

What I Wish I Knew: Women in Leadership Share Lessons on Developing as a Female Leader

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Recently we all participated in a Women in Leadership panel at the American Biomanufacturing Summit in San Francisco. The goal of the panel was to share learnings, observations, and advice for early career female leaders in industries that are male-dominated—or really any leader looking to grow beyond their current position.

For most of us, it was the first time since the pandemic we got to meet in person, and it was really energizing to have an actual audience! We covered a range of topics about overcoming barriers (external and self-imposed) to accelerate our careers as women in business and early-career professionals. As we debriefed the panel discussion and audience questions, we realized others might benefit from us sharing some of our topics.



Here are the key points from our discussion and experiences:

- 1. Blaze your own trail:** To be successful in your career, it's important to find your own leadership style and authentic voice. This may take time to develop, but start by finding what you're passionate about and what drives and motivates you to succeed despite challenges. Too often women think to be successful, they must modify their style to be like successful male colleagues. As a woman leader, you need to find your own voice and be confident that your point of view is valuable, especially if it's different from the team's perspective. Take feedback from others on how you're doing, but always modulate the feedback for context and *don't* change your core values. Unfortunately, recent research suggests negative personality feedback tends to appear more often in reviews for women than for men. However, that doesn't mean that you should change who you are. Your effectiveness as a leader and role model are maximized when you show up as your authentic self. After all, we know diversity of thought and perspectives ultimately strengthen team dynamics.
- 2. Seek out both mentors and sponsors throughout your career:** Mentors will help you navigate networking and building relationships, as well as clarify your vision and what's important to you. They'll offer insight, advice, and check-ins on your progress. Sponsors go one step further; they have a special interest in promoting and advocating for you, whether or not you're in the room. Sponsors are actively engaged in ensuring success in your personal vision and helping to remove barriers. Ideally, you'll have experiences with both sponsors and mentors. But here's the catch—quite often *you* must seek them out, rather than waiting for them to come to you. Don't hesitate to ask others for support. Think of reaching out as an expression of admiration. People will generally be happy to help when asked. But don't solely rely on women to be sponsors or mentors. Think first and foremost about who may provide the most valuable support given their experience, role, connection with you, etc. Similarly, don't limit yourself to looking for mentors and sponsors in the organizational ranks above you. You can learn a great deal from peers and those earlier in their careers who see things differently. Even someone who has been critical of you may be open to a partnership and supporting your growth as a leader. These individuals can provide invaluable insight into your blind spots and opportunities to grow.
- 3. Be open to new opportunities/don't be afraid to take risks:**
You may not always know the right next step for your career. That's ok. In general, it pays to look for and be open to new opportunities that will help develop and push your potential. Don't wait for the perfect opportunity, unless you know exactly what you want. Don't be afraid to take risks with

your choice. Not every decision will turn out perfect, but every one will be a steppingstone for further growth and clarity around your goals and strengths.

- 4. Overcome your inner critic:** Women often think too much about why they can't or shouldn't take on a career opportunity, rather than being excited about said opportunity. *Nobody* is ever truly perfect for a role in every sense. If you meet a lot of the requirements, lean in *more*, rather than overthinking things. Male colleagues are often much more willing and ready to take on opportunities without worrying if they have sufficient experience, without doubting they can be successful. Female leaders could do more of the same. Perceive these opportunities as chances to learn and grow, not opportunities you should already be perfectly equipped for. If you're still not sure, your mentor/sponsor can be a great gauge of this move's fit for your journey. Additionally, as you advance in your career, the likelihood grows that you won't be an expert in all areas you're responsible for. Here's an incredible opportunity to be humble and rely on the experts around you!
- 5. Find allies:** As we go through our personal and professional life journey, it helps to have reliable, day-to-day allies. They may show up as mentors and sponsors, but here we want to focus on allies that are not in any formal role relationship to you. They may provide advice based on their own journey, offer support and friendship, or simply stand up for you when it's most needed. Finding and nurturing allies takes time and effort, and even if you think you can manage on your own, cultivating these relationships will be immensely valuable in the long run.
- 6. Help shape the organizational culture to empower women:** There are many things you can do as an individual to support women in the workforce. At the same time, lasting impact comes from the way we look at the entire organizational culture. If you're in a leadership position, look for ways in which organizational processes, systems, and behaviors can be shaped to support equitable growth of women in leadership. You have incredible power to elevate the women around you!
- 7. Support other women in small and large ways:** Be a mentor, ally, or sponsor for other women. Find ways to celebrate their achievements, and support other women being seen and heard. Pay back the positive support you have been given by others, and especially help younger generations find their voices and next steps in their journey. Foster a culture of inclusivity in everything you do, so that women (and other minorities) feel safe and can reach their full potential.

These are some of the key points we discussed as a panel. We hope that by sharing these, we help you further your ongoing leadership journey and provide some additional ideas for making the process just a little easier. Thank you!

AMERICAN BIOMANUFACTURING SUMMIT
WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE
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