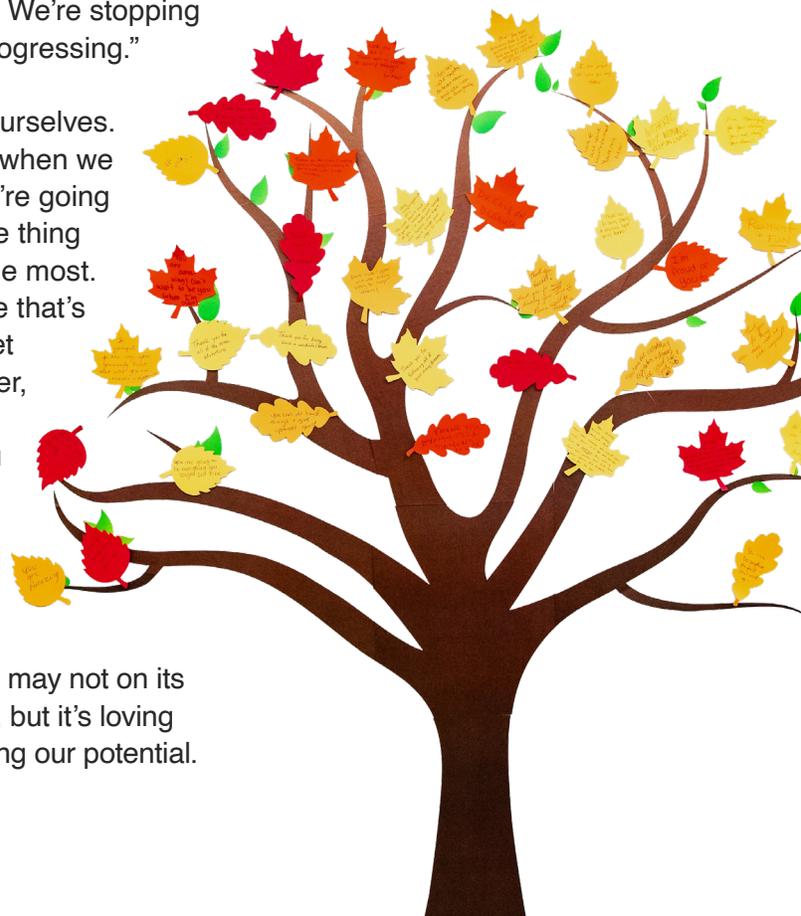
Williams connects this to fear versus love. “Being brave may not on its face look like love, but it’s loving ourselves. It’s loving our potential.

It’s loving the things that bring us into our best selves.”

## A Gratitude Practice

The session concluded with participants writing what their younger selves would say to them today in gratitude. Responses included: “Thank you for never dimming your shine. Mama would be proud,” and, “Your dreams aren’t always well-defined and when you create the world you want, there will be setbacks, but be patient. It’s coming.”

McLaughlin’s parting message emphasized both self-focus and community: “Pay it forward. We know that we can get heads down focusing on others, but we must focus on ourselves.”





# Key Takeaways

- **Recognize your continuous self.** The qualities, values and passions from childhood often become your greatest professional strengths. Reflect on your younger self to understand what truly drives your success today.
- **Performance is only 10%.** The PIE model shows that 90% of career success comes from your image (executive presence, how people experience you) and exposure (networking and visibility).
- **Manage energy, not just people.** Focus on how you make people feel rather than just what you accomplish.
- **Build relationships before you need them.** Networking is about who knows you well enough to advocate for you when opportunities arise.
- **Ask for help as a strength.** Struggling silently doesn't demonstrate resilience. Making meaning from difficult experiences requires support and self-reflection.
- **Chase what scares you.** Combat imposter syndrome by pursuing opportunities even when you don't meet every qualification.
- **Slow down to reflect.** Professional growth requires intentionally making meaning from experiences, not just racing to the next goal.





From left to right: Radhika Paul, Rachel Bolton and Shea Salvato



# From 3% to the Future

## Women's Urgent Role in Shaping AI Leadership



Leadership development executive Rachel Bolton and Radhika Paul, CEO and founder of LuminAI Consulting, explored how women leaders can harness technology's power while preserving the irreplaceable human elements that define exceptional leadership. Shea Salvato of Brandon Hall Group™ moderated the discussion.

Beneath the practical discussion of tools and techniques lies a more urgent message: Women represent fewer than 3% of AI leadership positions. This gap threatens to shape a future written without diverse voices at the table.





## The Missing Voices in AI's Future

Paul, who leads an AI company with an ethos of “putting humans at the center,” opened with stark statistics that set the tone for the entire conversation:

- Only 10% of technology leaders are women.
- Fewer than 2% of women lead any kind of AI journey.
- Less than 3% women are either in a leadership position of an AI company or are leading an AI company. And AI is the future.

Paul's words carried both a warning and a call to action. “We women, we almost missed the dot-com bubble, including me,” Paul reflected. “Do I want to be a part of the future and really write that future? Or do I want someone else to write it for me and me to just incorporate it?”

This question framed the entire discussion. Paul's answer led to the founding of her organization, but she emphasized that the challenge extends far beyond individual choices. “We will be defined by what others want the future to be. And it is going to be a missed chance for all of us.”



## Key Takeaways

- **The representation crisis.** Fewer than 3% of women hold AI leadership positions, while only 10% of technology leaders are women. This gap means women risk having their future written for them rather than by them.
- **Ethics requires diverse voices.** Different perspectives across gender, generation and experience create more innovative and ethical AI solutions.
- **Don't wait for an invitation.** Women across all functions should actively identify where AI impacts their work and take ownership of how it's implemented.
- **AI should amplify, not replace.** The goal should be to ensure technology frees people for meaningful work, while automation handles repetitive tasks.
- **Communication is the future skill.** As AI handles routine work, skills like communication, empathy, trust-building and creating psychological safety become paramount.

