

The Leadership Reset

A NEW BLUEPRINT FOR POWER, PROGRESS,
& POSSIBILITY FOR WOMEN IN HOSPITALITY



Executive Summary

In partnership with Forbes Travel Guide, hertelier conducted a survey of women in the top ranks of luxury hospitality to better understand what helped them advance, the personal and professional costs they encountered along the way, and what they believe must change for the next generation of women leaders to succeed.

The 2026 hertelier x Forbes Travel Guide Women in Hospitality Leadership Survey reveals a clear and consistent pattern. Senior women leaders are not simply seeking incremental improvements to existing leadership pathways. They are calling for leadership itself to be reimaged.

Women Fill Half of Hospitality's Entry Roles – But Hold Just 19% of Top Hotel Leadership, 7% of CEO Posts

Despite women representing roughly 50% of the hospitality industry's entry-level workforce (source: WTTC), they hold only around 19% of leadership positions at Forbes Travel Guide Star-Rated hotels (source: FTG). Progress narrows further at the very top, where women account for just 7% of CEO roles, the equivalent of one woman for every 13 men (source: WTTC). These disparities persist even as women continue to enter the industry in equal numbers.

None of this comes as a surprise to the leaders surveyed. Many described advancing within systems that reward conformity over authenticity and stamina over sustainability. Nearly 80% of respondents identified personal mindset and resilience as the primary drivers of their advancement, suggesting that leadership success is still being carried by individuals rather than supported by organizational design.

This report moves beyond familiar narratives of grit and personal sacrifice to propose a new model of hospitality leadership, one grounded in systems that are strategic, human, and sustainable.

Key Findings

Leadership advancement in hospitality still relies more on individual endurance than on organizational design.

Nearly 65% of respondents cited ambition and determination as essential to reaching senior leadership, while personal mindset and resilience emerged as the most significant enabler of success overall. External supports such as mentorship, brand culture, or formal development programs ranked meaningfully lower, signaling that leadership progression is still being carried by individuals rather than systems.

Structural barriers, not capability gaps, continue to hold women back from the highest leadership roles.

The most frequently cited obstacles were gendered expectations of leadership style (40%), limited flexibility for family life (34%), and bias in promotion and hiring (30%). These findings point to systemic friction embedded in how leadership is defined, evaluated, and rewarded.

Women are clear that the future of leadership requires a different skill set.

Looking ahead, strategic thinking ranked as the most essential leadership trait for the next generation, followed by emotional intelligence, authentic communication, and resilience. Traditional markers such as risk-taking and commercial acumen ranked lower, underscoring a shift toward leadership that is both strategic and human-centered.

Momentum for women's leadership is real but remains cautious.

Respondents rated current momentum at a moderate 3.45 out of 5, with just over half describing it as strong or very strong. At the same time, a substantial share still view progress as incremental, reflecting optimism tempered by lived experience.

Key Findings

Hospitality leadership is at an inflection point and requires a new, more sustainable model.

While women continue to advance, the data shows growing resistance to leadership models built on constant availability, personal sacrifice, and conformity. In response, this report puts forward a new leadership blueprint for hospitality, one that is strategic, human, and sustainable, shifting leadership from something that is endured to something intentionally designed.

Methodology

The hertelier x Forbes Travel Guide Women in Hospitality Leadership Survey was conducted online between December 10, 2025 and January 10, 2026, among **99 senior women leaders** working at Forbes Travel Guide Star-Rated hotels.

Respondents represented **General Managers, Hotel Managers, Managing Directors**, and **Area General Managers** across North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, and the Middle East and Africa.

SECTION ONE

Why This Moment Matters



“Leadership structures still reward constant availability & informal sponsorship over proven performance.”

To understand this moment, it's important to understand our history.

For decades, success in hospitality was measured by stamina: long hours, constant accessibility, and personal sacrifice. These norms rewarded those who could organize their lives around work—and penalized those whose leadership looked different.

Today, the cracks in that model are visible.



The hospitality industry is now facing an array of pressures - talent attrition, burnout, generational realignment, cultural shifts, and the redefinition of work itself - that challenge its most fundamental assumptions about leadership.

Younger leaders are questioning the costs of success. Senior leaders are reassessing their own ability to withstand the myriad pressures over decades. And women—who have long navigated leadership through invisible labor—are saying that the system itself needs urgent redesign.



One thing is clear: organizations whose leadership models fail to evolve will not just lose talent but also legitimacy. They will struggle to recruit, retain, and to inspire. They will watch leadership become something people opt out of rather than aspire to.

