

# STRATEGIES FEMALE LEADERS SHOULD LEVERAGE

LAURIE SCHULTZ | Some qualities women try so hard to suppress at work can actually give them a competitive edge



**Breaking through the glass ceiling takes more than determination and grit. It takes confidence, and the courage to own the fact that even in a top-level position you may not always be right or the most knowledgeable person in the room**

**W**omen are often conditioned to put up a tough front in the workplace. Exercising empathy, compassion or a willingness to listen to alternative viewpoints can be viewed as “soft” and as such women may steer clear of showing these traits for fear of being seen as unfit for a leadership position.

This is unfortunate because in my experience, breaking through the glass ceiling takes more than determination and grit. It takes confidence, and the courage to own the fact that even in a top-level position you may not always be right or the most knowledgeable person in the room. And that’s OK. In fact, it’s often the very qualities that women try so hard to suppress that can actually give them a competitive advantage in the workplace.

When I joined ACL in 2011, I accepted the task of leading a seasoned and talented group of people to scale growth and expand into a category-leading company. Becoming CEO was nerve-racking as not only were there high expectations to deliver clear results, but I was taking over the reins from a father-and-son-run company, which had a long operating history and pre-established culture. Despite this, the first goal I set out to achieve was to create an environment free of judgment, an open place for ideas to be shared without criticism. This turned out to be the catalyst for many future successes, none of which could have been achieved without exercising three key behaviours.

**EMBRACE YOUR VULNERABILITIES** ■ Contrary to popular belief, the workplace is not a place to detach from emotions. Businesses are run by humans, which entails feeling emotion. Often in a leadership position, there’s a tendency to be stone-faced and to remove the humanistic side to establish power. While it’s important to earn the respect of your colleagues, it’s OK to open up about sensitive topics. Humanizing yourself is a great way to be relatable, build deep connections and cultivate an understanding of valuable viewpoints.

We all second-guess ourselves at times, but women, due to conditioning, can do this more often in the workplace. As female leaders, we need to recognize that we may be less comfortable speaking up and challenge ourselves and others to speak openly. This means having the courage to ask the “dumb” question. Set a precedent that no question is too off base to ask and encourage others to abide by that rule. Often, what comes off as a stupid question is silently on the mind of everyone else in the meeting. We can develop a callous attitude when we fail to be open or find alignment out of fear of how we’ll be perceived. It’s OK to show vulnerability; you don’t need to be the smartest person in the room all the time.

**WELCOME MISTAKES** ■ Developing a culture of antifragility means welcoming stress and mistakes so that your team can improve and become more resilient. I always say that leaders create a future that otherwise would not have happened by making promises they don’t know how to keep and then doing everything they can to live up to those promises. Nothing is more stressful than committing to something you don’t know how

to do yet; you will make mistakes, you will feel the pressure and you will learn and become more resilient.

As leaders, we set the example by making those promises, learning through the experience and, as a result, redefining how the future looks. By encouraging others to do the same, we recognize the value of not knowing everything, and disrupt the idea that leaders and women have to be perfect before they can get started. Start now become good later.

**BE CONSISTENT AROUND THE CLOCK** ■ Consistency is bringing the same values that leaders live by in their “5-to-9” into their “9-to-5.” These values should include integrity, kindness and care both outside and inside the workplace. The core of leadership and culture rests in values alignment. You must be consistently and authentically who you are as a leader and a person at all times. You must be the same person at home as you are at work because that’s how people relate to you and learn from your experiences and the example you set.

If you’re in a place that is not consistent with your core values, you must leave it. Working somewhere that doesn’t align with what’s meaningful to you and consistent with your personal values will prevent you from reaching your full potential. Life is too short and too busy to dedicate your time and energy to a place that’s inconsistent with your integrity. 📌



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