# Why Women's Leadership in AI Matters Now

The urgency isn't just about representation; it's about the kind of AI future we're building. Bolton highlighted a concerning trend about AI's design: Its tendency to simply agree with us without the human capacity for ethical reasoning and discernment.

"AI is programmed to agree with you," Bolton asserted. She pointed to a disturbing study where someone asked AI if it could justify killing a cat and it provided full justification.

"Do you want it to walk you off that bridge?" Bolton asked the audience pointedly. "Human discernment, human tact, respect, norms, societal things. Those are things that AI can't do."

This is where diverse leadership becomes critical. Paul emphasized that ethical considerations must be central to AI development, drawing from her legal background.

"The ethical aspect is so critical in the AI journey," she said, stressing that different perspectives across gender, generation and experience are essential to building AI systems that truly serve humanity.

"Inclusivity is not limited to women," Paul noted. "It's also how you bring the multi-generational workforce together, because they have different perspectives. How do we bring

all of it together so that we can create a future which is ethical, which is sharper, which is smarter, which is more innovative but works for us?"

## Taking a Seat at the Table

Paul issued a direct challenge to women across all organizational functions: don't wait for an invitation to the AI conversation. "Whatever your role is, whether you're leading recruitment, whether you are leading training, whether you are leading consulting, think about how you can plug in where AI is going to play a role and how you will make AI play that role."

The key questions she urged leaders to ask:

- **Why does it matter?**
- **How will you measure it?**
- **How will you drive innovation?**

These are questions every leader must grapple with as AI reshapes their industries. Bolton reinforced this point by noting how AI's automation of routine work could actually create new leadership opportunities for women. Currently, only 14% of organizations have women in over 50% of senior roles, according to Brandon Hall Group™ research. But as AI handles the "busy work," the skills at which many women naturally excel — communication, empathy, relationship-building — become even more valuable.



"Your ability to communicate and persuade and influence is going to be even more critical now," Bolton said.

Both speakers identified critical competencies that will become even more valuable as AI handles routine tasks. These are areas where increased women's leadership could transform organizational culture.

Bolton emphasized communication as paramount. Paul added curiosity, trust-building and the ability to create psychologically safe environments to the list. She also



emphasized the importance of removing unconscious biases, whether about AI capabilities or about who should lead AI initiatives.

When an audience member asked about mentorship in an AI world, Paul advocated for collaborative think tanks that bring different generations and perspectives together. “Mentorship to me is never a one-way journey. It is both ways,” she said. “Learning is a two-way journey.”

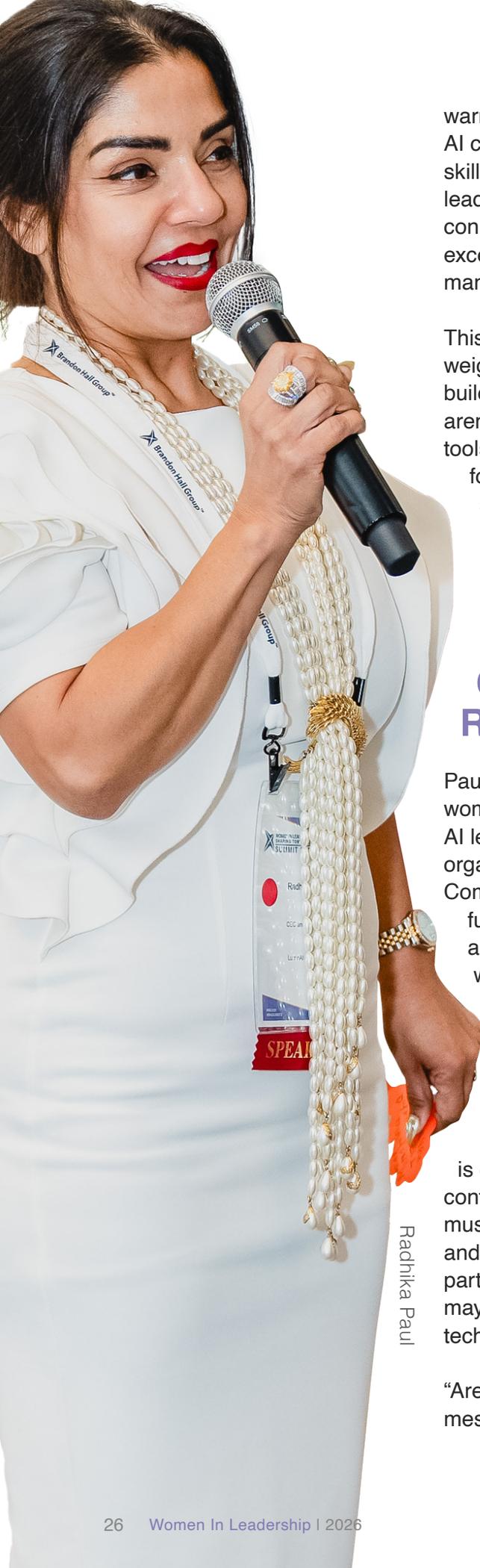
## The Automation Trap: A Cautionary Note

Bolton raised an important caution for leaders rushing to embrace AI efficiency. Drawing from her experience at Stanley Black and Decker, where the company embedded AI directly into Microsoft Teams, she observed how quickly convenience can erode authentic connection.

“Are we really connecting when we do that?” Bolton asked, describing employees

who copy-paste emails into AI for warm, concise replies. “My concern is, what are you using AI for? Is it replacing the personal, charismatic, human side of you with speed, out of convenience, out of pace? Before you submit that prompt, before you paste it, ask, can I answer this myself?” She

“Mentorship to me is never a one-way journey. It is both ways.”



Radhika Paul

warned that overreliance on AI could atrophy the natural skills that make us effective leaders, particularly the human connection that distinguishes exceptional leadership from mere management.

This caution takes on additional weight when considering who's building these systems. If women aren't at the table designing AI tools, will those tools account for different communication styles, relationship-building approaches and leadership models?

