



Unveiling Female CEO Excellence:

A Special Report featuring Insights from 11 CEOs Shaping Canada's Future

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“..Women are redefining the rules of business and leadership, creating opportunities not only for themselves but for future generations to break barriers and build sustainable, inclusive economies.”

— *Melanie Perkins, Co-founder and CEO of Canva*



Introduction

Welcome to a compelling exploration of **female CEO excellence**, drawn from the powerful insights of 11 exceptional women leading across a wide range of industries. This research dives into the unique strategies, philosophies, and defining moments of female CEOs who have not only broken barriers but are reshaping leadership in small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) today. **This research also addresses the questions of what differentiates women in the role of CEO.**

Being a CEO isn't for the faint of heart. The pressure is constant, the decisions are high-stakes, and every move is under a microscope. On top of that, we're leading through a time of deep uncertainty—shifting geopolitics, rising tensions, and heartbreaking setbacks in the fight for gender and racial equity. It can feel overwhelming.

That's why now, more than ever, it matters that women show up—fully, boldly, and unapologetically. We need to lead with authenticity, with purpose, and with the courage to stand for what we believe in. For me, that starts with taking a breath. Honoring the incredible women leading the way. And sharing our stories.

Through these interviews, we uncover what makes these women stand out as visionary leaders and how they've navigated their paths to success, facing both universal and gender-specific challenges. Their insights are meant to ignite inspiration and provide practical, actionable strategies for current and aspiring CEOs, Presidents, Founders, and Managing Partners/Directors, as well as anyone with a dream to start or lead their own business.

Representation Matters

At its heart, this research is about empowerment—helping to elevate and sustain women in positions of power, both in Canada and around the world. Representation matters, and by spotlighting these remarkable women, we challenge the stereotypes that persist around female leadership. The more women see other women excelling at the top, the more they believe it's possible for themselves.

Eight of the 11 CEOs profiled rose through the corporate ranks to claim the ultimate leadership role, while the three others stepped away from corporate life to build their own businesses from the ground up. Regardless of their paths, all share a commitment to fostering growth, innovation, and sustainable success, while navigating the unique challenges that come with being a woman at the top.

Valuable Lessons

This report offers valuable lessons, from leadership philosophies, strategic decision-making and driving innovation, that you can apply in your own journey. It's not just about business success; it's also about inspiring and supporting the next generation of female CEOs and leaders. The CEOs featured are setting an example and opening doors for future female entrepreneurs and executives.

By sharing their stories, these leaders not only build connections and encourage collaboration but also inspire a sense of belonging for women in leadership, especially in industries where they are often underrepresented. Whether you're seeking to scale and grow, tackling technological disruption, or guiding teams through economic uncertainty, these shared experiences offer lessons you can apply to your own leadership journey.

Pause and Reflect on Your Own Leadership Journey

As you engage with this report, I invite you to look inward. Throughout these pages, you'll find thought-provoking questions designed to spark reflection on your own path and leadership style. Don't rush past them—use them as moments to pause, challenge your assumptions, and explore new possibilities. Your answers may illuminate untapped potential or inspire bold action.

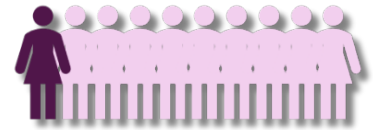
Fuel your Confidence

Let these stories fuel your confidence, expand your strategies, and inspire your vision to create something new! Together, we can create a more diverse, inclusive, and thriving business landscape where women continue to lead with purpose and passion.

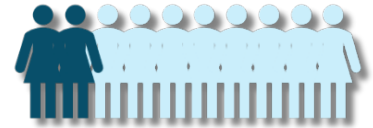
Enjoy the read—and get ready to be inspired!

Current Landscape of Female CEOs in Canada

Women hold 5% of CEO positions in Canada's top 500 companies¹



18% of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Canada have majority female ownership²



A gender diverse business is 25% more likely to financially outperform³



The Case for Women leading and building businesses

Diverse Leadership, Better Decisions: Women in top leadership positions bring unique perspectives that enrich executive decision-making, drive creative problem-solving, and foster innovation. Diverse leadership teams are more reflective of customers, employees, and stakeholders, resulting in more holistic and effective strategies.

Empowering Role Models for Future Generations: Female CEOs send a powerful message: leadership knows no gender. Their visibility inspires the next generation of women to pursue leadership paths and helps dismantle outdated stereotypes that have historically limited women's advancement in business and society. When young women see leaders who look like them, they believe they belong at the top too. Having female CEOs demonstrates to young women and girls that leadership roles are achievable, helping to break down barriers and stereotypes in business and beyond.⁴

Innovation Through Inclusive Leadership: Female leaders often adopt transformational and democratic leadership styles, approaches that emphasize collaboration, vision, and shared success. These leadership styles have been linked to stronger organizational cultures and measurable innovation outcomes, particularly in sectors like healthcare, technology, and consumer goods.⁵

Strong Financial Performance: Research shows that companies with women in leadership roles are more likely to outperform those with fewer female leaders. Female leaders are often associated with recognizing opportunities, better corporate governance and risk management strategies. It's not just fair – it's smart business.⁶

Higher Employee Satisfaction: Organizations led by women often foster cultures rooted in empathy, inclusivity, and collaboration. These environments lead to higher employee satisfaction, lower turnover, and greater retention—critical factors for organizational success and continuity. Companies led by women often foster more inclusive and supportive workplace cultures, leading to higher employee morale and retention rates.⁷

Uplifting Women-Owned Businesses: When women hold leadership roles in large corporations, the positive ripple effect extends beyond the boardroom. Increased representation results in more mentorship opportunities, targeted investments, and corporate programs that directly support women entrepreneurs, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises. This creates a stronger, more connected ecosystem for women in business at every level.

