

How to make leadership development programmes work for women

Source: hr-zone | **Author:** Jo Irving | **Published:** July 30, 2026 | **PMS Relevance:** PMS RELATED | **Type:** Opinion/Commentary | **Geography:** Global

Source URL: <https://hrzone.com/how-to-make-leadership-development-programmes-work-for-women/>

Executive Summary

This article addresses a persistent gap between organisational investment in women's leadership development programmes and actual outcomes, including burnout, attrition, and disengagement among women in leadership roles. The author argues that most leadership development programmes are designed around assumptions of consistent output and availability that fail to account for the compounded, gendered pressures women navigate — including physiological factors such as hormonal cycles and menopause, as well as disproportionate invisible labour described as the 'mother load.' The author contends that programmes focusing predominantly on confidence, communication, and visibility implicitly place the burden of adaptation on women rather than addressing structural misalignment. Key illustrative points include the observation that mid-to-senior women with greater experience are increasingly choosing to exit organisations rather than adapt to unsustainable environments. The article concludes that effective leadership development requires broadening definitions of performance to encompass energy management and recovery, incorporating practical tools for self-regulation and boundary-setting, and critically examining whether organisational cultures reward overwork. The implications centre on a systemic, whole-person reorientation of leadership development rather than incremental skill-building additions.

Key Insights

1. Burnout in women leaders is characterised as stemming primarily from sustained misalignment with how they operate physiologically, mentally, and emotionally — rather than simply from excessive workload.
2. The 'mother load' — the disproportionate invisible mental and emotional labour carried by women alongside professional roles — is identified as a significant but largely unacknowledged factor in leadership capacity and decision-making.
3. A cultural shift is described wherein women at mid-to-senior levels, with growing awareness around wellbeing and self-worth, are increasingly choosing to leave unsupportive organisations rather than continue self-adaptation.

Practical Takeaways

- Leadership development programmes oriented around confidence and visibility may be insufficient if they do not also address capacity management, boundary-setting, and sustainable performance as core competencies.

- Organisational cultures that structurally reward constant availability and overwork are identified as undermining the effectiveness of any leadership development investment, regardless of programme quality.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article identifies a genuinely underexplored tension between standard leadership development assumptions and the layered realities of women's professional and personal lives. The framing of burnout as structural misalignment rather than individual failure is a coherent and defensible position. The argument that leaders cannot model supportive environments while themselves operating in depleting ones is logically consistent. **Limitations:** The article provides no empirical citations, statistical evidence, or references to research to substantiate its central claims. Assertions about physiological factors, emotional labour, and attrition patterns are presented as established truths without sourcing. The 'mother load' concept is referenced as though widely accepted but is not attributed. The recommendations are high-level and lack implementation specificity, making them difficult to operationalise or evaluate. **Biases:** The article is written from an advocacy perspective for women in leadership and does not engage with counterarguments, competing interpretations, or evidence that existing programmes may be effective. The framing risks overgeneralising women's experiences across diverse contexts, industries, and demographics. The article appears on a practitioner HR platform and is written in a persuasive rather than analytical register.

Organizational Practice

The article describes organisations investing in leadership development programmes for women that typically focus on confidence, communication, and visibility competencies. It notes that many such programmes are structured around expectations of consistent output and availability, without accommodating energy fluctuations, caregiving responsibilities, or invisible emotional labour. The article also references the practice of rewarding overwork and constant availability within leadership cultures.

Strategic Implications

The article signals a growing expectation among experienced women leaders that organisations address structural and cultural conditions — not only skill gaps — as part of leadership development. If the attrition patterns described are accurate, organisations face reputational and pipeline risks that programme investment alone does not mitigate. The argument implies that performance metrics and leadership competency frameworks may need to be broadened beyond output consistency to incorporate energy, recovery, and contextual capacity if they are to reflect the conditions under which diverse leaders actually operate.

Validation Status: passed