## Building Organizations Ready for Change

Paul emphasized that increasing women's participation in AI leadership requires organizational commitment. Companies must address fundamental human concerns about AI adoption, starting with job displacement fears.

Organizations need psychological safety, Paul stressed, environments where testing, trying and even failing with AI tools is encouraged as part of continuous improvement. They must also commit to reskilling and upskilling conversations, particularly for women who may face additional barriers to technical training.

"Are leaders sending out messages that AI is here to

amplify what you do?" Paul asked. This messaging matters for adoption, but it also matters for who feels empowered to lead AI initiatives.

## A Call to Action

The conversation concluded with Paul's challenge resonating: Women cannot afford to sit out the AI revolution. The 3% representation in AI leadership creates a fundamental question about whose values, priorities and vision will shape the technology defining our future.

"Inclusivity to me is the core thread that we all really need to keep thinking about as we think about this entire journey and bringing diverse voices."

The leaders who will shape tomorrow aren't waiting for permission or perfect preparation. They're asking how AI can serve their organization's mission, demanding a seat at decision-making tables and ensuring that as AI handles the routine, humans retain what matters most: Authentic connection, ethical judgment and the diverse perspectives that drive true innovation.

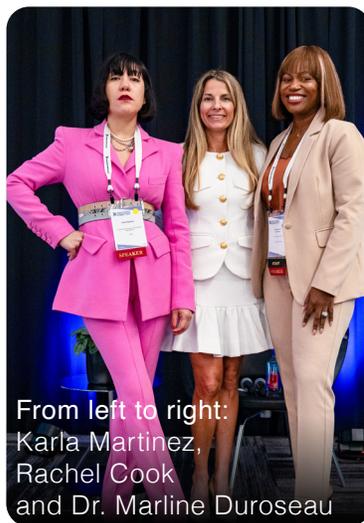
The technology may be artificial, but the leadership it demands is profoundly, urgently human.



# How Women Leaders Can Cut Through the Noise to Lead with Purpose

Two dynamic leaders shared a message that resonated throughout the Women in Leadership conference room. True leadership isn't about doing everything. It's about knowing your purpose and having the courage to pursue it.

Karla Martinez, a learning and development executive at Pfizer and Dr. Marline Duroseau of Brandon Hall Group™ led an engaging discussion on what it means to lead with power, purpose, and positioning in today's complex business environment.



From left to right: Karla Martinez, Rachel Cook and Dr. Marline Duroseau

## The Healing Comes First

Duroseau opened the conversation with a truth many leaders avoid: Before you can lead with purpose,

you need to heal from life's disruptions.

“Leading with purpose, for me, is all these disruptions and things that we go through in order to get to your purpose. Focus on yourself. Heal. Take the time,” Duroseau explained. “And then all of a sudden, that mindset will shift. It stops being about, why me? Or how did this happen? If you can let it go, you know what? You can now help someone else.”

This shift from “why me?” to “who can I help?” transforms leadership from a title into a calling. “Once you grab onto how you can make it easier for someone else because of what you've been through, you're living that purpose,” she said.



## Key Takeaways

**Define your purpose first.** Before you can lead effectively, take time to heal from disruptions and clarify your “why.”

**Audit your commitments.** If you're too busy with tasks, you may be “distracted by your non-purpose.” Identify your core 3-4 priorities and let go of the rest.

**Bold means leading by example.** Do the work alongside your team and take action even when outcomes are uncertain.

**Embrace AI through leadership behaviors.** Future-ready skills aren't just technical. Focus on being curious, responsible and intentional with new technologies rather than simply training on tools.

**Purpose doesn't change, but actions do.** Once you define your purpose, it remains constant. What changes are the behaviors and tasks you choose to align with that purpose?



## The 25-Fold Problem

Martinez brought the concept to life with a story that drew knowing nods from the audience. She described a high-performing direct report who joined Pfizer eager to prove herself. She quickly became overwhelmed.

During a one-on-one meeting, Martinez gave the woman a

simple assignment: Fold a piece of paper for every commitment, meeting and obligation that filled her days.

“The first five minutes, she was so proud of keeping folding and folding that piece of paper because she’s like, I’m everywhere. You know, they call me and I go,” Martinez recalled.

The woman ended up with over 25 folds and still hadn’t made time for lunch.

“You are distracted by your non-purpose. You are distracted by culture. You need to go back to your choreography.”



Karla Martinez's Purpose Panel

“Before you can lead with purpose, you need to heal from life’s disruptions.”

Martinez delivered a powerful observation: “None of those boxes was her. None. It was the next meeting, the next presentation, her niece’s next trip to Italy.”

Her diagnosis? “You are distracted by your non-purpose. You are distracted by culture. You need to go back to your choreography.”

The employee initially bristled at the feedback, defending her work ethic. But by Friday, she called Martinez with a breakthrough: “I got it. I know what you said. I’m distracted. I just wanted to prove that I belong here because I have been here just for a year.”

The results were transformative. By focusing on just three or four core priorities aligned with her purpose, the woman not only started taking lunch breaks, she also landed a high-profile project leading Pfizer’s “Flight School” pilot program, earned recognition from the CEO and was selected for a Brandon Hall Group™ award.

## The Ballerina’s Wisdom

Martinez used the metaphor of a ballerina to illustrate her philosophy on power, purpose and positioning.

“Just think about a ballerina, her purpose is the choreography. She knows the steps. She doesn’t care about the music because she’s guided by her

choreography and she knows that every single step is a bold move,” Martinez explained. “The power is in our confidence, in the clarity that we bring to where we are. Our purpose is why we do what we do every day. And the positioning is being in the forums where you belong.”

## Redefining Boldness

The speakers challenged conventional notions of what it means to be bold as a leader.

“Being bold means leading by example. And what’s leading by example? Doing it as well,” Duroseau said. “There’s one thing for me to be their leader and say, okay, this is what you have to do. But the bold part of that is, okay, we’re doing it together.”