Featured CEOs



**Amanda Voegeli, President & Managing Partner
Southlea Group – Executive Compensation Consulting**

Superpower: Transforming chaos into clarity. I skillfully balance conflicting opinions and emotions while guiding (or steering) all towards impactful decisions.

Amanda has 30 years of experience advising boards and management teams on compensation and governance. She previously led the Canadian Rewards practice at a major multinational consulting firm, working with some of Canada's largest and most complex companies. She specializes in industries such as mining, asset management, financial services, insurance, and technology, and is a recognized expert in the asset management sector. Amanda holds a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of British Columbia, a Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) designation, and is an ICD.D achieved through the Institute of Corporate Directors' Director Education Program.

Inspiration to Lead:



Amanda recognizes that her consulting business relies on having the best talent who are motivated to perform at their best. At Southlea, investing in people and fostering an environment where employees can thrive is a priority. She is passionate about mentorship, paying it forward as a way to honor the guidance she received from past leaders - many of whom were female.

Greatest Challenge as a Leader:



Amanda manages generational differences within a multi-generational team while balancing employee well-being with business objectives. Her key to success has been understanding generational nuances and prioritizing both employee needs and business goals. By overcoming gender dynamics in the boardroom, Amanda has developed a leadership style that commands presence and respect. Her gravitas not only allows her to take a seat at the table but also ensures that her valuable insights and strategic perspectives are heard and acted upon.

Key Insights for Success as a Female CEO:



- Develop gravitas and resilience
- Find a supportive mentor
- Be prepared. Be direct. Don't take it personally.



Anu Bidani – Founder and CEO **STEM Minds - specialized education services for youth**

Superpower: Perseverance

Anu Bidani is the founder and CEO of STEM Minds, a social enterprise dedicated to inspiring youth through STEM education. She previously spent 20 years at Scotiabank, where she served as Head of eStrategy and Solutions. Anu is an award-winning entrepreneur committed to fostering the next generation of global leaders and innovators. She holds a bachelor's degree in computer science and an MBA from Dalhousie University. Her work focuses on combining education and technology to create impactful learning experiences. She has recently added a new pivot to her business – Agri tech focusing on talent pipeline for the Agriculture Farming sector focusing on sustainability and innovation using technology.

Inspiration to Lead:



Anu's journey from senior corporate executive to business owner was inspired by her children and the desire to reshape the balance between work and family while fostering growth for her own children. She pivoted to create a business that empowered kids with essential STEM skills to prepare them for jobs of tomorrow. Using her corporate expertise, Anu designed educational programs that uplifted both her children and others driven by personal experiences and the need to make a meaningful impact.

Greatest Challenge as a Leader:



Fundraising struggles and feeling overlooked as an innovator were key challenges for Anu. Instead of chasing venture capital, she focused on organic growth, staying true to her values. Making this decision she didn't have to worry about keeping investors happy.

She runs her business on her terms and highlights the power of community support, like incubators and accelerators. Anu ultimately chose a slow, sustainable path for her business embracing the lessons along the way.

Key Insights for Success as a Female CEO:



- Grit, resilience, and perseverance.
- Never underestimate the value of relationships and community support in overcoming challenges.
- Measure success beyond revenue, focusing on experiences, impact, hope and personal growth.
- Be opportunistic to seize new prospects and pivots

Redefining Leadership: A More Human-Centered Approach

When I asked the 11 CEOs about their “leadership philosophy”, their insights reflected a human-centered approach, placing people at the core of their organizations. Through empathy, active listening, and emotional intelligence, they foster work environments where individuals feel valued and empowered.

They shared stories about developing trust and loyalty as well as fueling innovation and performance. *As one CEO states “I let my people make and own their decisions even if at times I know it’s the wrong choice.... The learning is invaluable.”*

Several of the 11 female CEOs interviewed shared that they are leading multi-generational teams. They emphasized the importance of fostering work-life balance and being attuned to the unique needs of each team member. By doing so, these leaders create an environment that not only drives loyalty but also ensures long-term retention across a diverse workforce.

6 core pillars of how these female CEOs lead:

CEOs focus on modeling behaviors they expect from their teams.

Leading by Example



Open dialogue, clarity in decision-making, and authenticity build strong leadership foundations.

Transparency & Communication



Employee well-being, inclusion, and diversity are core to fostering positive work environments.

People-First Approach



6 of 11 leaders highlight the importance of using both analytics and intuition.

Balance of Data & Instincts



7 of 11 leaders emphasize trusting their teams and allowing them to take ownership of decisions.

Empowerment & Trust



A resounding 10 of 11 CEOs expressed how important they are totally themselves with their personality, values, and consistency in their demonstrated behaviours... while encouraging their teams to be the same.

Authenticity & Consistency



Questions for Reflection:



What is my core leadership philosophy? How can I be more authentic and inspire my team to be more self-expressed?

