

# 6 STEP GUIDE TO BREAKING INTO A *Leadership Position*

Nowadays the idea of a corporate ladder is basically an urban legend. You hear whispers of how it used to exist, but it's pretty difficult to imagine. The thought of climbing the ladder may invoke major yawns in the heart of creatives and entrepreneurs, but for many, the idea of an easy to follow path that almost guaranteed your hard work would pay off sounds pretty sweet.

In the modern working world, it's a guessing game as to when your next achievement will be acknowledged in a big way. More specifically, [many women \(74.1% in fact\)](#) have their eye on a coveted leadership position, but are lost on how

to actually get there. If anyone knows of a psychic that specializes in career predictions hit us up.

Every industry and office plays by different rules, but we've tapped into our network of leadership experts (a.k.a badass women who've been there and done that) in order to get the best possible advice on how to break into a leadership role. We've broken down their advice into tangible steps so you can ace them with confidence that you're heading in the right direction. You'll be moving into a leadership role before you know it.



# THE *landscape* OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Women are ready to take charge. And we all benefit when women are in leadership positions.

[A study published by the University of California, Davis](#) revealed that large California companies with at least some women at the top performed better than those with mostly male boards and executives.

Wait a second, it gets better, among the companies with the highest percentage of female execs and board members, researchers found that the median returns on assets and equity were at least [74% higher than among the overall group of companies surveyed](#).

Some major companies do recognize the powerful potential of hiring women. According to their Vice President, Head of Global Brand Experiences &

Partnerships, Deborah Curtis, at American Express utilizes diverse talent as much as possible. “Leveraging the unique insights and experiences of our diverse colleagues within American Express means that we can both better serve our customers and continue to foster an environment in which the most innovative and brightest people can contribute their all,” Curtis says.

Despite the super clear fact that women are assets in the workforce, corporate boardrooms remain male dominated. We can’t believe we have to say this, but as of 2018 [women hold only 24% of senior roles](#) across the world.

**We’re so glad you’re on your way to changing these statistics.**

## Where Women Stand

### THAT CORPORATE LIFE

Only 5 percent of CEOs in the S&P 1500 index are women. As of right now, this percentage is unlikely to increase due to the fact that the [four highest paid executives beneath CEOs](#) (a.k.a stepping-stone jobs to the CEO role) were only filled by women 11.5 percent of the time. Can you feel us fuming?

In an ideal world, you would kill it at any company you work for, but before accepting your next job offer, research the company's leadership team to make sure women are being fairly represented. You deserve the best chance possible at success and finding a company that supports and promotes women will make your life a hell of a lot easier.

If you're on the corporate path, consider [one of these industries with the most female leaders](#):

- Education and social services
- Healthcare
- Hospitality
- Food and beverage
- Financial services
- Professional services
- Retail
- Agriculture, hunting, forestry, fishing
- Electricity, gas, and water supply/ utilities
- Clean tech
- Technology
- Manufacturing
- Transport
- Construction and real estate
- Mining and quarrying

### THE STARTUP STRUGGLE

Don't let the nap pods and kombucha on tap fool you. Startups may have modern offices, but their C-suites can be pretty old-fashioned. [67 percent of startups surveyed have no women on their boards](#) and 51 percent have no women in executive positions. Some startups are working towards changing these numbers. In 2018, the number of startups that say they have programs in place to increase the number of women in leadership jumped from 28 percent to 43 percent.

There is some good news and it comes courtesy of female (of course) entrepreneurs. [US technology startups with at least one female founder](#) have teams that are, on average, 48 percent women. That's twice as many as the average reported by US technology startups with no female founders.

Companies with female founders have executive leadership teams with on average 38 percent women (2.4x more than the average at U.S. technology startups with no female founders) and engineering teams that were on average 23 percent women (2.3x more than the average).

At Girlboss we have a primarily female team so we thought we would ask our fearless leader, Sophia Amoruso, for her take on leadership in the startup environment. “In any startup it’s challenging when you start with a team of generalist and as the company grows you need specialists who understand the nuances of more specific business needs,” she says.

We’ll chat a little more about how you can know if you’re ready for a leadership position on **page 5**.

**WOMEN IN PROGRESS WOMEN**  
**EN IN PROGRESS WOMEN IN**

Now that you have a better idea of what you’re up against, let’s talk about how you’re going to land that leadership position. We’ve broken down what you need to know about working towards a leadership position—with expert advice of course—into 6 manageable steps. Check these off as you work your way through this guide for all the I was born to lead vibes.