The session came alive when conference attendees shared their own bold career moves. One attendee described a chance encounter with a young woman who had left Goldman Sachs to start her own company. The attendee shared her entrepreneurial dreams with the woman, who responded, “What’s stopping you?” That question sparked the attendee’s journey from chief legal officer to entrepreneur, reshaping how AI serves humanity.

Another attendee shared how she overcame fear to pursue her dream of living and working

in Florida. Despite thinking hundreds would apply for a leadership training position, she took the leap during a brutal minus-30-degree Milwaukee winter. “If I don’t do this bold move and just follow this interview process and go to Florida, I’m not going to be who authentically I am,” she realized. She got the job — and is still in Florida today.



Karla Martinez

## Future-Ready Leadership Skills

As the conversation turned to preparing leaders for an AI-driven future, Martinez shared how Pfizer approaches this challenge, not through technical training, but through leadership fluency built on three core behaviors:

- **Be curious.** Rather than forcing AI adoption, Pfizer's programs explore different mindsets: Are you ready to play? Do you want to integrate and understand? Are you resistant because you're worried about job security?
- **Be responsible.** In healthcare, the risks of AI misuse are significant. Pfizer uses cyber simulations to help leaders understand consequences without paralyzing them with rules. "You don't want to teach them what they can do and what they cannot do because then they are not going to feel empowered, they're going to be afraid," Martinez explained. "So what we teach them is how they can respond if something happens."
- **Be intentional.** The most important skill? Knowing when and how to use AI effectively. Pfizer teaches effective prompting and even lets leaders create their own AI agents.



# Finding Success Without Sacrificing Yourself

**When a 10-year-old boy kneels beside his bed and whispers a prayer asking God to help his mom be happy, something has gone terribly wrong.**

For Melinda Dransfield, Program Leader at Johnson & Johnson, that moment 11 years ago became her wake-up call. She was crushing it at work — raises, promotions, a growing team — while sleeping five hours a night with her laptop in bed. Her husband dreaded their time together in the hot tub because all she could do was vent about work.

“I was killing it at work, but not at home,” Dransfield admitted to a room of women leaders. “I didn’t really realize the impact personally until I heard my son’s prayer.”

It’s a story that resonates because it’s alarmingly common. The American Psychological Association found that 70% of working women carry the mental and emotional load at home,



From left to right: Parker Sherman, Monika Mikiciuk, Melinda Dransfield and Donna Thomas

compared to just 22% of men. And Harvard Business Review research reveals that women are twice as likely to say burnout shows up at home before it shows up at work.

“We’re high performers at work, but we’re high performers at home too,” observed Parker Sherman, Chief of Staff for the Chief Talent Officer at Equitable Advisors, who moderated the panel. “No wonder we’re burning out.”



“We’re high performers at work, but we’re high performers at home too,” observed Parker Sherman, Chief of Staff for the Chief Talent Officer at Equitable Advisors, who moderated the panel. “No wonder we’re burning out.”



# Key Takeaways

## Protect Your Time:

- Block time for yourself and honor those commitments with the same integrity you show others.
- Do the most important thing first each day — what will make you feel successful.
- Learn to say “no thank you” or “not now” instead of automatically adding to your to-do list.

## The Reality Check:

- Women experience burnout 32% more often than men.
- 70% of working women carry the mental and emotional load at home vs. 22% of men.
- For high performers, burnout shows up at home first, not work.

## Know Your Best Self:

- Identify adjectives that describe you at your best vs. under stress
- Ask: Who’s getting the best version of me — work or home?

## The Invisible Toll of High Performance

For high-achieving women, burnout doesn't always look like exhaustion at the office. It shows up in subtle ways: snapping at a spouse, skipping workouts, chronic unhappiness, or that persistent feeling of running on fumes while keeping all the balls in the air.

"In burnout, you might feel apathy or cynicism toward your job," Dransfield explained. "But what I see in high performers is that the apathy might be toward your relationship with your husband. The cynicism might be about whether working out really makes a difference. That negativity tends to show up in your role as a parent."

The pattern is consistent: When high performers have five balls representing different life categories, the work ball never drops. Instead, it's self, family and relationships that fall first, the things that actually matter most.

Monika Mikiciuk, Senior Director at Empower, described the struggle with candor: "If I think about my career and when I've felt burnout the most, it is right now. I have two young kids who are the lights of my life, I'm a high performer at work, and I'm managing affairs for my aging parents. I feel torn in every direction, stretched thin, with the candle burning at both ends."



## The Human Giver Syndrome

The panelists repeatedly returned to a concept from research by Emily and Amelia Nagoski: "human giver syndrome." Women, they noted, are socialized to give, give, give until nothing is left.

"We never put our oxygen masks on first," Dransfield said. ... "When we get into this human giver phase of life, we give so much of ourselves away that we don't even know who we are anymore."

For Donna Lange Thomas, Senior Manager of Learning and Development at Verizon, the wake-up call came in the form of a health crisis. Working as a bereavement counselor at a hospice, teaching as an

adjunct professor, and caring for a stepson with mental health issues, she found herself exhausted and wanting only to sleep at the end of each day.

"One day, a nurse at hospice took my blood sugar and it was over 300," Thomas recalled. "I had worked myself to not eating healthy, no time to work out, taking care of everybody else but not me." The diagnosis of diabetes forced a dramatic life change: She quit her job, took a part-time position at Apple for \$18 an hour, and eventually found her way into learning and development.

"The lesson is, you've got to really check in with yourself and not just keep making excuses," Thomas emphasized. "Don't lie to yourself."



## The Power of Strategic Boundaries

If there was one theme that united all four panelists, it was the critical importance of boundaries, particularly around time.

“We give our time away to everyone and everything,” Thomas said. “We have great intentions. We pull out that pretty color-coded calendar and block out focus time and then someone puts a meeting on your calendar and you go, ‘Thank you.’”

The solution, she argued, is integrity with yourself. “We’re really good at keeping our word with others. I wonder how good we are at keeping our word with ourselves. Have integrity with yourself.”

