



TABLE STAKES

STRATEGIES FOR SHAPING
FUTURE-READY LEADERS

NOV 2023

“Great insights in this year’s Table Stakes report which will help us frame our pipeline program for rising female leaders.

- SVP, Talent
Fortune 500 company





ABOUT TABLE STAKES

At Pathbuilders, we help organizations move women forward in leadership every day. So, we constantly monitor what high-potential women are experiencing and share recommendations with senior leaders who are focused on readying women on the leadership bench. That's why we created Table Stakes, our annual report that provides deep insights into the challenges, thoughts, and opportunities facing high-potential women in today's dynamic workplace.

We call our report Table Stakes because investing in the retention and development of female talent is an essential prerequisite for success in business today. Through our in-depth personal interviews and monthly pulse checks with hundreds of high-potential women, we provide a window into the mindset of women across the business leadership landscape.

METHODOLOGY

In 2023, we conducted in-depth interviews with more than 300 high-potential and high-performing women from 56 companies across 31 US states, the UK and Canada. We compared these data to interviews conducted in previous years with over 5,000 women. These women were participants in our cross-company mentoring programs, Achieva® and Percepta®.

ACHIEVA COHORT

- Women in mid-level manager positions, ranging from Senior Managers to Senior Vice Presidents
- 59% in Director/Senior Director roles and 18% in AVP/VP roles
- 90% lead teams with an average size of 27 members, and team sizes ranging from 1 to 300 people
- 60% are the primary breadwinners for their families, while 40% share that responsibility equally with their partners
- 64% identify as White/Caucasian, 14% as Black/African-American, 7% as Asian/SE Asian, 7% as Latina, and 8% as Other

PERCEPTA COHORT

- Female people managers, project managers, and individual contributors aspiring to manage
- 55% are Managers with an average team size of 13
- 10% are Project Managers
- 51% are the primary breadwinners for their families, while 41% share that responsibility equally with their partners
- 53% identify as White/Caucasian, 20% as Black/African-American, 8% as Latina, 8% as Asian/SE Asian, and 11% Other

We interviewed a diverse group of women from various industries, functions, and company sizes, providing valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of high-potential women in the workplace.

OUR SHARED REALITIES

While each organization is unique, our work across organizations sheds light on prevailing trends that impact the sentiments and actions of women – both external realities that provide a backdrop to business as well as internal realities that we see repeatedly inside companies.

Six key themes are most prominent in today's working world.



The Evolving Employee “Contract”

Employees are becoming increasingly empowered, expecting remote and hybrid work arrangements, and thoughtfully choosing how they'll spend their discretionary time – engaging in side hustles and personal pursuits rather than extending their work days.



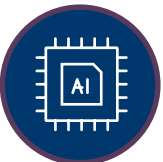
Uncertainty as the Norm

Change and unpredictability are now accepted as the status quo. Employers and employees face new challenges on a regular basis, requiring adaptability at all levels to stay competitive.



Culture Untethered

Maintaining a strong company culture presents an ongoing challenge to leaders as workforces are less anchored to traditional office settings. Leaders are striving to find practical solutions for addressing big issues, such as purpose, well-being, and ever-changing technology.



The Rapid Rise of AI

Advancements in artificial intelligence and tech-driven processes are streamlining operations and paving the way for tech-enabled idea generation, leaving organizations grappling with the need to rapidly adjust to the implications for their workforce.



Silos Standing Tall

Reduced interactions across teams are limiting cross-functional understanding and straining peer-level connectedness. This is impacting both organizational cooperation as well as individual career perspective.



Focus on Individuals

Media and networking groups are creating a hyper-focus on individuals. Attention is focused on personalities and personal issues, taking focus away from companies and corporate careers.



ACHIEVA FINDINGS

A-PLAYERS – Capable but not owning their power

Achieva women are mid-level leaders on the path to the executive suite. They take on your biggest initiatives, and people follow their lead. They are positioned to move the business forward.

But, in today's hybrid workplace, it's harder than ever to influence outcomes across the organization. And, it's essential that they build powerful peer relationships, position themselves for new opportunities, and become great leaders that inspire those around them.