More Featured CEOs



**Camille Dundas - Co-Founder
ByBlacks.com**

Superpower: Disarming

Camille Dundas is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of the award-winning online magazine ByBlacks.com. She is also the founder of the IDEA Practice, where she leads as a diversity, equity, and inclusion educator dedicated to transforming workplaces through scenario-based learning. Founded in 2013, ByBlacks.com is ranked the #1 Black Canadian online magazine, having won four national ethnic press awards and recognition from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Inspiration to Lead:



Camille never saw herself as a leader growing up. She was introspective, creative, and aspired to be an author. Leadership came to her “by force” during the 2008 recession when she couldn’t find work and started her first media consulting business out of necessity. She rejected promotions in corporate jobs, preferring to focus on output and results rather than leading others. Her leadership journey was not driven by ambition but by circumstance. Camille reflects that her natural personality traits, like being “bossy” (a nickname from university), may have hinted at her leadership potential, but she didn’t recognize it professionally until later.

Greatest Challenge as a Leader, Woman and Woman of Colour:



Camille faced early challenges in her career when clients were surprised by her age, gender, and race. These experiences sparked self-doubt. She rejects the term “imposter syndrome,” arguing it mislabels women’s struggles as personal insecurities rather than addressing systemic discrimination. For Camille, women, especially women of color, often face invalidation in the workplace, leading to unnecessary self-doubt.

Working with her husband as a business partner has been both rewarding and challenging. Their differing approaches, her emotional, his tactical combine nicely to push them to constantly refine their strategies.

Key Insights for Success as a Female CEO:



- Vision, empathy, and stick-to-itiveness
- Trust yourself, something she wishes she had learned earlier.
- Self-belief, especially for women who face systemic barriers and discrimination.
- Embrace your unique leadership style and don’t feel pressure to conform to traditional models of leadership



Dawn Marchand - President & CEO Lawyers Financial

***Superpower:** Authenticity & Connectivity. What you see is what you get!*

Dawn Marchand claims to have been ‘born a marketer’ who just needed to find her product. That product was financial services. Dawn spent 30+ years in progressive marketing roles for some of Canada’s largest financial institutions including Manulife and Sun Life. She worked in Canada and Asia and had the privilege of leading and developing countless fellow marketers. In 2019, after three years as Head of Marketing, Dawn was appointed President and CEO of Lawyers Financial, a federally chartered organization with the sole mandate of serving the financial needs of Canada’s legal community. When not working, you will find Dawn on the golf course which she often refers to as a nice walk, ruined.

Inspiration to Lead:



Dawn’s path took a significant turn from senior executive when she was asked to step in as interim CEO twice. Although she initially hesitated due to self-doubt and the intimidation of being head of the organization, she was ultimately encouraged to take on the permanent role.

It soon became clear to the Board and Dawn that her task was to transform the organization, implementing significant change. A proponent of change, this challenge was one that Dawn readily accepted. Her story is a powerful reminder that leadership isn’t about having all the answers, but about finding the courage to step up, even when faced with uncertainty.

Greatest Challenge as a Leader:



Being a CEO can be incredibly isolating. It’s a role where feedback and recognition are rare, and the weight of decision-making can feel heavy at times. Navigating board relations adds another layer of complexity, balancing the strategic vision with the day-to-day operational demands. She’s learned to appreciate the power of incremental progress—achieving short-term goals that steadily build toward a bigger, long-term vision.

Imposter syndrome is something many women face, often questioning their value despite clear evidence of their capability. In a male-dominated environment, there’s the constant pressure to assert authority, while also being mindful of gendered expectations. Women leaders are often scrutinized more intensely for their assertiveness, judged differently than their male counterparts. These challenges, though tough, have shaped her leadership style, helping her navigate the fine line between confidence and humility, all while pushing forward with purpose.

Key Insights for Success as a Female CEO:



- **Authenticity** – Being real, open and consistent.
- **Common Sense** – More valuable than expertise in any single area.
- **Confidence** – Essential to decision-making.

Strategy and Decision-Making That Drives Impact



“To make strategy more interesting — and different from a budget — we need to break free of this obsession with planning. Strategy is not planning — it is the making of an integrated set of choices that collectively position the firm in its industry so as to create sustainable advantage relative to competition and deliver superior financial returns”

— Roger L. Martin, Harvard Business Review



When I asked the 11 female CEOs how they define strategy and make strategic decisions, as well as how they balance short-term wins with long-term planning, I expected more uniformity. However, I quickly learned that with strategy - "one size doesn't fit all." Each CEO tailored their approach based on industry, business model, and the nature of their services.

Here are specific tools and approaches the CEOs use to guide their strategic thinking:



Business Model Canvas: A key tool for analyzing and refining business models.



Capturing strategy on 1-page: Strategy, along with KPI's and key tactics are condensed into a one-page document to ensure all employees understand their role and how they contribute to execution.



Distinction Between Strategy and Planning: Defining strategy is about creating a long-term aspirational vision, while strategic planning involves setting goals, building actionable plans, and ensuring alignment across the organization.



Clear Vision, Mission, and Values: These foundational elements guide the strategy and are reinforced through engagement with stakeholders such as regulators, board members, and employees.



Board Relations: Balancing strategic direction with operational execution is crucial, especially in maintaining alignment with the board.



Planning Horizon: Some CEOs use a 5-year plan that allows for confidence in creating ambitious goals, while others opt for a 3-year plan to set ambitious, yet attainable, targets. Most focused on building incremental goals that align with the bigger vision.



Agility in Strategy: One CEO shifted from a rigid 5-year plan to a more opportunistic, flexible approach due to resource constraints. Her focus evolved to prioritize impact and adaptability over strict, long-term planning.



Digital Strategy: Ensuring a cohesive digital strategy and aligning people, processes, and systems to support it.