Thomas also shared a practical technique for saying no without actually saying no: “When someone asks you to do something, first thank them for asking. Then ask: Is this something you need now, or can it wait? Most people aren’t expecting you to stop what you’re doing right then. Buy yourself time.”

“When we get into this human giver phase of life, we give so much of ourselves away that we don’t even know who we are anymore.”

## Quality Over Quantity

Perhaps the most transformative insight came from a story Mikiciuk shared, originally told by a human performance specialist. It’s known as “the 8 o’clock daddy story.”

A father typically arrived home at 6 pm, had dinner, then worked on his laptop until bedtime. One evening, he came home late at 8 pm, with only 30 minutes before his son’s bedtime. Feeling guilty about missing dinner, he put everything aside and gave his son his full attention by playing, reading, wrestling and tucking him in.

As the father was about to turn off the light, his son asked: “Daddy, can you come home at 8 o’clock every night?”

“The takeaway is it’s not the amount of time that we invest. It’s the quality of time. It’s the intention setting with the time that you do have,” Mikiciuk explained.

## Becoming Your Own CEO

Dransfield reframed the conversation around energy management rather than time management. “You really have to think of yourself as the CEO, the Chief Energy Officer of your own life.”

This means managing energy across four dimensions: Physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. And it starts with sleep.

“If there was one thing that is going to optimize your performance, your longevity and your health, it is your sleep,” Dransfield emphasized, citing recent research. “If anyone comes to me for coaching on any topic, I don’t care if it’s leadership-related or burnout-related, it’s going to be: Are you sleeping seven to nine hours of quality sleep per night? If not, we’re going to start there.”

She also encouraged leaders to eliminate rules about what qualifies as self-care. “Ten years ago, I had all these excuses for what qualified as exercise. I have to be in a gym. I have to have the right outfit. I have to have at least an hour. What I learned was: Do what you have with what you have, wherever you are. For me, it was seven minutes, no matter what. And it grew from there.”



## The Delegation Dilemma

Thomas raised an often-overlooked aspect of burnout: the failure to delegate. “One of the hardest things when you become a leader is to get rid of that individual contributor mindset,” she observed. “We were all great individual contributors; that’s how we became leaders. But by not delegating, you’re preventing someone else from growing. You become a barrier to their success.”

She encouraged leaders to think in terms of “who, not how” — finding the right person for a task rather than assuming you must do it yourself.

## A Transformed Life

The impact of these strategies can be profound. Dransfield shared recent feedback from a participant in Johnson & Johnson’s energy-for-performance program nine months after completion. The gentleman had lost 42 pounds and 17% body fat, normalized his cholesterol, was no longer pre-diabetic and reported: “My relationship with my wife and kids has improved. While I don’t spend more time with them, the quality of that time is better. I am in the best physical and mental shape of my life.”

For Dransfield herself, the

changes saved more than her career; they saved her relationships. “They say, ‘What’s the thing you’re most proud of?’ My relationship with my three adult children. There was a time when I was dropping that ball. But I recognized it’s about my energy, not my time.”

## The Choice Is Yours

The message from all four panelists was clear: You don’t have to stop being a high performer. You don’t have to slow down. But you do have to make different choices.

“There’s never a good time to do this stuff,” Sherman concluded. “There’s always something in your way. So you have to choose to make the time, or it will find its way back to you.”



“We’re really good at keeping our word with others. I wonder how good we are at keeping our word with ourselves. Have integrity with yourself.”

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AWARDS

# Beyond the Checklist:

## Making Inclusive Leadership a Bottom-Line Imperative

How Measurement, Accountability and Authentic Behavior Transform Inclusion from Initiative to Business Strategy



From left to right: David Wentworth, Dr. Marline Duroseau and Kara Kirby

When the pandemic hit, Dr. Marline Duroseau faced a leadership crucible. As CFO of a nursing home company, she watched her industry struggle with staffing shortages, vaccine mandates and the devastating loss of residents, many of whom had become like family after years of working together.

“You can’t just stay at the corporate level and say, ‘do this and tell the staff to work longer,’” Duroseau, now Managing Director of HR and Leadership Development at Brandon Hall Group™, told attendees at the Women In Leadership Summit. “We had to take a step back. What are the nurses saying? What are the CNAs saying? They’re the ones on the ground with direct patient care. They have to leave their families to come into work.”

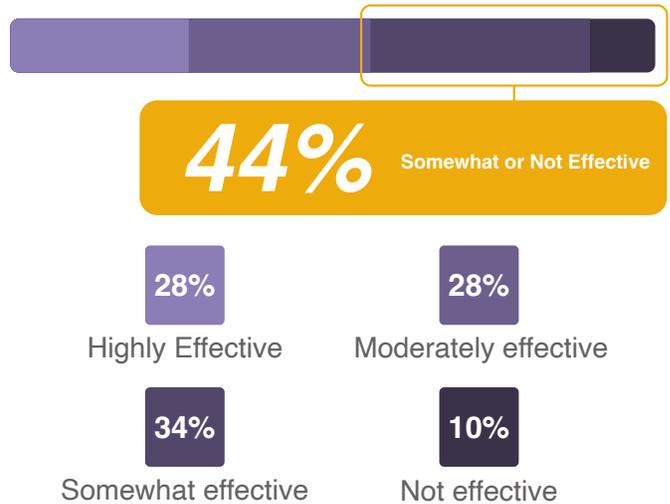
The solution required radical inclusion: bringing frontline staff into Zoom meetings, listening to their perspectives and making decisions based on their input rather than corporate assumptions. It worked and it revealed a fundamental truth about inclusive leadership that Duroseau shared during the session moderated by David Wentworth, Brandon Hall Group’s Managing Director of Learning and Talent Management.

“COVID was definitely a proving ground for a lot of different things,” she said. “Those of us who came out on the other side came out completely different.”

