



**Nurturing Women's
Leadership:
Insights from
Distinguished
Thought Leaders**

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As we celebrate National Women Support Women's Day on December 1, 2023, **George Washington University's Center for Excellence in Public Leadership** and **CommPRO** are showcasing the voices and wisdom of trailblazing women who have left an indelible mark on the business landscape.

Insights from female business thought leaders contribute a unique perspective on the current state of women's leadership in the business world and in the workforce. Leaders such as **Dr. Kathy Bloomgarden**, CEO, Ruder Finn Inc., **Allyson Hugley**, Global Director, Customer Insights, LinkedIn Marketing Solutions | Customer Science, **Meredith Maskara**, CEO, Girl Scouts of Greater NY, **Linda Rutherford**, Chief Administration & Communications Officer, Southwest Airlines Company, **Marian Salzman**, Senior Vice President, Global Communications, Philip Morris International, **Lisa Sepulveda**, Global Chief Client Officer, Edelman, **Valerie Simon**, Senior Vice President, Chief Marketing and Communications Officer, Lumeris, and **Patrice Tanaka**, Founder & Chief Joy Officer, Joyful Planet LLC.

These thought leaders were invited to share their reflections on two pivotal questions that are at the heart of the exploration into women's leadership:

- In your experience, what leadership development and management training opportunities have been effective in retaining female talent and helping women move up into leadership roles?
- What do you believe is still needed to further support and advance women in leadership positions?

In the following, we present the thoughtful responses of these influential women, offering a glimpse into their experiences, challenges, and aspirations for the future of women in leadership.

As we delve into their insights, we aim to uncover actionable strategies and illuminate the path forward for businesses striving to cultivate an inclusive and empowering environment for women.



"Women need to assert themselves with confidence in the workplace. Speaking up, raising your hand, and being proactive are musts to advance your career." - Dr. Kathy Bloomgarden

Dr. Kathy Bloomgarden is the CEO of Ruder Finn Inc., one of the world's largest independent public relations and creative agencies, with offices across the United States, EU, and the Asia Pacific region.

I am very proud to be a female leader. At RF I am not the only woman in a leadership position. Our Global COO is a woman, and at least half of our management committee are women. We must recognize that it's not just putting women in leadership roles that's important, it's also important to support them throughout their careers. There are three things that I think are super important for helping women move up into leadership roles:

Building Confidence: I've heard from many of the CEOs that I've worked with over the years that women are less forward about asking for promotions and raises, even when they have years of experience and a defined skill set. Women need to assert themselves with confidence in the workplace. Speaking up, raising your hand, and being proactive, are all musts to advance your career.

Role Models: It's critical to provide visibility to women who are role models both inside and outside your company and identify women who can become future leaders and to provide them with training opportunities and promotions. Building strong women leaders within your business will help to retain younger generations. If you are a role model, it's important to share your knowledge, and interact with people at all levels. Never ask someone to take on a task you would not do yourself.

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Career Goals: To be successful, young people and potential leaders need to set their own career goals, as well as always be looking to what's next. Most of the time, your competition is market transitions rather than direct business competitors, and it's important to become familiar with what these transitions are. Consider what tools you might need to adopt and what skills you might need to learn, and constantly adjust your career goals to encompass these things.



"Building alliances allows women to share experiences, resources, and opportunities, ultimately fostering a sense of unity and solidarity." - Sabrina George

Sabrina George, the current CMO at Xcyte Digital Corporation, leads the development of innovative event technology solutions, creating unforgettable immersive experiences.

COMMPRO: In your experience, what leadership development and management training opportunities have been effective in retaining female talent and helping women move up into leadership roles?

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In my experience, mentorship provides female employees with guidance, support, and valuable insights from experienced leaders. Pairing them with successful men and women in leadership positions helps build trust, develop skills, and navigate potential challenges.

Networking initiatives create opportunities for women to connect with influential individuals within the organization and industry. These networks provide access to information, resources, and potential career advancement opportunities.

COMMPRO: What do you believe is still needed to further support and advance women in leadership positions?

Women supporting other women and building alliances is crucial for promoting gender equality and empowering women in all aspects of life. By standing together, women can create a strong network of support, encouragement, and mentorship. Building alliances allows women to share experiences, resources, and opportunities, ultimately fostering a sense of unity and solidarity. When women support each other, they can break down barriers, challenge stereotypes, and create a more equal society. It is important for women to uplift and empower one another, as it benefits not only individuals but also the entire community.