Common insights across most of the 11 CEOs around approach to strategy:



Relationship Building: A strong emphasis on developing key relationships and engaging with stakeholders to gain their input and secure buy-in.



Market Awareness: A focus on "seeing around corners," anticipating market trends, and acting proactively.



Balanced Decision-Making: A blend of data-driven decisions with intuition and gut instincts.

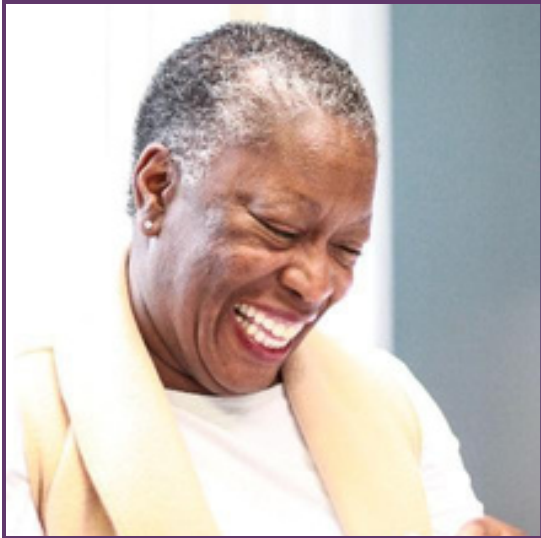
These insights reveal the diverse and adaptable approaches female CEOs take to shape their organizations' futures while staying responsive to change.

Questions for Reflection:



How can I expand my long-term vision for the business with bold goals? How can I consistently engage key stakeholders in the fabric of my decision-making?

More Featured CEOs



Ira Baptiste – President Evolve Agency Group

Superpower: bringing my true authentic self with a strong positive energy

With 35 years of experience as a successful marketing and advertising executive, Ira has a wealth of knowledge and experience under her belt. She has had the pleasure of working with multi-national advertising companies and small independently owned agencies across Canada and Europe. She has been instrumental in their success and continues to do so as President at Evolve Agency.

Ira's tenure in marketing has had her working with clients such as Molson Breweries, Labatt's, Kellogg's, Mars Incorporated – Effem Inc., Toyota, Egg Farmers of Ontario, Canadian Cancer Foundation amongst many others.

The breadth of experience across these clients has included strategic positioning to consumer execution in the areas of TV, print, radio, digital, social, shopper marketing, consumer activations etc.

During her free time, Ira enjoys nothing better than getting on the tennis court to try and reach the Serena Williams that she is convinced lives somewhere inside of her.

Inspiration to Lead:



Throughout Ira's career, she has drawn inspiration from the great leaders she worked with. Early on, she was ambitious and learned to advocate for herself through mentorship, with one key piece of advice from a key mentor that stood out: "If you do the work, you don't have to ask." This lesson led her to document her accomplishments and ensure recognition from higher-ups.

Ira struggled to break through the glass ceiling. Her promotion to President happened to coincide with the Me Too Movement and DEI initiatives. Despite facing judgment, she proved her worth by delivering exceptional agency performance in her first year. Inspired by the vision of powerful figures like Oprah Winfrey and encouraged by her father's advice to always bring her A-game, she continues to lead with the belief that hard work and self-empowerment pave the way for success.

Greatest Challenge as a Leader:



When Ira was introduced as President, many reactions were patronizing, with comments like "Good for you!" suggesting that her appointment was seen as an affirmative action move rather than a merit-based decision. She proceeded to prove herself through delivering outstanding company performance. Aware of the stereotypes, she has deliberately cultivated a professional presence to combat unconscious biases and to assert her rightful place at the top.

Key Insights for Success as a Female CEO:



- Advocacy and self-promotion are crucial for career growth.
- Leadership is about supporting and developing others, not exerting power.
- True leaders create opportunities for their teams to excel.
- Authenticity and personal connections open unexpected doors.



Kim Richards – President & CEO FleetOptics Inc.

Superpower: KIMxeleration - catalyst for high-speed business growth

Kim Richards is an inspiring leader with over 30 years of experience in logistics, e-commerce, and operational excellence. As President & CEO of FleetOptics Inc., she builds high-performing teams, drives sustainable growth, and fosters innovation. Her career began at Canada Post, where she gained expertise in ecommerce, international logistics, and Smart Mail Marketing. At FleetOptics, she has brought structure and strategy, led major expansions, introduced 100% green delivery zones, and strengthened partnerships across Canada and the U.S. Her people leadership, strategic vision and ability to navigate complex industry landscapes has positioned FleetOptics as a leader in final-mile delivery.

Inspiration to Lead:



Kim's leadership path has been shaped by a series of entrepreneurial opportunities and challenges that asked her to: restructure teams and build future leaders, improve departmental outcomes, take on new portfolios and fix problems. Her reputation as a motivational leader opened many doors and she enjoyed every challenge. The bigger the task the more fun she had!

Driven by a desire to build something new she made the bold decision to join a smaller and more entrepreneurial organization where she could shape the future and continue to impact as a leader.

Greatest Challenge as a Leader:



Is making sure she has the right skillset and talent in the right roles. Her industry knowledge and strong business acumen have helped her navigate her new role as President & CEO in a robust, ever evolving, industry. It has been a rewarding and collaborative experience for Kim to work alongside her Private Equity partner. Hard work and humility were key to overcoming any roadblocks – which she insists she never let get in the way. Now as President & CEO, and a member of the Board of Directors, she is focused on fostering a culture of innovation and forward-thinking leadership, knowing that such an environment is crucial for the organization's continued success.