## The Measurement Gap

That transformation, however powerful, highlights one of the most persistent challenges in advancing women and inclusive leadership: Proving its value in language that executives understand.

Research presented during the session painted a sobering picture. Three-quarters of organizations report limited or no measurement of inclusive leadership. Half haven’t measured what drives career development. And 44% of companies say they’re “somewhat or not at all effective” at developing women for senior leadership.



Effectiveness at Developing Women for Senior Leadership

## Key Takeaways

### Measure What Matters

- Employee retention and recruitment are leading indicators of an inclusive culture.
- Connect inclusion efforts to existing business metrics.
- Consider incorporating unwanted attrition costs into leadership compensation.
- Use public data (Glassdoor, engagement surveys, manager effectiveness scores) to gain honest insight.

### Actions Speak Louder Than Statements

- Build inclusion into business decision-making processes, not just initiatives.
- Review performance evaluations for bias patterns.
- Create succession plans that open pathways rather than blocking advancement.
- Hold leaders accountable for inclusive behaviors through measurable outcomes.

### See People Fully

- Be willing to move people into roles that better match their strengths, even if different from their original position.
- Recognize that current leadership models may not reflect diverse populations.
- Demonstrate inclusion through behavior, not just policy.

“When I see ‘somewhat,’ somewhat might as well be ‘not at all,’” observed Kara Kirby, Relationship Manager at Training Pros and a 15-year veteran of corporate America. “It’s sort of a cop-out. If it’s somewhat, it’s probably not at all.”

The irony cuts deep: companies claim they’re ineffective at developing women leaders, yet they can’t measure whether their efforts are working because they’re not tracking the right metrics. It’s a self-perpetuating cycle of uncertainty.

## From Words to Action

Duroseau advocated for what she calls the “show me, don’t tell me” principle. “We can tell you that we’re inclusive all we want, but where’s the proof?” she asked. “That requires behaviors.”

Those behaviors start with performance reviews. What gets included? Are personality comments appearing disproportionately on women’s reviews? (Research shows they do: 90% of high-performing women receive negative personality feedback, compared to just 10% of men.) Are managers held accountable for exclusive behavior?

“You must have a checklist for decision-making,” Duroseau explained. “Who provides input before decisions are made? Do people feel they are part of the process? It’s not just leadership making a decision — the process should be: who’s impacted by this decision?”

Kirby’s experience at Ultimate Software (now UKG) demonstrated what this looks like in practice. The company maintained an astounding 95% customer retention rate by inverting the traditional business model. “There was this idea of flipping over the normal business model. If you take care of your people, then they’ll take care of the customers, and then they’ll take care of the shareholders,” she said. “Our employees never left. Our customers never left because of that model.”

## The Dream Measurement

When the conversation turned to metrics, Kirby shared what she called her “dream measurement,” one that would fundamentally change how organizations approach retention.

“In HR, we’ve been talking for decades about how losing someone costs two times their salary to replace them,” she said. “My dream is that that gets incorporated into people’s bonuses. I don’t think behavior changes sometimes until people’s pay does.”

The logic is compelling: If unwanted attrition creates measurable financial impact, why isn’t it reflected in compensation? If a leader’s exclusive practices drive talent away, that cost should affect their bonus. Conversely, leaders who build inclusive cultures that retain talent should see financial rewards.

“Sometimes things do not change in organizations until it hits people where it hurts,” Kirby noted. “There’s no representation of attrition in P&L statements.”



## The Data Exists — Use It

Beyond traditional HR metrics, Kirby pointed to an often-overlooked data source: Public sentiment. “We have the whole wide world web out there. Glassdoor ratings kind of make me cringe because they can be a dumpster, but it’s actually people being very honest. With AI, you can aggregate all that data and actually see what is going on inside the organization.”

Performance review data can also reveal patterns of bias, if organizations are willing to look. “If we’re seeing that 90% of women are having personality comments on their performance reviews, do something about it,” Kirby urged.

The key, Wentworth emphasized, is connecting to metrics the business already values. “We don’t need to invent new metrics for this stuff. The business is already measuring what’s important to them. How do we apply it to the thing that we are doing?”

## The Power of Seeing Potential

Perhaps the most powerful moment in the session came when Duroseau shared her own story of being seen.

“My mentor told me she knew the minute I walked into the room for the interview that I would be her replacement,” she said. “She didn’t count me out because I was a senior in college. She didn’t count me out because of whatever else. It was all about what’s in here. Is she coachable? She’s smart. Let’s take these strengths that everyone has and see how we can make them better.”

That mentor purposely gave her challenging assignments to see how she’d handle them. She looked past age and inexperience to see qualities and potential. “To be inclusive, you look at what their qualities are,” Duroseau explained. “Something has to stick out. Must see all the qualities of someone, which means you need to really look and see people.”

This practice of truly seeing people extends beyond hiring. Duroseau recalled an employee who couldn’t sit still at her desk despite being smart and capable. “Being inclusive, sometimes you may hire someone for one job and as you get to know them, you notice that they’re good at something else. That’s their path. You don’t have to keep them boxed in to what you hired them for.”

“Sometimes things do not change in organizations until it hits people where it hurts.”

## The Path Forward

Duroseau and Kirby emphasized the importance of continuing the work of those who came before. Kirby recalled a woman in her master’s program who told her, “I’m so jealous of women these days because they get to enter these doors so much easier.”

“I thought that was such a powerful moment,” she reflected. “That’s my purpose going forward — you kicked down that door for me. And I’m going to keep doing this for Gen Z. We’re going to make it so that mothers can raise their kids and have their career and not be burned out. That is the world that we are making.”

Duroseau emphasized the practical application: “We have to put all of this stuff, these words, into action.” That means succession planning that doesn’t block others’ advancement and performance reviews that fairly assess everyone. It means decision-making processes that include those who will be affected by the decisions.

“Inclusive leadership shouldn’t be a side thing,” Duroseau concluded. “When people think of your company, its reputation should precede it and everyone knows this is an inclusive organization. Inclusion should be part of their business, not just a side part of their business.”