"Creating a strong sense of community is particularly important for women who can still find their ascent into leadership a lonelier journey." - Allyson Hugley

Allyson Hugley leads LinkedIn Marketing Solutions (LMS) global Customer Insights team, part of the LMS Customer Science organization.

In my experience, fostering a strong sense of community and psychological safety have been most effective in retaining top talent. These conditions allow emerging and established leaders license to innovate, take risks and find new paths to value at a time defined by accelerating technological, economic, and environmental change. Creating a strong sense of community is, however, particularly important for women who can still find their ascent into leadership a lonelier journey. For this reason, programs like The Forums for Executive Women (The FEW), offered by Women Unlimited Inc., are so important for creating opportunities for women on path to executive leadership roles to deepen their leader toolkits and forge new relationships with other women in the executive pipeline.

To avoid losing hard won gains for women in leadership, corporations must remain vigilant and intentional in their pursuit of building more diversity around their leadership tables. This includes monitoring signals in publicly available research like [McKinsey's Women in the Workplace report](#), tracking the diversity of their own leadership pipelines all along the path to executive levels, versus just at the top, and being attentive to the types of benefits valued by top-talent – benefits like skills development, flexibility, and care-giver support.



"We have not reached a place where we can be passive or accepting. We must continue to be a relentless force for empowering women." - Meredith Maskara

Meridith Maskara is Chief Executive Officer of the Girl Scouts of Greater New York, leading a team committed to empowering girls in their communities.

As CEO of Girl Scouts of Greater NY, I am fortunate to work with female leaders in all sectors who often attribute their ambition and success to Girl Scouting. 70% of women in C-Suite positions were Girl Scouts. That says so much for the organization and the impact, but most important it's a testament to identifying what is needed to ensure female leadership.

Leadership (courage, confidence, and character) must be integrated into the lifestyle, community and zeitgeist. The normalization and prioritization of soft skills (speaking up, raising your hand, having your voice validated, permission to not be perfect) need to become habitual not just for the girls, but for teachers, family and community members who support female leadership. When young girls are given the space to exercise these skills freely, without judgment or limitations, a foundation is laid that enables them, as they become women, to ask for what they deserve, question expectations and stereotypical gender norms, and take the seat at every table- invited or not!

A continued effort and intentionality that focuses on diversity and intersectionality must be in the center of strategic plans, Boardroom conversations, HR, and education. Although we have come so far in the efforts of equality, equity and parity- we have not reached a place where we can be passive or accepting we must continue to be a relentless force for empowering women.



"True diversity in our leadership ranks will lead to better problem-solving, more clever innovation, and increased effectiveness." - Linda Rutherford

Linda Rutherford is the Chief Administration & Communications Officer for Southwest Airlines, overseeing diverse aspects of communication, engagement, and leadership development.

COMMPRO: In your experience, what leadership development and management training opportunities have been effective in retaining female talent and helping women move up into leadership roles?

Training that focuses on personal brand has been effective at helping female leaders crystalize their value and contributions in a way that helps them gain confidence among male-dominated leadership teams, find their voices and build confidence along with competence in their growing remits.

COMMPRO: What do you believe is still needed to further support and advance women in leadership positions?

I believe that a high tide raises all boats and that we ALL must continue the work of identifying, mentoring, and developing underrepresented groups (including female leaders). True diversity in our leadership ranks will lead to better problem solving, more clever innovation and increased effectiveness in leading people from all walks of life toward a common set of organizational goals.



"Brilliant careers aren't built on caution. Too often, the barriers women face are self-erected." - Marian Salzman

Marian Salzman is a global thought leader, trendspotter, and communications pro currently heading global communications at Philip Morris International.

COMMPRO: In your experience, what leadership development and management training opportunities have been effective in retaining female talent and helping women move up into leadership roles?

No two employees or career trajectories are alike, so we need to offer as many training and experiential opportunities as feasible. I think one reason we're hitting our hiring and retention goals at PMI is that we constantly talk about the value of advancing women as part of a diverse and innovative workforce and giving female employees the confidence and skills they need to excel. Through our WIN GLOBAL (Women's Inspiration Network) employee resource group, we offer training, networking events, and mentoring opportunities in which women support one another to push past barriers to advancement. We also make it a point to publicly celebrate women and their achievements, including via profiles we post online. We're a goal-driven company, so it has been critically important to set ambitious targets for hiring, retention, and promotion and hold our most senior executives accountable for reaching them.

