

Companion Checklist: Elevating and Retaining the Next Wave of Women Leaders



From Insight to Action

Nearly 500,000 women left the U.S. workforce last year – and more than half did so voluntarily. Across Europe, younger professionals are declining middle-management roles they see as incompatible with work/life balance.

For organizations, that's not just a talent issue. It's a leadership pipeline risk.

As we explored in our recent webinar, retaining and elevating Millennial and Gen Z women leaders requires more than strong intent. It requires visible pathways, behavior-based expectations, meaningful sponsorship, and flexibility that works in practice – not just in policy.

This companion checklist is designed to translate those insights into action. Whether you are an organization strengthening your leadership systems or an emerging leader shaping your own growth, these practical steps will help turn potential into sustained impact.

Checklist for Organizations & Managers

Make leadership growth visible, fair, and behavior-based so high potential women can stay, grow, and rise.

1 Translate values into leadership behaviors

Define what leaders do (decision-making, accountability, stakeholder influence, team-building) and make those behaviors observable and coachable.

2 Define “ready” with evidence

Replace vague language (“polished,” “confident,” “executive presence”) with clear indicators: such as outcomes delivered, handled complex tasks, trust built.

3 Repair the “broken rung” early

Review first-level promotions for fairness. Ensure women have the experiences and visibility needed to be considered for that first manager step.

4 Audit access to high-value work

Regularly review who receives stretch assignments, client exposure, strategic work, and correct patterns, if necessary.

5 Make flexible real

Define what flexibility looks like for each role and review to be sure it's implemented consistently, so flexibility isn't dependent on one manager's preference.

6 Remove “face time” as a proxy for commitment

Be sure expectations are connected to productivity and outcomes.

7 Make sponsorship a leadership responsibility

Ask leaders to name who they sponsor, what doors they are opening, and what opportunities they are actively creating (projects, introductions, visibility).

8 Strengthen mentoring pathways

Address the mentorship gap with structured mentor matching, peer coaching, and reverse mentoring so younger talent has “healthy leadership models” to learn from.

9 Coach managers to develop talent in the flow of work

Equip managers with practical tools: how to delegate stretch work, how to give skill-building feedback, and how to build confidence through experience.

10 Make feedback specific and meaningful

Move from annual feedback to timely coaching after key moments: presentations, project launches, stakeholder meetings, and cross-functional work.

11 Use Meetings as a leadership opportunity

Rotate facilitation and decision ownership; assign roles that build leadership skills.

12 Create multiple ways to demonstrate leadership

Show that you value “quiet leadership” with different communication styles through written updates, projects and demos.

13 Look for bias in performance and potential decisions

Use consistent criteria and review language for bias and assumptions that can distort evaluations.

14 Provide training necessary to develop leadership and “people” skills

Offer additional training opportunities to allow competence building in a variety of areas, not just in job-specific areas.

15 Hold leaders accountable

Include development outcomes (promotions, retention, sponsorship actions, access to stretch work) in leadership expectations and reviews.

Checklist for Individuals (Emerging Leaders)

Turn potential into visible impact - by building skill, credibility, and support around you.

1 Clarify your leadership direction

Identify the kind of leadership you want (people leadership, project leadership, thought leadership) and the skills you need next.

2 Make your impact easy to see

Keep a simple record of outcomes: what you delivered, what improved, what risk you reduced, what you enabled for others.

3 Ask for stretch work with intention

"I'd like a project that builds X skill. Here are two ways I can take ownership, and how I'll measure success."

4 Build a sponsor list (not just supporters)

Identify people who can advocate for you in rooms you're not in - across levels and functions. Remain visible to them through results.

5 Seek mentors, and be specific about what you need

Ask for targeted guidance: how to influence decisions, lead meetings, manage conflict, and build credibility.

6 Strengthen influence skills early

Learn how decisions get made, who shapes them, what data matters, and when input carries the most weight.

7 Develop comfort with visibility

Share progress and wins in professional, authentic ways: brief updates, demos, and concise written summaries.

8 Build a “leadership toolkit”, one quarter at a time

Choose one skill per quarter (influencing, delegation, storytelling with data, conflict navigation) and apply it on real work.

9 Position your availability thoughtfully

Be clear about what you can commit to and avoid over-promising. Reliability builds trust faster than heroic last-minute saves.

10 Ask for feedback in the moment

After key meetings: “What should I do more of next time?” and “What’s one thing to adjust?”

11 Build cross-functional credibility

Volunteer for work that puts you in contact with other teams and stakeholders, especially cross-functional work.

12 Invest in relationships

Build steady, professional relationships with peers and senior colleagues. Trust and reputation are leadership capital.

13 Request training that will help you develop your skills, such as communication, team building, and collaboration

Look for ways to gain valuable management and leadership skills through training and continuous learning.

14 Use learning in real time

Ask for opportunities that increase responsibility that build confidence through experience.

15 Stay alert to culture signals

Be clear that you are aligned with your organization’s values and that you behave in a way that is consistent.

Leadership Development by Design

Elevating the next wave of women leaders is not a single initiative. It's the result of consistent, everyday decisions – about who gets visibility, who receives stretch work, how “ready” is defined, and how leadership behaviors are reinforced.

For organizations, the opportunity is clear: make leadership pathways visible, fair, and behavior-based.

For emerging leaders, the path forward is equally clear: build skill, credibility, and sponsorship with intention. And, make your impact easy to see.

When organizations reduce friction and individuals build momentum, leadership development becomes less about luck and more about design.

Together, that's how the next wave rises.

If this conversation sparked reflection about your own leadership systems – or your own leadership path – we invite you to continue the dialogue.



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