Some may see this as a crisis. At hertelier and Forbes Travel Guide we see it as an opportunity, if organizations are willing to listen.

“The broken middle, where middle management roles are the least flexible, is exactly when many women are managing families or elder care.”

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black blazer, a white collared shirt, and a black and white striped neckerchief, is smiling warmly. She is shaking hands with a person whose arm and hand are visible in the foreground on the left. The background is a blurred interior space with large windows and a stone wall.

SECTION TWO

What Women in Hospitality Are Really Saying

“While women enter the industry in equal numbers, progression often slows when career paths lack flexibility & when leadership potential is assessed by visibility rather than impact”

**In the 2026 hertelier x Forbes Travel Guide
2026 Women in Hospitality Leadership Survey:**

the most frequently cited drivers of advancement were traits related to personal endurance: *ambition, determination, resilience through challenge, relentless commitment to excellence, and personal mindset.*

nearly

80%

of respondents identified mindset and resilience as the primary enablers of their success.

Women Rise Through Resilience, Not the System

When leadership success is overwhelmingly attributed to internal fortitude, it tells us something important about the environment: women are advancing despite systems, not because of them.

Supportive senior leadership ranked second. Recognition and advancement opportunities followed. Professional networks and brand culture appeared further down the list.

In other words, women are not lacking drive. They are compensating for friction.

Top Drivers of Leadership Success

Women attribute leadership success primarily to personal endurance.



That friction becomes clearer when we examine what respondents named as their greatest challenges.

The most frequently cited barriers were structural:

Gendered expectations of leadership style

Limited flexibility for family & life

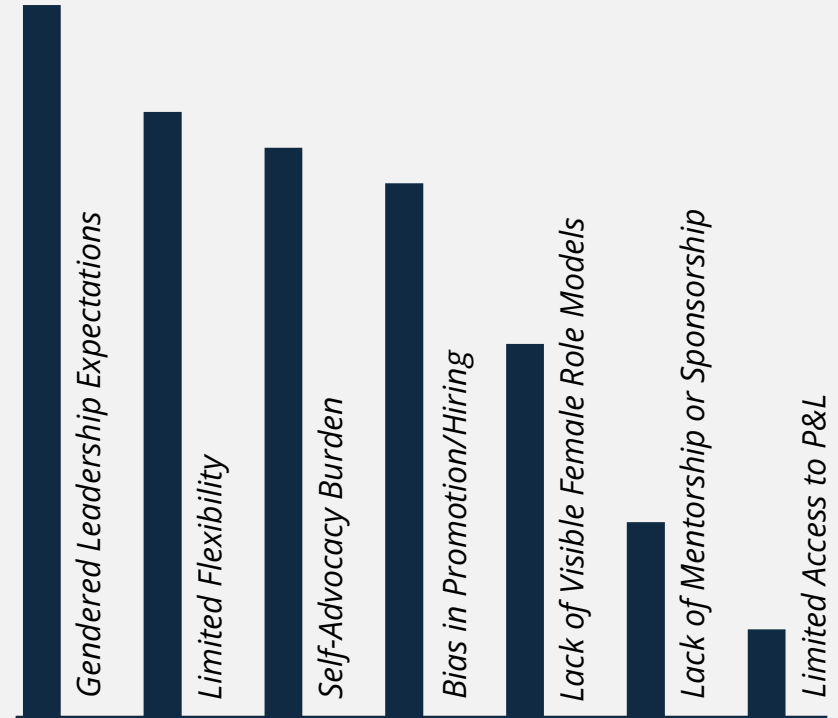
Bias in promotion & hiring

The constant need to self-advocate

A lack of visible female role models

Structural Barriers to Advancement: Ranked

Women identify structural—not personal—factors as the primary obstacles to advancement.



“Women often face limited sponsorship, unconscious bias, & career paths that don’t always allow flexibility at key life stages.”

The women we surveyed are describing how leadership in general (not just women’s leadership) must evolve if it is to remain relevant, credible, and human in a people-centered industry.