**STEP 1**

# ARE YOU *ready?*

Not everyone wants to be a leader at work, but if you do, chances are you were daydreaming about it long before you were qualified. It's pretty hard to not fantasize about the day you'll be making big-picture decisions, when you're on that entry-level coffee run. Transitioning into a leadership role should only happen when you are absolutely ready to take on the responsibility and have the skills to succeed in the role.

Sophia Amoruso, founder & CEO of Girlboss, advises that before taking on a leadership position that you understand what the job truly pertains. "Managing others doesn't come naturally to most of us. Understanding that managing people is another job in and of itself is important. And an ability to set guidelines without micromanaging creates trust across teams."

For a dose of perspective, Naama Bloom the VP of Brand Marketing at Zulily suggests noting if other people in the office view you as a leader. "Are you a natural leader? Even though you don't have direct authority over people, are people still looking to you for your input and guidance?" Bloom sees that as an external assessment, but believes only you truly know what you are capable of. "How do you know you are ready? You just have to trust and believe in yourself... There are very few jobs that you walk into where you've done it all before, so you have to just trust that you can figure it out."



## HOW YOU KNOW

*you're ready to take on a leadership role*

- Are you comfortable making difficult and sometimes unpopular, decisions?    
Y N
- Can you communicate effectively with members of your team, even if they have different communication styles?    
Y N
- Can you tackle tough conversations without taking them personally?    
Y N
- Have you taken on smaller leadership opportunities in your current position? Like being the first to volunteer to spearhead a new project, running the office book club, or stepping up when a teammate is out of the office.    
Y N
- Are you receptive to constructive criticism? Have you welcomed constructive criticism and learned from it?    
Y N
- Are you encouraging of your colleagues' success? Do you see them as an asset to success instead of competition?    
Y N

**If you checked Y on most of these boxes, then you're ready to start taking more steps towards becoming a leader. *Congrats!***

## PRO TIP:

“I look for leadership candidates who *love* to teach and mentor others. Nurturing the talent under you is a huge part of supporting internal growth within a business, and it’s not something that’s easy to do if you don’t have a genuine passion for it.”



*Sophia Amoruso*

FOUNDER & CEO, GIRLBOSS



**STEP 2**

# COMMUNICATION

## *is key*

In any relationship, communication can make or break you. Once you become a leader, your relationships are bound to increase. Unlike a roommate or best friend, you may get no say in who you have professional relationships with. Chances are not all of the employees you manage, or other office leaders you collaborate with, will communicate in the same style as you. Which is why if you want to lead effectively—and as smoothly as possible—it's important you learn how to successfully communicate. Proper communication skills will come in handy when you're vying for that

promotion or looking to gather support from your colleagues.

[Companies with high effectiveness in communication](#) are three and a half times more likely to outperform their industry peers whose firms don't communicate effectively. This means that by taking the time to improve your communication skills, you can also increase the efficiency of your team. There is no need to wait until you're a leader to work on these skills, you can start today.

### *How to communicate better at the office*

#### **GET PERSONAL**

You know what's fun? Taking personality tests. Not the ones you find in magazines in your dentist's waiting room, but ones that are trusted and backed by research. Ask your manager if you can invite the team to try out a personality test like [Myers-Briggs Type Indicator](#) or the [Riso-Hudson Enneagram Type Indicator](#). You'll learn a lot about your colleagues and how they tick, which can help you communicate better. As a bonus, it's a pretty fun team-building exercise.

#### **EMOTIONS RUN HIGH**

Only have emotionally-charged conversations in person. Work can make us emotional and we aren't afraid to admit that. It's unrealistic to expect people to not get upset or find their feelings hurt at the office. Which is why if you have to deliver news or have a difficult conversation that you know may upset someone, do it in person. Yes, it is less scary to confront someone about a rude comment they made over email or to tell them you need major edits to the project they worked on for months over instant messenger, but don't. Having emotionally-charged conversations in person can help avoid any misunderstandings. How many times have you read through an email too quickly while mad? Ultimately, it's just more respectful to meet in person. The same goes for celebrations. If an employee accomplished something huge or your team landed a big account, don't send the announcement over email. Congratulate them and spread the news in person, they'll feel so much more valued that way.