Key Insights for Success as a Female CEO:



- Create an eclectic and diverse team of experts in their field
- Be fully present and accessible while demonstrating grace under pressure
- Great work ethic and the ability to inspire, forgive and move forward

Redesigning Progress: Female CEOs and the Future of Innovation

When I asked our female CEOs about how they drive innovation in their organizations, I was struck by how their leadership philosophies seamlessly align with their approach to fostering innovation. The same qualities that define their leadership styles—empathy, inclusivity, and adaptability—are also key drivers of innovation within their teams. In fact, these leadership traits are linked to stronger organizational cultures and measurable innovation outcomes, especially in sectors like healthcare, technology, and consumer goods⁷.

Key Highlights from our CEOs:



Innovation is expected and integrated into the company's culture, with a focus on hiring the right people and staying competitive



Leveraging emotional intelligence to create inclusive and high-performing teams that are key to driving innovation. We do this through EI training and immersing all leaders and employees in making EI part of our culture



Staying ahead of trends and testing innovative approaches with our clients.

- We need both internal initiative from our people and client buy-in to drive innovation.
- This can be challenging as many clients prefer playing it safe rather than taking risks with new ideas – we need to make it risk-free.



Innovation by instilling a culture of calculated risk-taking and learning from mistakes



Data privacy and cybersecurity concerns influence how businesses adopt digital innovations

Shared Principles of Innovation from our CEOs:

- **Promoting Diversity and Inclusion:** A diverse team is seen as fundamental to generating fresh, innovative ideas.
- **Encouraging Risk-Taking and Learning from Failure:** Female CEOs emphasize taking calculated risks and viewing failures as opportunities to learn and grow.
- **Investing in Employee Development:** Continuous growth and training are vital to maintaining a competitive edge and driving innovation.
- **Fostering Collaboration and Teamwork:** Innovation is seen as a team effort, with collaboration across all levels essential to success.



Questions for Reflection:

How am I driving Innovation in my company? Is there an opportunity to encourage more diverse perspectives and approaches?

More Featured CEOs



Lesley Morris – President
ISPA Store Fixtures – Retail Manufacturer

Superpower: Clear is kind

Lesley Morris is a forward-thinking President with a strong track record of driving transformation in manufacturing and retail. As President of ISPA Store Fixtures, she leads with a focus on innovation, customer-centric growth, and collaborative partnerships. She champions teamwork, sustainability, and technology to foster modernization and long-term success. With executive leadership experience in global organizations, she excels at turning ideas into actionable strategies that drive measurable results. Passionate about talent development and community engagement, Lesley combines empathy, strategic foresight, and hands-on execution to create lasting impact.

Inspiration to Lead:



Lesley's inspiration to lead organizations stems from her immigrant parents' journey, which instilled in her a deep sense of resilience and determination. Her passion for sales and marketing grew from her natural ability to connect with people, driving her desire to make an impact in business. Gaining operational experience at Tyco Fire, Lesley moved through various roles, honing a diverse skill set that included marketing, account management, and P&L analysis. These experiences shaped her leadership approach, blending her personal drive with a broad expertise in business operations.

Greatest Challenge as a Leader:



Lesley reflects on a formative experience early in her career, when she was in a grassroots marketing role on a construction site and was inappropriately touched by a male colleague. When her boss failed to take action, she reported the incident to the foreman and chose to resign, a decision that profoundly shaped her leadership philosophy. This experience taught her the importance of accountability and follow-through.

As a leader and woman, Lesley acknowledges the challenge of not being able to please everyone and the tough decisions that often come with the role, such as letting go of detractors for the greater good of the team. She also recognizes the loneliness that senior leadership can bring, underscoring the vital need for a strong support network of mentors, friends, and family. In moments of organizational misalignment, she stays true to her core values, ensuring her decisions align with those principles, even in the face of difficult challenges.

Key Insights for Success as a Female CEO:



- **Awareness:** Be mindful of gender biases in the workplace, and show up confidently and assertively, especially as the only woman in the room.
- **Core Values:** Prioritize values like hard work, perseverance, and dedication. If an organization's values don't align with your own, it's okay to leave.
- **High Energy:** Maintaining high energy and consistency in performance is crucial but also recognize the importance of stepping back and recharging when needed.
- **Support Network:** Build a strong personal network, particularly for women in business, as it's essential for navigating the unique challenges women face in leadership roles.



Lisa Taylor - Founder and CEO Challenge Factory Future of Work Advisory & Research

***Superpower:** Lisa is a Sector Bridger. She builds collaboration and partnership across industries by applying interdisciplinary tools and thinking, turning silos into systems and sparking solutions that others miss.*

Lisa Taylor is an author, entrepreneur, consultant, futurist, and community leader focused on making sense of the changing world of work. She is the Founder and CEO of Challenge Factory, an internationally trusted advisory and research firm that supercharges talent across organizations, industries, and economies. Lisa has published five employer-focused books, including *The Talent Revolution: Longevity and the Future of Work*. She is an associate fellow for the National Institute on Ageing and one of WXN's 2022 Top 100 Most Powerful Canadian Women.

Inspiration to Lead:



Lisa's journey to becoming a Founder and CEO was shaped by her early corporate experiences as a young manager leading a large team of older staff who often expressed career inertia during career conversations.