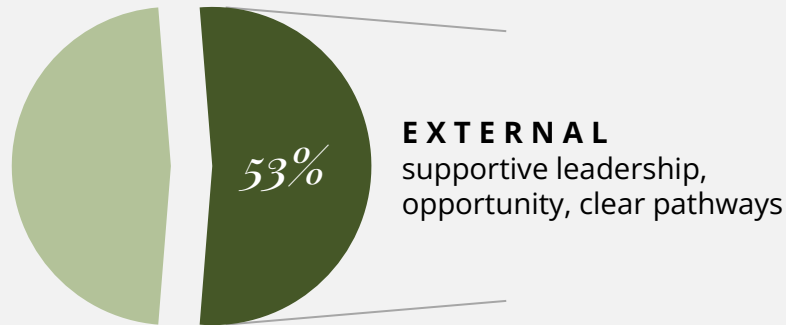
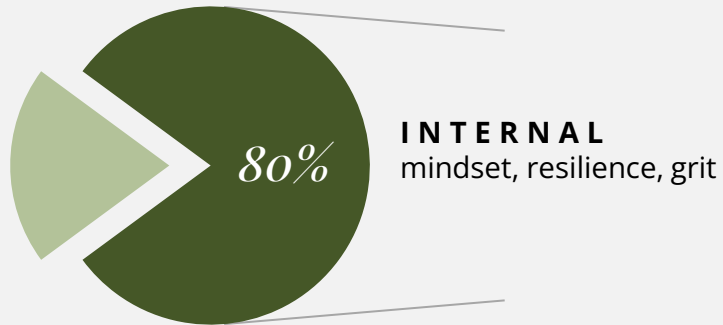
SECTION THREE

The Myth of Grit



Internal vs. External Enablers of Leadership Success

Leadership success is still being carried by individuals rather than built into organizational design.



“Balance is a myth, but flexibility is not.”

For years, grit has been framed as a leadership requirement. In hospitality, especially, grit became synonymous with long hours, constant availability, and personal sacrifice. To lead meant to endure.

The women in this survey, however, are telling us that personal cost and sacrifice should no longer be the entry fee for leadership.

When success is primarily attributed to endurance, it suggests that the system still demands too much of individuals and too little of itself.

Grit, when romanticized, shifts responsibility away from systems and onto people. It reframes unsustainable conditions as personal challenges, rewarding endurance without questioning the design that requires it.

This is not leadership. It is *survival*.
And survival is not a scalable model.

**The myth of grit tells women:
If you can just try harder, you'll be seen.**



The reality is more complicated: visibility is often less about effort and more about conforming to outdated expectations of what leadership should look like.

True leadership does not ask, Who can handle this? It asks, Is this really necessary?

Until organizations begin asking the second question, they will continue to mistake resilience for consent—and endurance for engagement.

“If you have work-life balance, then you are not meeting expectations somewhere.”

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a dark blazer over a white polka-dot blouse, is seated at a desk. She is resting her head on her right hand, looking thoughtfully to the left. She is wearing a watch on her left wrist and a ring on her right hand. The background is a blurred office setting with a bookshelf.

SECTION FOUR

Structural Friction

“Women tend to be steered into softer administrative departments, while operational & P&L roles remain male dominated.”

Leadership conversations still focus on the individual.



How to build confidence.
How to advocate more effectively.
How to be more visible.

The Hidden Friction Facing Women Leaders

But what women in our survey describe is not an individual or internal problem. They describe structural friction, and the consequences that occur when capable, talented leaders must continuously adapt themselves to systems that were not designed with them in mind.

It appears as

Leadership styles that reward assertiveness
but penalize emotional fluency

Promotion pathways that privilege proximity
& presence over performance

Expectations of round-the-clock availability
that ignore the messy reality of human lives

Inaccessible informal power networks

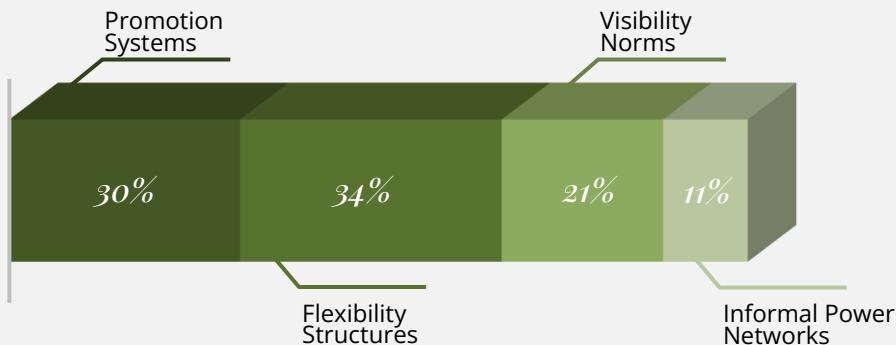
Cultural codes that reward conformity

These are not isolated incidents. They are patterns.

