10 lessons for women to break through barriers

15 leading women share how to overcome common barriers to personal and professional development and thrive in their lives and careers.



February 3, 2023

One goal of “sustainable development” is ensuring effective participation and leadership

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opportunities for women in economic life, while at the same time sharing out household and family responsibilities. Until relatively recently, reconciling personal and professional demands seemed impossible for women. Yet a new generation of female professionals are defending their right to combine both, under a new style of leadership distinct from the traditional male one.

A new book (*De la mano de las mejores*, available in Spanish) — written by IESE professor Nuria Chinchilla, holder of the Carmina Roca and Rafael Pich-Aguilera Women and Leadership Chair, together with Pilar Garcia Lombardia and Esther Jimenez — features the testimonies of 15 leading women who, as agents of change, are making a positive impact in their field and, by extension, helping to change the world.

The challenges these women faced in their career journeys will be familiar to many, regardless of their field. Here we share 10 lessons to help women break through the barriers and thrive.

1. Look for role models — and be one yourself

As more women assume management positions, there are more initiatives by women for women, where experiences can be shared and mentoring opportunities created. “We must consciously support each other and encourage other women to become entrepreneurs or leaders,” says **Regina Llopis**, founder and president of the AIA tech group. An example is her initiative Women Angels for STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts & Architecture and Mathematics).

2. Cultivate a network

Yes, networking takes time and effort, but it presents growth opportunities, attest **Fuencisla Clemares**, Country Manager for Google Spain & Portugal, and **Maria Eugenia Brizuela de Avila**, an executive coach who was El Salvador’s first female Minister of Foreign Affairs and the first female president of a private bank. Networking is most effective when it is genuinely collaborative and mutually beneficial, generating the trust necessary for healthy relationships.

Positive, effective networking involves: exchanging information and experiences; finding common interests; keeping in touch and being present; transmitting passion; and building relationships over time. Networking helps you make yourself and your company known. And as you listen and learn from others, you may find new collaborators, partners, investors and

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even strategic competitors.

> *“The key to exercising leadership is knowing how to manage other people’s energy, motivation and involvement.” —* ***Maria Eugenia Brizuela de Avila***

3. Lose the fear of negotiating

Don’t settle for second best. In the words of **Paloma Beamonte**, former head of Xerox Southern Europe: “Why do women tend to sit in the second row? If there’s room, go to the front row! We have to convince ourselves there’s no ceiling!”

This has implications for job offers, promotions and compensation. Studies show that women are less likely to negotiate out of fear of damaging the relationship. Women must overcome this fear and become better advocates for themselves, highlighting the added value and benefits they bring to the table.

4. Know yourself

Self-knowledge — knowing your strengths as well as your weaknesses — is vital for overcoming the barriers that women sometimes impose on themselves. According to Nuria Chinchilla, these can range from perfectionism to lack of delegation, as well as the tensions that still exist around the stereotypical roles that women are supposed to assume, whether at home or at work.

The first step is to be aware of self-imposed limits, and then work on developing leadership competencies to overcome them. Don’t be afraid if your leadership style doesn’t fit “the norm.” As Clemares acknowledges, “I’ve changed my leadership style from being more of a manager to being more of a coach: active listening, understanding what really worries my team, and encouraging them to find their own solutions.”

> *“We must be clear: it’s your colleagues and teams who help you go higher.” —* ***Marieta del Rivero****, Independent Non-Executive Director for Cellnex Telecom*

5. Delegate

To succeed as a manager at any level, it is essential to share responsibilities with team members, ensuring everyone’s involvement, which enhances motivation and develops their

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capabilities. It would be impossible for board directors, for example, to perform all the tasks and functions required of them if they didn't delegate some responsibilities to others. Delegating contributes to a positive work environment by demonstrating that you trust your team.

6. Be passionate

Pilar Almagro, CEO of VertiSub, faces every day seeing all that remains to be done and gets on with the job. That desire to keep learning, to keep going, especially in times of uncertainty, is a strong motivating force, not only in business but also in networking success.

7. Have a clear purpose

Corporate culture expert **Karin Becker** and **Ana del Rio**, Spain & Portugal Country Manager for DNV Business Assurance, both make this point: Have your purpose clear. Whether identifying which networking events to go to, or preparing for a strategic negotiation or meeting: What's your goal? What do you want to get out of it?

A clear purpose will enable you to navigate obstacles better, allowing you to accept each moment and each day with a sense of serenity. According to **Socorro Fernandez Larrea**, president of OFG Telecommunications, it will help you to see life as an integral whole, not divided between family, personal and professional domains, thereby contributing to work-life balance.

> *"In moments of uncertainty, understanding where you are and where you want to be, and deciding how you'll position yourself, is fundamental." —* ***Helena Herrero***

8. Don't be afraid to fail

"Failure teaches you a lot," says **Ana Maria Llopis**, founder of ideas4all Innovation. "The important thing is to have humility to face it."

Helena Herrero, President & CEO of Hewlett-Packard Spain & Portugal, insists: "Every woman must believe in herself, commit to her goals (purpose) and set aside the fear of failure and of making mistakes." When things go wrong, it's an opportunity to learn and gain experience for next time.

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9. Resist impostor syndrome

“If someone has given you an opportunity, it’s because they have seen something in you that makes them think that you’re going to do a good job,” notes Socorro Fernandez Larrea. “Life has shown me there’s no reason to feel small.”

And yet, all too often, women feel that way, doubting their abilities and achievements. Again, self-knowledge and accepting failures with humility can combat such feelings, reassuring you that your success is deserved.

10. Find the energy to pursue your dreams

To reconcile work, family and personal lives, sometimes it’s your attitude that makes all the difference. Draw upon the resources that will give you the energy you need to rise to the occasion as you pursue your dreams.

That being said, breaking down barriers is everyone’s business, achieved through consensus and cooperation with multiple stakeholders. In this effort, companies have a central role to play. As Karin Becker points out, work-family conciliation also depends on there being an organizational disposition to flextime, so that people can adjust their own schedules according to their personal and professional needs.

The 15 female leaders featured in the book show us how they have done it, which can serve as examples for others. In addition to those mentioned in this article, the book cites: **Sylvia Diaz-Montenegro**, CEO of Balandra Software; **Adriana Dominguez**, CEO & Chair of the Adolfo Dominguez fashion brand; **Nieves Briz**, managing partner at the global law firm Dentons in Barcelona; and **Angela Maria Montenegro**, a senior strategy consultant. For any woman seeking a more holistic approach to career development as well as a more humane, inclusive form of leadership, these women’s stories provide inspiration and a guide for achieving it.



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