Lisa took a brave leap, leaving her successful corporate career to tackle a challenge that few were addressing at the time: the growing need for meaningful career transitions among older workers. Driven by a vision for change, she founded one of Canada's first companies to recognize the ageing population as a powerful force for innovation in the world of work. Her pioneering efforts helped shine a spotlight on what is now widely acknowledged as a critical economic and workforce issue.

Her decision was motivated by a strong entrepreneurial drive and passion for doing high-impact work. It wasn't always easy. In the early days, she faced her fair share of resistance—especially as someone who was often the youngest person in the room, challenging ageist stereotypes head-on.

Greatest Challenge as a Leader:



Although Lisa encounters fewer gender-based barriers running her own business than she did in the corporate world, gendered assumptions still surface. She meets them with curiosity, seeing these moments as a chance to shift perspectives. It's a mindset that mirrors Challenge Factory's broader mission to advance women's participation in labour markets around the world.

Beyond gender, Lisa has weathered major business challenges, from shifting markets to the constant need for adaptation. When the domestic landscape became uncertain, she made a bold move: taking Challenge Factory international. It was a strategic pivot rooted in innovation and a clear-eyed response to today's unpredictable world.

Key Insights for Success as a Female CEO:



- When CEOs connect business strategy with career development, they unlock greater impact, innovation, and productivity for their entire organization.
- Peer support and career literacy are as important for CEOs as it is for their teams.
- Staying at the forefront of your industry means noticing the early signals of change before others do.
- The world is a big place and few women-led businesses export. Canadian products and services are too good to keep secret or limit only to domestic markets.



Michelle Moore – Managing Director Leadership Development - Gallagher

Superpower: Strategic Connector, Life-long Learner

Michelle Moore is an executive leader with over 30 years of experience helping organizations drive business results through strategic planning, innovation, leadership, and culture transformation. She began her career in financial services, transitioning from retail banking to investment management before moving into learning and development. After taking time to focus on her family, she built a successful career in professional services, holding senior leadership roles at companies like Global Knowledge and Lee Hecht Harrison. In 2023, she led the sale of HORN Sales and Leadership Development to Gallagher, managing the due diligence and closing process. Michelle now leads the legacy HORN team

as part of Gallagher's Global Talent practice, continuing her work in leadership development and transformation.

Inspiration to Lead:



Michelle's journey to lead was shaped by a goal-oriented, opportunistic mindset. Instead of adhering to rigid goals, she naturally scanned for opportunities, embracing significant risks, such as moving overseas and pivoting to new business lines. These bold decisions proved to be pivotal in her career growth.

Her leadership journey took a significant turn when she transitioned into a leadership role at Horn. Initially serving as SVP of Strategy and Solutions, she focused on building relationships and crafting a growth plan for the business. A conversation with a colleague who recognized her leadership potential further solidified her belief in her ability to lead, setting her on the path to taking over running the business.

Greatest Challenge as a Leader:



As a female leader, Michelle felt it was important to feel comfortable having a strong voice. Communicating confidently isn't always well received when it's a female's voice, but she believes that women shouldn't be deterred and should advocate for their business when it's the right thing to do. Another major challenge was the integration of a small boutique company into a larger organization. Michelle carefully balanced the needs of long-tenured employees with the needs of the new company, ensuring a smooth transition. Throughout this complex process, she emphasizes the importance of transparent communication, effective change management, and maintaining high employee engagement to foster a positive and productive work environment.

Key Insights for Success as a Female CEO:



- **Humanistic Influence and Empathy:** Successful female CEOs balance goal-driven focus with empathy, adapting their approach to different situations while maintaining a humanistic leadership style.
- **Being Courageous and Flexible:** While having career goals is important, new opportunities always come up – be on the lookout for them and don't be afraid to take some risks.
- **Continuous Learning and Digital Leadership:** Embracing digital leadership and committing to continuous learning are essential for both personal growth and inspiring team development in today's fast-paced business environment.



Nicole Bendaly – Managing Partner Leadership Consulting - Boyden Canada

Superpower: The ability to Ignite passion, insight, and action— helping leaders and teams see new possibilities, challenge the status quo, and step into their full potential.

Nicole Bendaly is a visionary leadership consultant and trusted advisor to C-suite executives, dedicated to transforming organizational culture and empowering leaders to tap the best of themselves and those they work with. With over 20 years of experience, she has pioneered strategies that unlock the full potential of leaders, teams, and organizations.

Nicole doesn't just teach leadership— she ignites passion, insight, and action—helping leaders and teams see new possibilities, challenge the status quo, and step into their full potential.

A sought-after speaker and facilitator, Nicole has shaped leadership development, talent management, and culture transformation across diverse industries, from healthcare to financial services. She is the co-author of two books, a Forbes contributor, and a published expert on high-performance teams. Passionate about creating lasting and meaningful impact, Nicole challenges organizations to redefine leadership and achieve extraordinary results.

Inspiration to Lead:



Nicole's journey into leadership was profoundly shaped by her mother, a pioneering female entrepreneur who launched her own business in the early 1980s. Growing up in this environment, Nicole viewed entrepreneurship as a natural path rather than an exception. Initially working in marketing in financial services, she quickly realized her true passion lay in coaching and empowering people rather than the corporate work itself. Driven by a desire for greater freedom and ownership in creating meaningful impact, Nicole made the bold decision to step away from corporate life and forge her own path. Learning from, and working with, her mother, Nicole quickly discovered her calling in leadership and entrepreneurship. After more than 20 years of working alongside her mother, Nicole embraced a new opportunity with a global firm to lead and expand a new leadership consulting practice across Canada.