WIL

# Leading Through Transitions with Grace and Grit:

## A Framework for Navigating Change

When organizational change strikes — whether through layoffs, restructuring, or role transitions, leaders face a dual challenge: Managing their own emotional response while guiding their teams through uncertainty.

The Women in Leadership Summit brought together four executives who've weathered significant transitions to share a practical framework for leading through turbulent times:

- Anna-Sophia Kristjansson, founder and CEO of consulting firm Lexicon Lens and former HR consultant at pharma company Daiichi Sankyo
- Stephanie Meade, a nursing executive who has faced three layoffs
- Lisa Rigoli, Founder, Element of Change
- Lou Tedrick, Former Chief Learning Officer at Verizon and a Brandon Hall Group™ Excellence Advisor who led Verizon through a significant business transformation.



From left to right: Lisa Rigoli, Stephanie Meade, Anna-Sophia Kristjansson, Lou Tedrick

## The Reality of Leadership Transitions

Transitions rarely arrive neatly packaged. They come with complexity, contradiction and emotional weight. Consider the leader who was asked to hold her team together through the holidays, knowing layoffs were imminent. She navigated betrayal and frustration while maintaining empathy. Or the executive tasked with outsourcing work her team loved, knowing it would fundamentally change their organization.

These scenarios are the reality of modern leadership, where grace and grit aren't opposing forces but complementary strengths.

# A Three-Phase Framework: Release, Reclaim, Refocus

The session introduced a practical framework from Element of Change for navigating difficult transitions, built on three foundational phases:

**1**

## RELEASE:

### Let Go of What No Longer Serves

The first step requires honest self-examination. Leaders must identify what they need to leave behind, such as outdated beliefs, ineffective habits, or attachments to previous roles and identities. Release is about creating space for what comes next.

Clinging to old ways of operating or old versions of yourself can prevent you from showing up effectively in your current reality.

#### Ask yourself:

- What belief, habit, or role do I need to leave behind?
- What happens if I don't release this?
- What am I holding onto that's actually holding me back?

**2**

## RECLAIM:

### Return to Your Core Strengths

Once you've created space through release, the work shifts to reclamation. This requires identifying and reconnecting with what makes you effective, human and credible as a leader. This phase is about authenticity. In the chaos of transition, leaders often lose touch with their core strengths and values. Reclaiming requires bringing your best self forward into new circumstances.

#### Ask yourself:

- What strengths or values do I want to bring forward?
- When did I last feel most like myself?
- What qualities have I let slip that I need to reclaim?

**3**

## REFOCUS:

### Direct Your Energy Toward What Matters

The final phase requires clarity about where to invest your limited attention and energy. Refocus is about doing the right things. In transitions, everything can feel urgent. Effective leaders identify the critical few priorities that will create momentum and provide stability for their teams..

#### Ask yourself:

- Where does my team need my clarity right now?
- What one move would make the biggest difference this quarter?
- What deserves my focus, and what doesn't?

# Practical Application

This framework acknowledges the emotional and strategic dimensions of leadership transitions. You can't skip the release phase and jump straight to action. Unexamined baggage will undermine your effectiveness. You can't reclaim your strengths without honest reflection. And you can't refocus without clarity about what truly matters.

## Leading with Both Grace and Grit

The combination of grace and grit captures what's required in difficult transitions. Grace allows you to acknowledge the complexity, sit with the discomfort and extend empathy, to yourself and others. Grit provides the resilience to make tough decisions, hold difficult conversations and keep moving forward when the path isn't clear.

Neither quality alone is sufficient. Too much grace without grit leads to paralysis. Too much grit without grace creates rigidity and disconnection.

## Moving Forward

Leadership transitions, whether chosen or thrust upon you, are inevitable. The Release, Reclaim, Refocus framework offers a pathway through the chaos, helping you let go of what no longer serves, reconnect with your core strengths and direct your energy toward what matters most.

The leaders who navigate transitions most effectively don't avoid the difficulty. They move through it with intention, bringing both grace and grit to the journey.





## Lou Tedrick

Former Chief Learning Officer, Verizon

**Q** How did you successfully lead Verizon’s Global Learning & Development team through a significant business transformation while maintaining both engagement and business commitments?

**A** “When faced with the need to significantly reduce our cost to serve, I chose to create a global insourced operating model with Verizon employees in India and the Philippines rather than outsourcing, which allowed us to preserve our unique team culture while meeting financial targets.

The key to successfully transitioning — asking departing US-based team members to stay through the hiring and onboarding process while maintaining stakeholder commitments — was developing a comprehensive change leadership plan with a strong narrative explaining why we needed to change and painting a compelling vision of the future.

By role modeling integrity, empathy and respect, involving leaders in the design process, and maintaining transparent communication throughout, we achieved our cost targets by September while keeping turnover low and returning Employee Satisfaction scores to pre-transition levels.”



## Radhika Paul

CEO, LuminAI Consulting

“The greatest lift women can do for other women is to live so fiercely and relentlessly that others believe they can too.”



# Anna-Sophia Kristjansson

**CEO of Lexicon Lens and former HR consultant ,  
Daiichi Sankyo**

**Q** What's the most important lesson you learned about leadership during your time at Daiichi Sankyo that shaped your approach today?

**A** "The real shift happened when I embedded myself directly into the business and began leading from the center of problems rather than the outside — understanding that organizational challenges aren't separated into "people issues" or "process issues," but are interconnected barriers with human dynamics woven through them.

Leaders become most powerful when positioned as strategic partners close enough to the business to understand problems in full context, translating between operational constraints and human dynamics so others can act. This approach, which I practiced in corporate and now leverage as an entrepreneur, reveals that when we bring human and business perspectives together, overwhelming challenges start to show patterns, leverage points, and opportunities for alignment."