When respondents cite gendered expectations, limited flexibility, bias in promotion, and lack of visible role models as top barriers, they are naming design flaws, not personal obstacles.

Where Structural Friction Lives


Structural friction is architectural.



Yet most organizations still respond to structural friction with individual interventions, coaching women to adapt rather than adjusting the architecture itself.

True equity does not come from helping people survive broken systems. It comes from building better ones.

“Ownership groups still hold traditional views of what a General Manager should look like.”



SECTION FIVE

The New Leadership Profile

Emotional Intelligence

One of the most revealing findings in the Hertelier 2026 survey emerges when respondents are asked to look forward and to describe what leadership must become. They chose:

Strategic Thinking

Emotional Intelligence

Authentic Communication

Resilience

Empathy

Strategic thinking enables leaders to see beyond immediate demands and design for long-term coherence. **Emotional intelligence** allows leaders to navigate complexity without erasure. **Authentic communication** builds trust. **Empathy** enables better decision-making in human systems. **Resilience** becomes meaningful when it is supported rather than extracted.

These are not “soft skills.”
They are *system* skills.

Traditional vs. Emerging Leadership Traits

Women are not asking for softer leadership—they are asking for smarter leadership.




Emerging

Traditional

This is a call for structural, not cosmetic, change.

Leadership as performance is no longer sufficient or sustainable. Leadership as architecture is required.

“Authenticity.”

A woman with short dark hair and bangs, wearing a grey short-sleeved dress with a brown belt, is smiling and gesturing with her right hand while holding a tablet in her left. She is standing in a modern office or meeting room with large windows and indoor plants in the background. The scene is softly lit, suggesting an indoor setting with natural light.

SECTION SIX

The hertelier x Forbes Travel Guide Leadership Model

“It’s achievable, but only with clear boundaries, strong teams, & intentional prioritization.”

If leadership is going to reset, it needs a new operating system.

The hertelier x Forbes Travel Guide Leadership Model emerges directly from the data. The traits women prioritized cluster into three integrated design principles

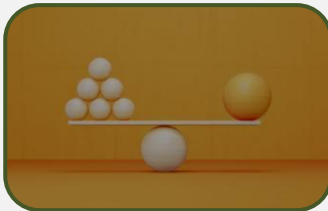
These are not slogans or rebrands. They are *design criteria*.



1. Strategic



2. Human



3. Sustainable



1. Strategic

In the survey, strategic thinking emerged as the most highly-ranked future leadership trait because the complexity of the modern workforce demands it.

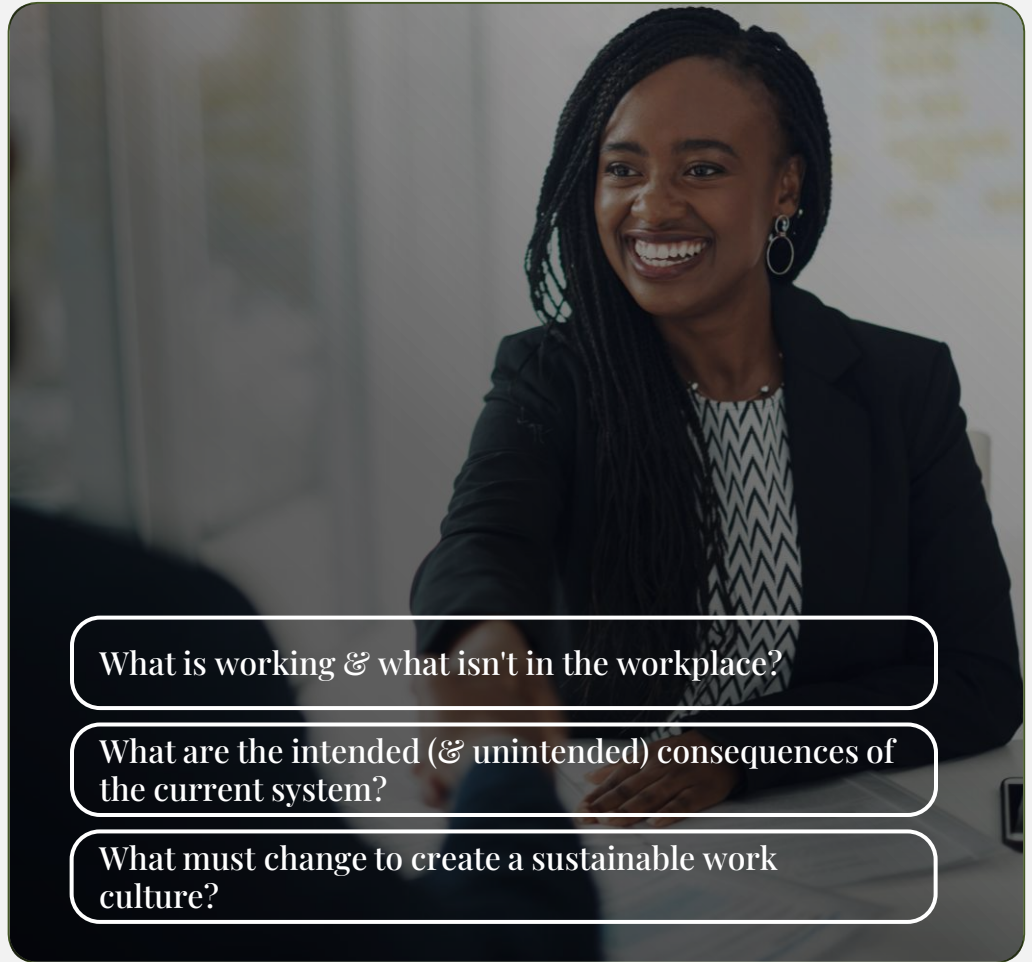
Strategic leadership is about clarity. It is the ability to see systems and to understand how culture, structure, and behavior interact. It is about designing for growth and coherence.