Greatest Challenge as a Leader:



Nicole's biggest challenges as a leader, and as a woman leading companies, have revolved around staying authentic while managing imposter syndrome and self-doubt. Nicole has had to find her voice and build confidence in high-stakes leadership roles. Over the past year and a half, Nicole has become more intentional about embracing her true self, choosing not to conform to traditional expectations and instead leading with authenticity.

Key Insights for Success as a Female CEO:



- **Authenticity:** Embrace who you are, have the confidence to step into leadership, and be willing to take risks to stay true to yourself..
- **Connection:** Cultivate meaningful relationships and stay aligned with both your personal purpose and your company's mission to inspire a cohesive, motivated, and high-performing team.
- **Mentorship:** Pay it forward by mentoring others—especially women in leadership—while fostering a culture of learning and growth that empowers and uplifts the next generation of leaders.



Toni Ferrari – President & CEO Canadian Investor Protection Fund (CIPF)

Superpower: Inspiring, focused, strategic, visionary and transformational

Toni Ferrari was appointed President and Chief Executive Officer of CIPF in January 2023. Prior to her role at CIPF, Ms. Ferrari served as Senior Vice President, Internal Audit at Scotiabank, and previously held senior positions with TD Bank Group, Barrick Gold Corporation and Royal Bank of Canada, in the areas of Compliance, Risk Management, Finance and Audit. Toni also worked as a regulator in the Canadian financial sector at the Ontario Securities Commission, where she worked to establish regulatory oversight over securities registrants and self-regulatory organizations, such as the (then) Investment Dealers Association of Canada. Toni is a Chartered Professional Accountant and holds a Bachelor of Commerce and Finance and an Economics degree from the University of Toronto.

Inspiration to Lead:



Toni's journey to becoming a CEO was fueled by her early realization that she excelled in roles offering a diversity of experiences and opportunities to lead. It was clear to Toni that she was a lifelong learner, who thrived in the creation and implementation of strategic priorities that cultivated high-functioning teams.

Toni's leadership capabilities were further highlighted during a leadership program, where one of the facilitators suggested that Toni would be well-suited for a C-suite role. This was a defining moment that solidified her CEO aspirations.

Throughout her career, Toni actively pursued new challenges, continuously seeking to broaden her impact across teams once she had successfully stabilized and mastered her role and responsibilities, ultimately paving the way for her to lead at the highest level.

Greatest Challenge as a Leader:



Like all leaders, Toni faced challenges throughout her career, particularly when balancing work and personal responsibilities, often feeling torn between the two. She also had to navigate the complexities of building strong relationships, learning that prioritizing peer relationships was just as important as managing those above and below her. Through these experiences, Toni learned that work-life balance must be actively managed, not taken for granted, and that cultivating relationships at all levels—whether with managers, peers, or her team—is essential. She also came to understand that prioritization and delegation are key to effective leadership and career success. As a female leader, these lessons have become critical as she continues to navigate the unique pressures and demands of her current role.

Key Insights for Success as a Female CEO:



Top 3 Qualities:

- **Strong Relationship Building** – Cultivating connections at all levels.
- **Effective Communication** – Clear, strategic messaging
- **Strategic Alignment** – Keeping vision and goals front and center.

Top 3 Execution Tactics:

- Regular strategy refreshes through offsite meetings.
- Ensuring long-term initiatives are well-resourced.
- Checking progress consistently to maintain focus.

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“Just because you are CEO, don't think you have landed. You must continually increase your learning, the way you think, and the way you approach the organization. I've never forgotten that.”

— - Indra Nooyi, Former CEO of Pepsico

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Continuous Growth through Community

When I asked our female CEOs about professional growth and development, all shared unreservedly that having strong networks and community is the single most critical factor as a CEO. Whether you're a female who has risen through the ranks to CEO, or you founded a business, the journey to the top and AT the top is filled with unique challenges.

“It is an exceptionally lonely job because you are in the spotlight on your own in a very different way, and you are much more vulnerable because, statistically, this is a more perilous road for you. Straight away the backdrop is not attractive and that's before you add in the levels of personal scrutiny and potential criticism.” Russell Reynolds article⁸

That's the reality many female CEOs face—not only as they rise, but once they've arrived. Trusted confidantes from earlier stages of your career may not understand the complexity of your current challenges. And while everyone expects you to lead with certainty, who do you turn to when the path forward isn't so clear?

Dawn Marchand shares, “The role is isolating; feedback and recognition are rare.”

Once in the CEO role, the dynamics shift. The people you once turned to, may no longer relate to your challenges, leaving you isolated in your decision-making.

That's why **connection isn't a luxury for women in top leadership—it's a lifeline.**

The Power of Peer Support

One of the most critical supports a female CEO (or male CEO) is connection with peers. Peers who know what you're going through, who have walked in your shoes (or do walk in your shoes) – to share challenges and navigate key decisions. This connection is crucial not only for professional growth but also for personal well-being.

When female CEOs connect with others who have walked the same road, everything changes. The sense of isolation fades. There's room for honest conversations. There's space to admit doubts, exchange insights, and celebrate wins without caveats.

As Lesley Morris notes, “We as women leaders face unique challenges in leadership roles. I've found it's critical to have a strong personal network, particularly for women in business.”

Kim Richards emphasizes the value of community, saying, “Core to my ongoing professional and personal development has been belonging to a peer group. I'm able to bring all my challenges and get feedback on key decisions.”