COMMPRO: What do you believe is still needed to further support and advance women in leadership positions?

When I look at the progress made within my organization—including being the first multinational to be EQUAL-SALARY certified and earning a spot for three years running on the Bloomberg Gender-Equality

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Index—I see a lot to be proud of, but I can't stress enough how vital it is to look beyond the numbers and get a pulse on how women are feeling in their roles and how ambitious they are. Whether due to nature or nurture, too many women continue to suffer from imposter syndrome or feel that everything they do needs to be perfect to be acceptable. We need to get the message across that brilliant careers aren't built on caution. They require a willingness to stretch, get bruised, and bounce back quickly. Too often, the barriers women face are self-erected, and it's up to those of us in senior leadership positions to lead by example. Earlier this month, I addressed our women's employee resource group and shared this advice: "Do not say, 'Be careful.' Don't be careful, be bold. Don't be careful, be kind. Don't be careful, be confident." When it comes to career advancement, being unnecessarily cautious exacts a heavy toll.



"Leadership development can help women grow, but the industry needs to address the systemic and cultural factors that hinder access to leadership roles." - Lisa Sepulveda

Lisa Sepulveda is the Global Chief Client Officer at Edelman, leading the firm's portfolio of global clients and ensuring the delivery of creative, quality client work.

COMMPRO: In your experience, what leadership development and management training opportunities have been effective in retaining female talent and helping women move up into leadership roles?

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Opportunities that are tailored to the specific needs of women are most effective. For example, Edelman's Global Women's Equality Network (GWEN) is an internal initiative with a mission to continue to foster an environment where women of all backgrounds can enjoy equal opportunities to grow, lead and succeed in and beyond Edelman. We continue to push for progress with GWEN such as: tracking representation to ensure Edelman achieves and maintains gender parity in leadership roles, conducting pay analysis to ensure equal pay for equal work, providing mentorship and networking opportunities, executing training and career pathing exercises, and more. These efforts equip women with the skills and tools they need to succeed, as well as create a supportive community of peers and mentors who can help them navigate the complex and dynamic landscape of leadership.

COMMPRO: What do you believe is still needed to further support and advance women in leadership positions?

Leadership development can help women grow, but the industry needs to address the systemic and cultural factors that hinder access to leadership roles. This means creating a more equitable and inclusive environment for all genders, where women are valued and empowered to lead. It also means challenging the stereotypes and norms that limit women's potential and aspirations, as well as celebrating the diversity and contributions of women leaders across different sectors, industries, and backgrounds.



"Supporting and advancing women in leadership has both systemic and cultural facets." - Valerie Simon

Valerie Simon is Chief Marketing and Communications Officer for Lumeris, a population health services and analytics company working with health systems across the country.

COMMPRO: In your experience, what leadership development and management training opportunities have been effective in retaining female talent and helping women move up into leadership roles?

In my experience, the most impactful leadership development and management training initiatives transcend mere skill-building; they offer a gateway to a network of mentors, sponsors, allies, and peers and ignite energy and passion for the road ahead. I have found that both employer sponsored programs and industry associations can both be effective. At Lumeris, I am energized by programs such as “iWil” (Inspiring Women in Leadership) , a network designed to help develop talent. Throughout my career I have also been able to learn from, and help support, women leaders through Chief and industry associations from Washington Women in PR to Women Business Leaders of the U.S. HealthCare Industry Foundation..

Additionally, recognizing that professional development needs differ is crucial; identifying gaps and tailored training, be it in communication or financial acumen, is essential. All too often I have heard women in communications share that they are “not a numbers person.” As you move into leadership roles, you need to be comfortable stepping outside of your area of expertise and making the most of opportunities to develop both hard and soft skills.

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COMMPRO: What do you believe is still needed to further support and advance women in leadership positions?

Supporting and advancing women in leadership has both systemic and cultural facets. It has been more than 60 years since the Equal Pay Act was signed by President John F. Kennedy mandating equal pay for equal work and it is difficult to fathom the gender-based disparities in compensation and opportunities for advancement that continue to exist today. Policies ensuring pay equity, parental leave, and flexible work arrangements remain vital.

If we are to support and advance women, we must refuse to accept the status quo. When my daughter was five she ran into the kitchen sobbing. She pointed her finger angrily at her big brother and screamed, "He's lying." When I asked what he had said, she tearfully explained he said no girl had ever been President. She knew he was learning about the Presidents at school and MUST know the names of the girl Presidents. He MUST be lying. He looked at her apologetically, and helplessly said, "I'm sorry." While perhaps misdirected, her outrage was justified. We must all use some of that outrage to ignite change. It is incumbent on all leaders to create intentional pathways for women to access networks and opportunities.