ACHIEVA FINDINGS

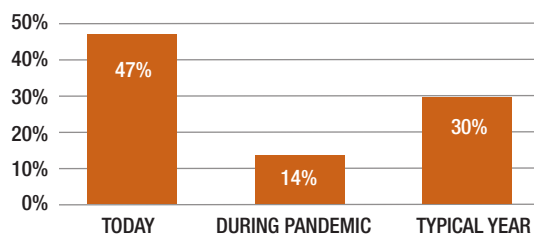
1 CHALLENGED INFLUENCING ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION

Personal networks and connectivity are critical for exerting influence. However, strained relationships, changing players, and the proliferation of silos have made it increasingly challenging for mid-level leaders to work across the organization and through others. Leaders who once navigated change and complexity with ease now find themselves lacking the robust peer relationships that gave them the confidence to drive results at scale.

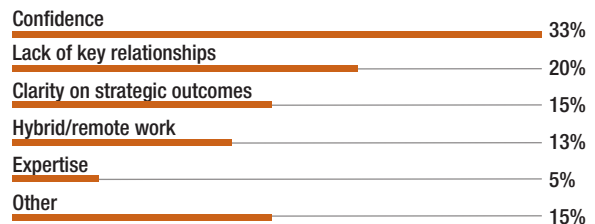
47%

focused on developing ability to influence outcomes

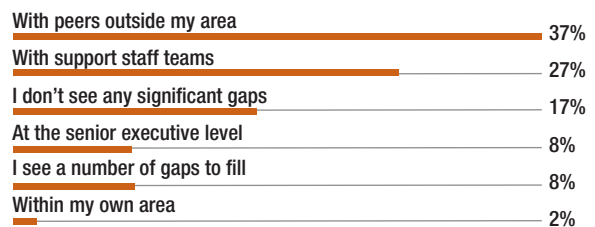
INFLUENCE GAINING IMPORTANCE AS A TOP DEVELOPMENT FOCUS



WHAT LIMITS YOUR ABILITY TO INFLUENCE?



WHERE IS THE BIGGEST GAP IN YOUR NETWORK?



“ I’m working on a product launch, but I’m having trouble getting the finance team to sign off on my business case.

- Interviewee

THEIR PERSONAL POWER IS ACTUALLY NOT ENOUGH – YOUR ACTIONS:

Engender the next senior leadership team – it’s about reliance, not just resilience

Success relies on cross-functional leaders with trusting relationships collaborating to achieve results. The emphasis on building resilience, though justified, has primarily focused on individual and personal capacity. But, organizations must go beyond developing talented and ready individuals and also foster shared reliance among mid-level peers so they can effectively wield their influence to face difficult challenges together.

Re-assess and pressure test the path to General Manager in today’s working world

Employee norms for remote/hybrid work, willingness to relocate, and even choices regarding discretionary time and effort will have an impact on accepted practices for grooming influential leaders. The best General Managers possess the ability to see and think across functions, products, and time horizons, making it crucial for you to identify the critical capabilities required for enterprise-level leadership and then re-imagine how to create the experiences that best develop those capabilities.

ACHIEVA FINDINGS

2 READY TO BE IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Director- and VP-level women are saying “It’s time for me.” They have focused on their teams and their families through the challenges of the past few years and now want to take center stage, by both investing in themselves and seeking company support. They recognize that they bring great value but are concerned that others may not perceive or fully appreciate their ability to contribute at a more senior level.

3X
increase in focus
on career direction

TOP DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES BY ACHIEVA COHORT

2023	2022	2021
1. Influencing Others (47%)	1. Influencing Others (44%)	1. Communication Skills (44%)
2. Career Direction (34%)	2. Executive Presence (34%)	2. Strategic Thinking (33%)
3. Executive Presence (32%)	3. Navigating Company (32%)	3. Broad Business Sense (31%)
4. Navigating Company (25%)	4. Communication Skills (23%)	4. Executive Presence (30%)
5. Strategic Thinking (22%)	5. Career Direction (21%)	5. Navigating Company (19%)
		11. Career Direction (10%)

THEY HAVE BEEN...



MANAGING THROUGH CHANGE

- Transformation
- Redefining normal
- No rulebooks



“TAKING CARE” OF OTHERS

- Team resilience
- Needs of homefront
- Other-focused



NOW THEY ARE...



EAGER FOR OPPORTUNITY

- Unsure if value seen
- Concerned off track
- Capable of more



REFOCUSING ON CAREER GOALS

- Identifying opportunities
- Positioning selves
- Seeking exposure



It’s been a challenging few years, but my team is working well, and things are good at home—I’m ready for the next big role.