## LISTEN UP

This might be the hardest aspect of communicating properly. If you're excited about a topic or feeling defensive, it may be hard to hold your tongue. But speaking over people or not letting them finish what they're saying can ruin your efforts to communicate. If you do this frequently you also risk ruining relationships with your coworkers. Basically, it's rude and hinders your ability to communicate properly. So listen, wait, then speak.

## PRO TIP!

“Whenever I have made communication mistakes it’s when I’m doing a lot of talking and not a lot of listening. When I’m not communicating collaboratively. *Listening* can be one of the most powerful tools in your arsenal.”



*Deborah Curtis*  
VICE PRESIDENT, HEAD OF GLOBAL BRAND  
EXPERIENCES & PARTNERSHIPS AT  
AMERICAN EXPRESS



## FACTS MATTER

When delegating work or training a colleague on an important task, getting the facts down in writing can make a huge difference. If you call a teammate into your office to assign a new project, they are likely trying to absorb the bigger picture of what your goals are. Maybe they jot down a few notes, but chances are they will miss some of the smaller details. It's easy to blame them when this happens, but their mistakes can reflect poorly on you as well. Before or after a meeting where you assign work, send all of the important details in an email. Deadlines, client contact info, budget, etc. should all be in writing. That way your colleague won't need to keep asking for clarification throughout the project and nothing important will fall through the cracks. You'll also be able to hold them more accountable, if it comes to that.

## JUST ASK

Mention that you were reading about how important it is to learn how to communicate effectively at work and see what your colleagues have to say on the subject. Trust us, they will have opinions. Don't forget to ask how they prefer to communicate. Everyone likes to share their opinions and preferences and this will be the fastest way to learn how to communicate better with your team.

# PRO TIP:

“I think the best way to really communicate at work is to try to be as *transparent* as possible and give direct feedback... Actually first state what your intent is, because it disarms people and it lets them open themselves up to hear what you’re saying.”



*Naama Bloom*

VP OF BRAND MARKETING, ZULILY

**STEP 3**

# IT'S *inspiration* TIME

## HOW TO INSPIRE OTHERS TO DO GREAT WORK, EVEN BEFORE YOU'VE GOTTEN THAT DIRECTOR TITLE

Remember *Field of Dreams* and the whole “if you build it they will come” message? You might have forgotten to sign up for the company softball team, but you can still take some pretty big lessons away from the widely quoted film. If you start acting like a leader, you’ll be seen as one. What do leaders do? Okay, they lead, but they also inspire.

By being a positive and encouraging presence in your office, you will not only be helping your colleagues, but also will have one more way to brand yourself as a leader.

### *What makes a leader inspiring?*

A survey conducted by [Bain Inspirational Leadership Model](#) asked survey recipients what inspired them about their colleagues. They found 33 traits that help leaders in four areas: developing inner resources, connecting with others, setting the tone, and leading the team.

Stress tolerance, self-regard, and optimism were popular traits. Vitality, humility, and empathy were seen as helping leaders connect. Openness, unselfishness, and responsibility set a positive tone with colleagues.

Traits like vision, focus, servanthood, and sponsorship were seen as assets towards being a good leader. Because these traits are so diverse, it means that most people have the potential to be a good and inspirational leader, as long as they focus on their strengths.

The number one strength that respondents indicated mattered the most? Centeredness. In other words, the ability to remain calm under stress, empathize, listen deeply, and remain present. Sounds like an ideal leader to us.

## What makes a leader inspiring to you?

We asked some real life leaders what they find inspiring in a leader. A little meta, but also super insightful.

On a super positive note, the survey found that you only need one of the traits to double your chances of being an inspiring leader. But we're confident you can master a few.