"Tie executive compensation to supporting and advancing women to leadership positions to incentivize this behavior and reinforce the importance of this responsibility." - Patrice Tanaka

Patrice Tanaka, best-selling author, public speaker, and founder of Joyful Planet LLC, highlights the effectiveness of "all-women" leadership development programs and the power of mentorship from both internal and external sources. She encourages reciprocal mentoring and ties executive compensation to supporting women in leadership.

COMMPRO: In your experience, what leadership development and management training opportunities have been effective in retaining female talent and helping women move up into leadership roles?

"All-women" leadership development programs, I believe, are highly effective in women feeling supported in their leadership journey and, ideally, able to be open and vulnerable in the safe space of sisterhood.

Women being supported by internal and external female and male mentors and sponsors is another very powerful way to help them succeed.

COMMPRO: What do you believe is still needed to further support and advance women in leadership positions?

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Have aspiring women leaders mentor and sponsor younger, emerging women leaders to learn and grow, helping those junior to them WHILE concurrently being mentored and sponsored by women leaders senior to them.

Tie executive compensation to supporting and advancing women to leadership positions to incentivize this behavior and reinforce the importance of this responsibility.

Conclusion

The insights and experiences shared by these accomplished leaders emphasize the importance of leadership development and management training programs tailored to the needs of women. They underscore the significance of mentorship, sponsorship, and creating a supportive community where women can thrive.

Building confidence and encouraging women to speak up and take initiative are key components of advancing in leadership roles. Recognizing the value of personal brand and celebrating achievements publicly can boost confidence among female leaders.

Additionally, fostering a strong sense of community and psychological safety is vital for both men and women but is particularly important for women who may face unique challenges on their leadership journey. Programs and initiatives like internal women's networks and forums provide a safe space for women to grow and support one another.

Moreover, systemic and cultural factors that hinder access to leadership positions must be addressed. This includes ensuring equal pay for equal work, promoting flexible work arrangements, and creating intentional pathways for women to access networks and opportunities. True diversity in leadership ranks leads to better problem-solving, innovation, and effectiveness in achieving organizational goals.

Reciprocal mentoring, where aspiring women leaders mentor and sponsor younger women while being mentored by senior women, can create a cycle of support and growth. Tying executive compensation to supporting and advancing women in leadership positions can incentivize this behavior and reinforce its importance.

Overall, these leaders agree that a holistic approach that combines skill-building, mentorship, community, and systemic change is necessary to further support and advance women in leadership positions. By implementing these strategies, organizations can empower women to thrive and contribute to a more diverse and inclusive leadership landscape.

About George Washington University's Center for Excellence in Public Leadership

Countless studies from McKinsey, Harvard and other respected research organizations have proven that gender diversity at all levels of management and leadership creates the most profitable and effective organizations. GW CEPL offers programs for women at every level of their leadership journey to help address the early socialized habits, as well as the workplace and life challenges that often hold women back from pursuing increased responsibility, while supporting their growth and development. Their online programs are known for their interactive discussions and networking among the participants, as well as its critical, career-changing content.

[Women Leaders on the Rise](#) - Gives high-potential women leaders at the start of their careers the tools to enable management success, while addressing limiting beliefs that may be holding them back.

[Executive Women's Leadership Program](#) - Designed for experienced executives who have potential for greater leadership responsibilities. Topics covered include executive presence, negotiations, resilience, growth mindset and more!

[Global Women's Leadership Program](#) - Provides game-changing leadership strategies that will transform your mindset and expand your sphere of influence as a woman leader. Program is designed for global executives.



About CommPRO

CommPRO is a leading digital platform and integrated communications firm serving the public relations and communications community.

With a rich history dating back to 2008, CommPRO offers a comprehensive set of services and resources designed to empower communication professionals and elevate the industry. CommPRO's platform features news, insights, thought leadership, events, and professional development opportunities to help PR and communications practitioners thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape. Through webinars, conferences, and expert content, we foster learning, networking, and collaboration within the industry.

CommPRO's mission is to provide the tools, knowledge, and connections necessary for communication professionals to excel in their careers and drive innovation within their organizations. Join us at [CommPRO](#) to stay informed, engaged, and inspired in the world of communications.