Peer groups provide something few other relationships can: understanding without explanation. You don't have to justify your experiences or soften your truth. You're speaking with women who get it. And that understanding creates an unmatched level of support.

It's not just about having people to talk to, it's about having people who know what it's like to lead under a microscope. People who can offer strategic guidance with empathy. People who will tell you the truth, not just what they think you want to hear.

Leadership Doesn't Have to Be Lonely

The truth is, leading at the top requires more than just grit and vision. It demands a deep well of emotional resilience—and that well runs dry without meaningful support. Community doesn't make you less independent. It makes you more powerful.

Because behind every thriving female CEO is not just talent, but **trusted relationships**—a network of peers who offer insight, encouragement, and clarity when it's needed most.

Key Drivers of Growth Through Community

- **Peer Communities:** Surrounding yourself with other female CEOs creates a circle of insight, accountability, and inspiration. These connections give you the clarity to lead with confidence, especially in uncharted territory.
- **Mentorship:** Learning from women who've walked this road provides wisdom you can't get from a book or a podcast. Their experiences are a compass for your own journey.
- **Diverse Networks:** Engaging across industries, generations, and backgrounds leads to sharper thinking and more innovative leadership.
- **Relationships Over Roles:** While male allies and advisors are essential, there's unmatched value in women-centered spaces. These relationships offer support that's deeply personal, intuitive, and holistic.

Joining a community of women CEOs isn't just about networking—it's about **belonging**. It's about having a safe place to show up fully, lead boldly, and grow relentlessly. When women lead together, we lead stronger.

Questions for Reflection:



On a scale 1 – 10, how do you rate the quality of your network? Do you have a trusted group of CEO peers that you rely on to be a sounding board and to navigate decisions with?

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“It's time for a new narrative. One that acknowledges the complexity of the CEO role and the need for support. One that encourages female leaders to be vulnerable, to ask for help, and to prioritize their own growth and well-being.”

— GERALYN OCHAB AND KIM CHERNECKI, CO-FOUNDERS VIBE CEO

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Fuel Your CEO Journey: Making the Most of This White Paper

This white paper is designed to fuel your growth and success as a female CEO. Here's how you can maximize its value:

- 1. Acknowledge What You're Already Excelling at:** Celebrate your strengths! Take time to confirm the strategies, practices, and approaches that are already working well for you. Keep them in your toolkit as you continue to excel.
- 2. Experiment with One or Two New Ideas:** Don't be afraid to step outside your comfort zone. Pick one or two insights from this report and give them a try. Whether it's a new leadership approach, communication strategy, or productivity technique, taking action is key to evolving as a leader.
- 3. Identify Challenges and Explore New Ways of Leading:** Pinpoint 1 or 2 areas where you feel you could improve or where you encounter resistance. Then, get curious! Seek innovative solutions and explore fresh leadership strategies that can break through barriers. This is your opportunity to unlock new levels of performance.
- 4. Find 'Gamechangers' to Support Your Growth:** Identify mentors, coaches, consultants, books, or podcasts that can act as your “gamechangers” in the areas where you're looking to improve. These resources can provide guidance, inspiration, and insights that will empower you to move forward with confidence.
- 5. Collaborate and Innovate with Peers:** Ideas and innovation thrive in conversation. Share and discuss the concepts from this report with peers across different industries. This exchange will allow you to refine your thinking and uncover new opportunities for innovation and leadership.
- 6. Engage with CEO Communities and consider joining a Peer Group:** Stay ahead of the curve by exploring various communities, associations, and peer groups specifically for CEOs and business owners. These spaces are invaluable for learning, networking, and gaining the knowledge that will help you remain at the forefront of your role and industry.

Action is Key:

The insights in this report are a starting point. Your next steps are crucial to your ongoing success. By applying these strategies, seeking new perspectives, and collaborating with other powerful women in business, you will continue to evolve into the impactful, trailblazing CEO you're meant to be!

About the Author



Kim is the founder of CEO Performance Advisors, a boutique consulting firm partnering with small to mid-market CEOs and business owners to identify and bridge performance gaps across their businesses. Leveraging her exclusive network of vetted A-list advisors, she delivers tangible business results without the hefty fees of big consulting firms.

For the past 25 years, Kim has worked with over 2000 CEOs and executives as a consultant, facilitator, and coach. Consulting with leaders and teams of Fortune 1000 organizations, she developed partnerships across all lines of business at organizations like BMO, Manulife, and Sunlife as well as 40 other organizations across multiple industries in the area of sales effectiveness.

For the last 12 years, Kim shifted to working with CEOs and executives who decided to leave the corporate world to build thriving independent consulting practices. This was her focus in her own coaching practice, as well as a senior consultant with LHH Knightsbridge and The Talent Company human capital firms.

Throughout this time, Kim has had the privilege of building a powerful and vetted roster of “top of their game” Advisors who are gamechangers for their clients.

She’s helped solve countless business problems with her finger on the pulse of what’s most important in our constantly evolving business landscape.

As Co-Founder of VIBE CEO, the ultimate female CEO community, Kim brings together all her expertise, deep business network and passion around building communities to ensure that every female leader has access to the resources, insights and strategic connections to be top of their game professionally and personally.



**Click Here to
Book a Call
with Kim**

Interested in continuing the conversation?

If these insights sparked something for you and you’re curious about connecting with other dynamic female CEOs who lead with purpose and impact, let’s connect for a conversation around our **VIBE CEO Community** for female CEOs.

Please reach out to schedule a chat!

External Sources

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