*“Positivity. Integrity. Someone who has a powerful vision, yet makes everyone see themselves, and their work, in it. A leader who has my back.”*

*Deborah Curtis*  
VICE PRESIDENT, HEAD OF GLOBAL  
BRAND EXPERIENCES & PARTNERSHIPS  
AT AMERICAN EXPRESS

*“Leaders who lead with purpose, humility, and creativity. I've personally been inspired by many leaders who have exceptional work ethic, set ambitious standards, and challenge others to continue to grow by exploring new ideas, insights, and approaches.”*

*Lina Alcalá*  
VICE PRESIDENT, HUMAN RESOURCES,  
TINDER



*“I get inspired by leaders who are steady and true. They stick to their word, they are in it with you. You feel that they don't have an agenda at all, they are really focused on doing the best that they can for the team.”*

*Jennifer De Castro*  
PARTNER, DIGITAL MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT,  
TRUE TALENT ADVISORY

*“Authenticity is super important and what I mean by authenticity is acknowledging that you're a whole person, not just the professional you are at work.”*

*Naama Bloom*  
VP OF BRAND MARKETING, ZULILY

## STEP 4

*Lead* ON

You know you have great leadership potential, but does your boss know that? There are subtle ways you can show you're leadership material. The following suggestions are good habits to form regardless and they'll help build your image as a leader. When it comes time to promote from within, management will think of you immediately. Recruiting pro Jennifer De Castro, a Partner of Digital Media & Entertainment at True Talent Advisory, helps hire at various leadership levels. She recommends using your current job to gain the experience necessary to lead. "Anybody that is looking for that next step to move in their career, should always leverage that environment they

are in, the company they are in, to gain that experience."

When Deborah Curtis from American Express is examining leadership qualities in her staff, she looks to see what qualities they have already exhibited, "To be successful you have to be able to mobilize teams to not only deliver results, but to also bring others along the journey with you, as you drive bold ideas and change. Accomplished leaders tend to thrive in facing challenge through creative problem solving. They consistently gain the advocacy of others."

*10 subtle ways to show you're leadership material*

- 1 **Skip the gossip.** It can be hard not to participate in what seems like harmless gossip, but if you want to be perceived as a leader, you can't be seen spreading rumors about colleagues you may oversee one day.
- 2 **Have healthy working relationships with most people in your company.** No one expects you to get along with everyone, but the general consensus should be you don't cause waves with your colleagues.
- 3 **Be conscientious about how you dress.** No one's saying you need to become the Audrey Hepburn of your office, but making sure you feel presentable (while remaining authentically you) can make a world of difference.
- 4 **Keep your office or cubicle clean and organized.** Maybe a messy desk doesn't bother you, or distract you from your workload, but your boss may feel differently. Appearing organized and pulled-together will give the decision makers above you more confidence in your ability to tackle new challenges. Whether or not that junk drawer actually affects how you work.

- 5 **Own up to your mistakes.** Fessing up to flaws is a hard pill to swallow, but can make you seem mature and that you have the company's best interests at heart. Everyone makes mistakes, but leaders don't make excuses.
- 6 **Welcome constructive criticism.** Even if you ask for your work to be critiqued, it's never fun to receive criticism. Remember, your work being critiqued is not a personal attack and in most cases can only help you. Being unwilling to admit where you may need help will hinder your ability to be seen as a future leader.
- 7 **Volunteer to help with new projects or fill in while your teammate is on maternity or paternity leave.** Show your manager you're always ready to take on a new challenge. If you decide to look for a new job, the extra skills you've gained by taking on more work will boost your resume.
- 8 **Have big picture conversations.** Sure, most of your days may be spent maintaining systems and workloads that are already in place. But you need to show the powers to be that you're not content with just being a cog in the wheel. Set aside some time each week to brainstorm solutions to problems your team is having, researching industry trends, or finding ways to cut costs. Start thinking like a leader and people will start seeing you that way.
- 9 **Brag about your accomplishments.** You may feel self-conscious when it comes time to "brag", but you can't expect everyone to know or remember your accomplishments. Don't be afraid to mention to your boss the really great review you got from a client or remind them of the time you increased your team's productivity by finding that task management software. Keep track of these accomplishments so when it's time to take the next step towards a promotion, you have evidence to back you up.
- 10 **Keep learning.** Many careers allow you to learn on the job, but it's easy to fall into a rut at work. You're good at what you do and that feels safe, but leaders always push themselves to learn more. Take an online class or weekend seminar. Attend that industry conference or pick brains at a networking event. Whichever path you choose, keep moving forward and your career will too.

**PRO TIP:**

Leadership is not a position or title—it's about the *influence* you have on others. Anyone can be a leader in any role. The best way to demonstrate readiness for a leadership position is to demonstrate your ability to influence and inspire others to achieve shared goals. Share examples of how you've done this in the past, regardless of your title or position.