- Interviewee

REAFFIRMING THEIR POWER IS KEY – YOUR ACTIONS:

Publicly celebrate the successes of high-potential women to fill a need for recognition

Networking organizations and media outlets are calling attention to high-profile moves and movement of women. Forward-thinking companies will address that by creating equally-celebratory exposure to highlight their work and accomplishments.

Invest in the development of top-performing women, readying them for new responsibilities

Your high-potentials know they provide significant value, yet many are unsure if that value is recognized. Affirm that you’re invested in their careers by providing rich development experiences that will ready them for senior-level roles.

Place women in key roles that prepare them for executive leadership

Many female leaders have provided stability and “carried the water” to ensure the success of their teams and functions through tough times and worry their progression has stalled. Their teams are performing well, and these proven leaders can now take on your next big challenge.

3 DISCONNECTED FROM THEIR ROLES AS LEADERS OF PEOPLE

Hand in glove with a desire for mid-level leaders to focus on self is disconnectedness from their roles as leaders of people. High-potentials have mastered management, but still need to grow in order to become the visionary and inspirational leaders you need them to be in today's complex world. They've simply forgotten their love for leading and for leading other leaders. They need help rediscovering the art of working through others.

ONLY 15% focused on developing as a leader

LEADERSHIP RARELY MENTIONED AS A TOP WORKPLACE CHALLENGE:



“ They just didn't use the word *leadership* when discussing their challenges.
 - Interviewer

THERE'S OPPORTUNITY TO AMPLIFY THEIR POWER – YOUR ACTIONS:

Acknowledge women for what they bring to their leadership roles

Your female leaders have demonstrated care and compassion for their teams, and have helped to maintain personal connections in the workplace. It's important to recognize and appreciate the vital role these leaders have played as the definition of leadership is evolving. Empathy and connectedness are competencies essential to leadership; acknowledge and appreciate all that women on your teams have done to redefine what it means to lead.

Future-ready your leadership competencies

What does your leader of tomorrow look like? The quintessential characteristics of leadership today are decidedly different than they were just a few years ago. Employee expectations, AI, and global challenges are shaping how we must lead. For leaders to wield the power of their teams, every organization should thoughtfully consider the skills and traits that will allow their leaders to drive performance, achieve purpose, and align with their values for the workplace of today and tomorrow.

Proactively connect women to their love of leading people

Powerful leaders are energized by their people, and their energy propagates engagement and standout results. Many female leaders have been mired in the complexities of management and need to reconnect to their inner leader, unleashing their capacity for impact. Provide opportunities and inspire them to develop their unique leadership styles and continue their growth as leaders.



PERCEPTA FINDINGS

FRONT-LINE LEADERS – Executing but uncertain

Percepta women are stepping up into leadership. They've mastered the technical aspects of their roles and are taking on big challenges. They are positioning themselves as managers of people who make things happen.

But, with the re-emergence of silos in the workplace, it's hard to gain alignment with other teams and even harder to see a clear career path forward. They need to connect across functional lines, level up their communication skills, and shift their focus from tasks and activities to high-impact results.

PERCEPTA FINDINGS

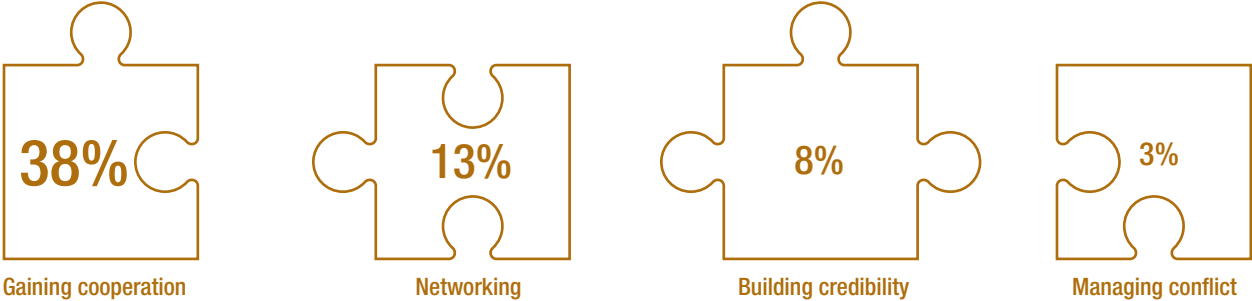
1 LACKING ALIGNMENT WITH OTHERS IN THE ORGANIZATION

It's essential for managers to collaborate with other departments to get the work done, but that's not easy in the hybrid world. With limited peer interaction, it's challenging to build trusting relationships and hard to see how the big picture comes together – and without understanding others' needs and goals, managers are questioning motives and sometimes even having disdain for peers when they're unable to gain cooperation. They need help to strengthen their networks and better understand how different parts of the company work together.