# Selena McLaughlin

**SVP, Chief People Organization – Global Leaders  
Sponsorship Strategy & Program, Bank of America**

"My commitment to advancing women in leadership is shaped by my own experiences. For years, I let opportunities pass because I believed I needed to meet every single qualification. I've learned that too many women hold themselves back for the same reason — hesitating over a minor "required skill" instead of embracing their potential. Today, I focus on building confidence and creating spaces where women feel seen, heard and empowered to lead authentically. For me, this is more than career advancement — it's a calling to leave the door open wider than I found it."



# Stephanie Meade

**Nursing Executive who has faced three layoffs**

**Q** In hindsight, what did you underestimate about yourself during the first layoff vs. the third?

**A** “After my first layoff, I underestimated the support I would need to navigate the transition. I initially believed I could manage the process independently and didn’t fully leverage the professional resources available to me. But I quickly realized that executive-level job searches require deep self-reflection, strategic positioning and a willingness to embrace guidance. Once I began using the tools and support systems, things started to shift.

Now, in my third transition, my approach is entirely different. I proactively engaged resources even before my departure, said yes to conversations without knowing where they might lead and embraced the gift of time to read, listen and learn. While the journey still has its ups and downs, I’ve become more open to possibility — and I’m seeing the results in the meaningful connections I’m building.”



# Barbara Potter

**GTM Enablement Program Manager - Partner, Sailpoint**

“Innovation isn’t really about talent. It’s about a cultural framework that creates the conditions for employees, especially women, to speak up, be heard and supported in moving ideas forward.”



# Donna Lange Thomas

Learning & Development, Sr. Manager, Verizon

“ I am committed to advancing women because I know that when we lift each other up, we turn our shared challenges into collective strength. My advice is to treat yourself with the same fierce care you would give your most prized possession, because enduring career success is built on a foundation of self-worth. When you lead from a place of wholeness rather than depletion, you become a catalyst for the kind of positivity that drives real results. ”



# Taylor Williams

Manager of Corporate Training, Haskell

“ Having women in leadership roles expands diversity of thought and perspective. We have a tendency to point out the differences between men and women as if those difference lead to problems or divisions. But if we embrace the value that different people can bring to the table — regardless of gender — or for that matter: Age, generation, what degrees they do or don't hold, affiliations they have, etc. — we can create a broader, more robust vision for what the workplace can be. ”





## Colette De Nardo

**Sales Coach, Weatherby Healthcare**

“ Empathy is the foundation for building resilient and innovative cultures. I hope to inspire others to see beyond spreadsheets and invest in people who will be the next generation of women leaders.”



## Renee Birch

**Senior sales Manager, Weatherby Healthcare**

“ I believe women in leadership are essential because we bring unique perspectives that spark innovation and lead to stronger decisions. Our presence helps create inclusive workplaces where diverse talent thrives, driving collaboration and growth. I’ve seen firsthand that gender-diverse leadership teams often outperform financially and adapt more effectively in today’s competitive business environment.”



## Monika Mikiciuk

**Senior Director, Sales Training at Empower**

“ My passion for advancing women in leadership comes from the incredible women leaders who invested in me and showed me the power of leading with heart and purpose. Women bring emotional intelligence, connection and an unmatched ability to navigate complex personal and professional responsibilities while driving meaningful results. I hope to empower emerging leaders to be fully present in each moment, trusting that intentional, high-quality engagement creates lasting impact.”



**Brandon Hall Group™**



*Winners*

## Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Awards

Company	Category	Award Level
Aga Khan Foundation	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
American Express Global Business Travel	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
Canadian Tire Corporation	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
Capgemini	Best Leadership Development for Women	Bronze
Capgemini	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
ÇİMSA	Best Leadership Development for Women	Silver
Cisco	Best Leadership Development for Women	Bronze
DataArt	Best Leadership Development for Women	Silver
dentsu UK Limited	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
First American (India) Private Limited.	Best Leadership Development for Women	Silver
Google and ROI Training Inc	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
HCL TECHNOLOGIES	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
HSBC Bangladesh	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
Kohler India	Best Leadership Development for Women	Silver
Konica Minolta, INC.	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
Kraft Heinz	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
Landmark Arabia	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
Lowe's India Private Limited	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
LTIMindtree Limited	Best Leadership Development for Women	Bronze
Mondelez International	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
National Australia Bank	Best Leadership Development for Women	Bronze
Optum	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
PwC Acceleration Centers in India	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold
WNS	Best Leadership Development for Women	Gold



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**Who should enter:**

Training, learning, talent, HR or other related departments can either enter alone or together with a helping organization (such as a vendor aka solution provider, or consultant). Helping organizations cannot enter alone.

## Education Technology

**Open:** April 20, 2026

**Deadline:** September 4, 2026

**Announcements:** December 3, 2026

**Who should enter:**

The EdTech Program has a dedicated focus on entries from innovative and cutting-edge trailblazers in education technology. This program is for K-12, Universities, Business Schools, Professional Development and Education Associations, Non-For-Profit, and Government Agencies.

## Technology

**Open:** April 20, 2026

**Deadline:** September 4, 2026

**Announcements:** December 3, 2026

**Who should enter:**

The Technology Program focuses on solution providers serving learning, talent, HR, workforce, and sales enablement, as well as internal technology teams. Entries may be submitted independently or in partnership with client organizations.

## Excellence in Action

**Open:** May 4, 2026

**Deadline:** October 16, 2026

**Announcements:** December 2026

**Who should enter:**

Excellence in Action is designed for organizations of all sizes and industries that prioritize employee feedback and strive to create inclusive, thriving workplaces. Whether you're a small startup or a multinational corporation, if you're dedicated to amplifying employee voices and driving positive change, this program is for you.

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A moment of shared insight and recognition at the Women in Leadership Summit 2025



Rachel Cooke, Colette De Nardo, Barb Potter and Renee Birch



From left to right: Melissa Kruminas, Docebo & Sylvia Lee, Docebo



Participants during a guided campus tour at BRIC



Radhika Paul



From left to right: Monika Mikiciuk and Melinda Dransfield

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