*Lina Alcala*

VICE PRESIDENT, HUMAN RESOURCES, TINDER



## STEP 5

LEVEL *up**The Ask*

The time has come. You're ready to lead, you just need your boss to give you a chance. Sure, you could wait for that annual review and hope they broach the subject themselves, or you could take your career into your own hands and plead your case now. If your annual review is nearing (say 8 weeks away, give or take) it may be better to wait

until your review to discuss the possibility of a promotion. But if it's months away, feel free to request time to speak with your manager about your future at the company. Because this is a pretty important step in meeting your career goals, let's break it down into mini-steps.

- 1 **Set a time to meet.** Don't spring a meeting like this on your boss. Send them an email asking if you can put 30 minutes on their calendar this week to speak privately. They will say, yes. If they are free that day, they might offer to chat right away. So be prepared to argue your case at a moment's notice.
- 2 **Come at your ask from a positive place.** Express that you love the company and your team and you hope to continue to grow in your career with them. Don't make this conversation about any issues you have with your job. Keep the focus on your options for moving forward.
- 3 **Remember those accomplishments you were told to brag about?** Now is the time to bring them up. If you want to outline some notes to reference during your conversation, you can. Remind your boss of the time you increased sales by 126 percent or lead a project that the CEO praised. This is your time to shine, so do it well.
- 4 **After you've made your ask, expect your boss to need time to think or to have to speak to decision makers above them.** Before you leave your first meeting with them, get a second meeting on the books in the next week to finish the conversation.
- 5 **If your request is rejected, don't get down on yourself.** Ask for honest feedback on why your boss doesn't think you're ready for a leadership position. Maybe they'll point out some areas you can easily improve on. Or perhaps a promotion just isn't in their budget right now. Take their feedback or reasoning to heart and ask when would be a good time to circle back on this conversation. If you improve on the areas they suggest or wait out a spending freeze, you may meet your goals sooner than you think.

## Plan B

You were told, no. Or you know there is not much room for growth at your current company. Maybe you're just ready for a new job. Either way, if you're job searching you can make a move to a leadership position, even if you aren't in one already.

### REWORK THAT RESUME

Writing your resume is no time to be modest. Were you second in command when your boss was out of the office? Did you run the summer internship program for three years? Were you in charge of training and onboarding new employees? A nice shiny title helps, but you can rely on your resume and cover letter to highlight the experience that proves you're ready to lead. Be prepared to work a little harder in your interviews, but sometimes the only way to move up the ladder is to jump to a new one.

### ARGUE YOUR POINT

There's no need to ignore the elephant in the room. You know you've never held a formal leadership position and it's OK to address that. Just make sure you come ready to expand on the leadership experience you outlined in your application.

### STEP OUTSIDE OF WORK

They say the proof is in the pudding, but what if the higher-ups at your company don't think you're ready to make pudding? Weird metaphor, but let's go with it. Sometimes bigger companies with elaborate company structures won't allow you to try as many new things or shift your responsibilities as easily. You may have to prove you're a leader outside of work. Can you volunteer at a charity you're passionate about? Look for volunteer roles that allow you to lead other volunteers or plan big projects. Enroll in leadership training courses and show that you're devoted to becoming a strong leader. Join a professional network and offer to spearhead an event. Not only will activities like this look good on your resume, but you'll learn more and make more new connections than you would by waiting for your company to decide you're ready.

**LEVEL UP LEVEL UP LEVEL UP**  
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**STEP 6****NOW GO** *lead*

Hopefully these steps will help guide you on your path to leadership. We're sending so many good vibes your way. Clearly, you're serious about becoming a leader. Why not take your preparation a step further? We've rounded up some of our favorite leadership resources to help you prep for the challenges ahead. And remember, [we're always here to help](#).

***Keep learning*****RESOURCES:**

[Online Leadership Training from Cornell University](#)

[Online Leadership Training from Harvard Business School](#)

**BOOK:**

[The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance---What Women Should Know](#)

[Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead](#)

[The First-Time Manager](#)

**PODCAST:**

[This Executive Wants You To Genuinely Embrace Change, Like Now](#)

**ADVICE:**

[Where To Meet Women Who Are As Obsessed With Their Career As You](#)

[Don't Even Think About Taking That Manager Job If You Can't Do This](#)

**THOUGHT PIECE:**

[What Does "Feminine Leadership" Look like?](#)

[Do You Have High Emotional Intelligence? Here's How To Know](#)