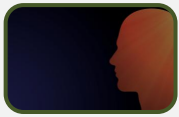
Strategic leaders do not merely manage. They are architects. They ask:

What is working & what isn't in the workplace?

What are the intended (& unintended) consequences of the current system?

What must change to create a sustainable work culture?





2. Human

Human leadership is empathic without being sentimental.

It recognizes that people are not interchangeable resources. They are complex human beings with emotional, cognitive, and individual strengths and challenges.

Human leadership understands that trust is earned, and that the best teams are built on a foundation of trust. Human leadership prioritizes psychological safety, recognizing its importance for operational success.

Human leadership designs for individual differences and celebrates them. Successful leaders know that diverse teams are stronger and more productive.

Emotional Intelligence & Empathy as Leadership Priorities

Emotional literacy is foundational.

1.

STRATEGIC THINKING

2.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

3.

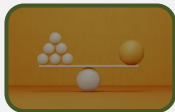
RESILIENCE

4.

AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION

5.

EMPATHY



3. Sustainable

Sustainable leadership is about creating a workplace built for longevity. It interrogates the costs of scaling and designs for long-term durability.

To be clear, women are not asking to work less. They are asking to work in ways that honor their humanity so they can work longer and enjoy more fulfillment and success.

“Work-life balance is possible if everyone buys into it.”



A woman with long dark hair, wearing a grey blazer over a light blue button-down shirt and dark trousers, stands in a bright, modern office lobby. She is smiling and looking towards two other people whose backs are to the camera. She is holding a tablet computer. A name tag on her blazer reads "FLOR". The background shows large windows, indoor plants, and a person sitting on a bench outside.

SECTION SEVEN

What Organizations Must Do Differently



“Gaining equitable access to influence and decision-making rooms.”

If leadership is being redefined, organizations cannot continue operating as if it is not.

So what must change? Here are our four key takeaways:

1.

PROMOTION MUST BECOME TRANSPARENT

When women cite bias in promotion and hiring among their top barriers, it means that leadership pathways must become: *explicit* | *criteria-based* | *visible* | *accountable*

2.

FLEXIBILITY MUST BECOME STRUCTURAL, NOT SYMBOLIC

Flexibility must be seen as essential for sustainable leadership, and not as a superficial lifestyle preference or a privilege for the exceptional individual. Flexibility must be: *designed into systems* | *normalized at senior levels* | *supported by policy* | *modeled by leadership*

3.

VISIBILITY MUST BE REDESIGNED

The lack of visible role models must be tackled head-on. Who we see as leaders teaches people what leadership looks like. *Visibility is not cosmetic. It is essential.*

4.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE MUST BECOME INFRASTRUCTURE

Respondents ranked emotional intelligence among the most important future leadership traits. Emotionally literate leaders: *retain talent* | *navigate conflict skillfully* | *build trust* | *reduce burnout*. *This is not a nice-to-have. It is a functional necessity.*



“Leadership potential is still assessed by visibility rather than impact.”