62%

have challenges aligning with others

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY INTERVIEWERS THAT IMPACT MANAGERS' ABILITY TO ALIGN ACROSS ORGANIZATION

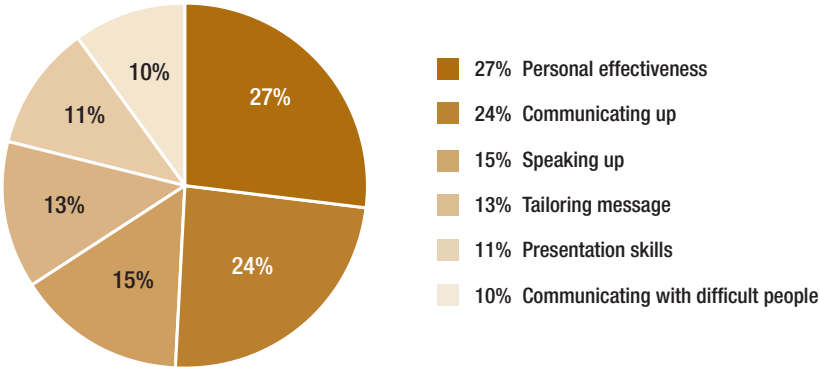


2 NEEDING TO BE BETTER COMMUNICATORS ACROSS THE BOARD

It's long been said that the ability to communicate effectively is the most critical skill for those leading people – yet, communication in all its forms is a primary challenge for managers today. Whether it is the impact of remote work, our communication mediums, or just our workplace norms, they're struggling communicating with those around them. New managers lack in-person interaction with role models, with many turning to Google and YouTube for learning, so it's key for organizations to invest in developing capacity in everything from personal effectiveness to speaking up to share ideas.

45%
challenged with communication skills

COMMUNICATION SKILLS TO BE DEVELOPED



PERCEPTA FINDINGS

3 LESS FOCUSED ON CAREER PATHS

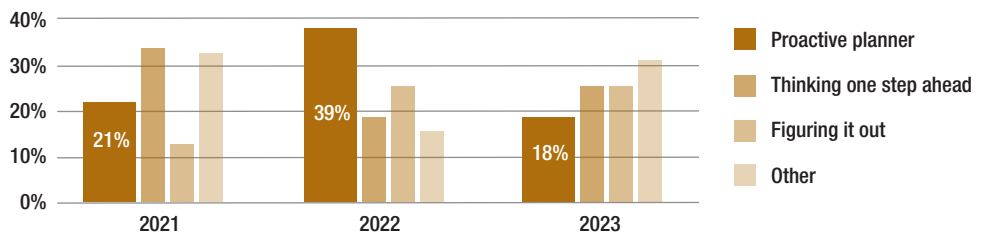
Unlike women at the director and VP levels, managers are far less focused on their career trajectories in their organizations. Their limited visibility beyond their own departments distances them from seeing the results of their work, creating a task/job orientation that's narrowing their career visions. They lack clarity about the career options available to them, and they're uncertain about what their businesses need in the future. They are looking for direction and guidance, and it's key for leaders to provide that guidance or they'll look elsewhere.

2021
Understandable confusion

2022
Returned to "normalcy"

2023
Back to uncertainty

APPROACH TOWARDS CAREER GOALS



No wonder they're challenged to see a path forward in their careers – they have limited exposure to other areas of the business, they're focused on completing their assigned tasks, but distanced from the results of their work. It's hard to feel connected to the big picture...

- Interviewer

CLARITY CAN MITIGATE UNCERTAINTY – YOUR ACTIONS:

Create collisions to drive alignment

Relationship-building can't be left to chance today. It's probably never been more important to engineer interactions that enable peers to find common ground and connectedness. Design cross-team projects where peers from diverse areas can collaborate to achieve common goals – furthering appreciation for others across the organization, deepening how teams interconnect, and creating awareness of opportunities for growth and advancement.

Build awareness across the value chain

Many managers don't have clarity on how teams impact each other's success, so it's key to educate them. Create programs and presentations about what other groups do and what they value, and build awareness of how individuals and departments connect to the bigger picture. Seeing how the pieces fit together can increase cooperation but also shed light on career opportunities beyond their current role.