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark blazer over a white shirt, is smiling broadly and shaking hands with a man whose back is to the camera. The man is wearing a brown jacket. The woman is holding a tablet computer. They are in a modern office or lounge area with warm lighting, including lamps and a television in the background.

SECTION EIGHT

The Cost of Stasis

The survey indicates that women are disengaging from leadership models that extract more than they return.

The price we pay for maintaining the status quo is immense. When leadership models fail to evolve, they lose their best people, as well as legitimacy and relevance.

Failing to reflect the redefined leadership systems that women are calling for is costly, resulting in:

Talent exists

Burnout

Cultural fragmentation

Trust erosion

Brand dissonance

“The role is demanding and responsibility doesn’t switch off.”



SECTION NINE

Why hertelier x Forbes Travel Guide




“Treat your career like a business.”

hertelier was built at the intersection of leadership, hospitality, culture, and lived experience. Forbes Travel Guide sets the standard for the industry's most trusted and transparent luxury ratings, training and leadership. Since its founding five years ago, hertelier's mission has been to inspire, educate, and motivate women in hospitality through shared information, conversation, and debate about the central topics in our lives.

The hertelier x Forbes Travel Guide Leadership Model—**Strategic. Human. Sustainable**—distills what women are telling us and turns it into architecture.

“Every woman needs a strong personal network or board of directors.”



SECTION TEN

A Call to Action

The women in this survey are offering a strategic blueprint for a new model of leadership that:

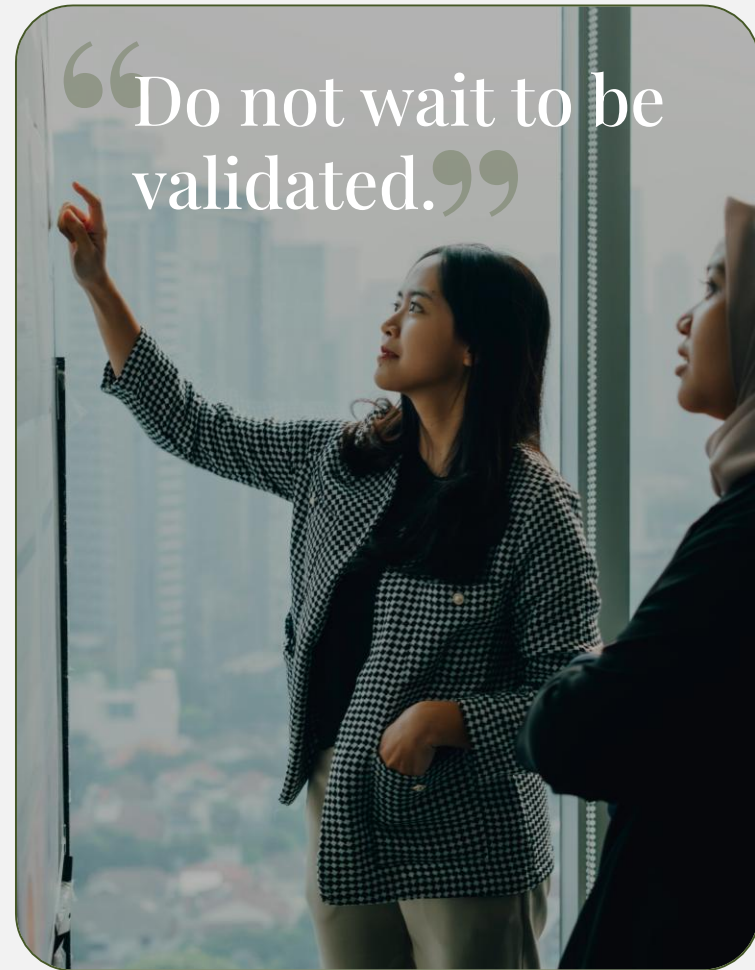
Thinks systematically

Communicates honestly

Designs for humanity and is self-sustaining

The Leadership Reset is not about who gets to lead. It is about how leadership itself must change to empower present and future generations.

“If there is no seat at the table, bring your own chair.”



65% of respondents cite *ambition & determination* as essential to reaching senior leadership

80% say *personal mindset & resilience* most enabled their leadership success

40% say *gendered expectations of leadership style* continue to hold women back

34% cite *limited flexibility for family life* as a barrier to reaching the top

#1 Strategic Thinking ranked the most essential leadership trait for the next generation

54% describe momentum for women rising into leadership in hospitality as "strong or very strong"