Equip leaders to career coach

It's essential for individual leaders to personally engage their teams in career conversations on a regular basis. Women in manager roles are seeking validation of their capabilities and looking for insight into the opportunities available to them. They need help mapping potential career paths and better understanding how to position themselves for more responsibility in the organization.

YOUR ACTION PLAN

CHALLENGE LEADERS TO...

- ENSURE ALIGNMENT:** Leaders need to expose their teams to how different functions support the larger organization and each other. It's essential to openly discuss how work flows and why teams may potentially encounter conflicting goals.
- CAREER COACH:** Career conversations need to be a top priority for people leaders – at every level, in every function. Individuals are seeking feedback, insight, and perspective on their potential and their trajectory inside the organization. They need support to identify their interests, capabilities, and possibilities.

CREATE INITIATIVES TO...

- ENGINEER COLLISIONS:** It's essential to design and create new experiences that will truly breed trust and reliance across peer-level leaders – projects with shared outcomes, challenges with multi-functional solutions, and rich dialogue that promotes deep connection.
- GROW ENTERPRISE LEADERS:** Rising leaders are “growing up” in a different organization than your current senior team. Every organization needs to develop a plan for crafting the experience set that will prepare mid-level leaders to be the senior executives your company needs tomorrow.

CONTRIBUTE BY...

- CELEBRATING WINS:** The outside world is shining a light on individual accomplishment. Take time to celebrate the accomplishments of your high-achieving, high-potential women. Publicize their internal wins and promotions, affirming their value inside your organization.
- DEFINING YOUR LEADERSHIP PROFILE:** Thoughtfully consider and conceive of the competencies, sentiments, and characteristics of the next generation of great leaders in your organization. Create a profile of what it means to lead ‘here’ and inspire leaders to become the people to fulfill your mission and achieve great success.



ABOUT PATHBUILDERS

Pathbuilders is a trusted partner in transforming top performers into high-impact leaders. With over 25 years of experience, we are dedicated to advancing women in leadership and creating a future where ready and capable women influence every table where decisions are made, enabling resilient businesses to deliver exceptional results. Our cross-company mentoring programs and custom solutions are designed to develop leaders who move companies forward and empower organizations to effect meaningful change.

Pathbuilders’ systematic focus on advancing women in leadership combines this bottom-up strategy for accelerating women’s growth with a top-down approach, ensuring organizations are culturally-ready for gender diverse leadership.

A SYSTEMATIC FOCUS ON MOVING WOMEN FORWARD

Ready and capable women influencing every table where decisions are made.



ABOUT OUR PROGRAMS

At Pathbuilders, we believe that the success of development programs depends on proper alignment with career stages. That's why we have designed high-impact programs for individuals at four pivotal career points.

STAGE ONE: INSIGNIASM

Insignia women are early-career professionals who entered the working world one to two years ago. Full of energy and potential, they are already relied upon to deliver quality work. They have embraced each assignment and are eager for more responsibility. We developed the Insignia program to create awareness of what matters most to the business and guide them in leveraging their skillsets to make a mark on their organizations.

STAGE TWO: PERCEPTA[®]

Percepta women have mastered the technical aspects of their roles and are ready to increase their impact. They are readying themselves to lead. Percepta was crafted to guide their transformation as they become aware of how the company functions interconnect and how their team's work connects to the overarching organizational goals. They learn to define personal success and to envision a path forward for their careers.

STAGE THREE: ACHIEVA[®]

Achieva women are A-players, already taking on key assignments and getting the job done well—thinking and acting cross-functionally, well-respected by peers, with a strong following. The Achieva program was designed to transform great managers into leaders. Participants build capacity to think strategically, navigate culture and politics, and build presence in the organization and broader community.

STAGE FOUR: INSPIRIA[®]

Inspiria women are proven executives. Already powerful leaders, they are shaping your organization's future. These women are talent magnets and go-tos for counsel on your most pressing issues. The Inspiria program is focused on the woman experiencing some sort of transition—a new role, a major increase in scope or a key career inflection point. We work with Inspiria mentees personally to capitalize on their unique strengths to deepen their ability to inspire others and lead with purpose. Inspiria graduates come into their own as leaders in their industry, the community, and their personal lives.

Since 1997, Pathbuilders has successfully collaborated with thousands of professionals from over 500 client organizations, including the Fortune 500 companies of today and tomorrow.

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