

# The Four Factors: Focus Group Summary



9th September 2025

## Introduction

This focus group brought together six women leaders from diverse sectors including healthcare, finance, utilities, and corporate services to explore what supports women's career advancement into leadership roles. The conversation revealed how these women were **claiming their unique perspectives and experiences** as women in leadership and **how their voices were then actively valued and supported** through their careers and by their leadership teams.



## Authenticity over conformity

These women consistently described leadership through words like **purpose, enabling, authenticity, creativity, vulnerability, and community**. The conversation revealed a strong theme around showing up as authentic leaders rather than conforming to existing models. For example, through challenging traditionally conservative industries, male-dominated environments, and pre-defined roles.

Key enablers of this were recognising and valuing their unique perspectives early (rather than waiting to 'earn' their place), seeing examples of successful transitions and different ways of leading, sharing experiences with other women in leadership, and being more discerning about the feedback they took on board from others. For example, focusing on feedback from people 'in the arena'.

The impact of this was to bring greater creativity, energy and strategic leadership - and impact - into their roles as well as enabling and inspiring others to do the same.



## FROM INSIGHT TO IMPACT

We need different thinking and perspectives in leadership in order to solve complex problems (e.g. climate change, AI, changing consumer demographics, economic uncertainty).

"We're in an age of wicked problems where it's all complex. There aren't any easy solutions... we actually need different thinking and different perspectives in order to come together and solve these complex problems."

Dr Amanda Sterling

"Leadership means authentically turning up, being me, bringing what I have to offer every day... unlocking the potential in others."

"Leadership is also enabling them to have that same sense of fulfilment and an aspiration to do the absolute best that we can."

"Leadership means bringing vulnerability and curiosity to how I lead."

## Recognising voice and value

The most significant factor enabling the leadership success of these women was feeling like a valuable contributor where their opinions and voice mattered.

They identified specific behaviours that enabled inclusive environments - highlighting the importance of leaders who actively sought out diverse perspectives and addressed exclusionary behaviors.

"Psychological safety has been huge for me and I've walked away from tables where I don't feel like I've been able to share my point of view."

"I think being in an environment when I was fairly early to my leadership roles, where my voice was sought out and treated as equal as anyone else's... was a really powerful indicator that diversity did really matter."

"For me, I think the most positive impact has been feeling like I'm a valuable contributor. I have felt valued and that my opinion matters."

## FROM INSIGHT TO IMPACT

We all need safe spaces to bring our unique perspectives and experiences into places of decision making and power.

"We often say that women lack confidence, but I actually think it's a real - natural - neurological response to perceived or real threat."

Dr Amanda Sterling

"One of the most helpful things men can do is realise when women have been talked over the top of, and call it out, and make sure that their voice still gets heard"

"You can have all the initiatives in the world to get people to the table, but if they still don't feel like they can have a voice when they get there, it's a lost effort."

"My voice was sought out and treated as equal as anyone else's. Even if it was different... my manager, CEO at the time was very curious and very careful to draw out all different perspectives."

Authenticity



Value and Support

## Moving forward

While this focus group was only one group of women, the conversation reinforced that supporting women's careers into leadership requires a holistic approach. **One that focuses on supporting women to identify and own their unique perspectives and experiences, alongside creating environments where diverse leadership styles and perspectives are genuinely valued and supported.**

# ACTIONS



## Workplaces

1. **Train managers** to actively seek out and value diverse perspectives.
2. **Develop skills** for calling out exclusionary behaviours constructively.
3. **Create psychological safety** where different opinions are welcomed.
4. **Recognise the value** that different thinking brings to problem-solving.

## Men

1. **Notice** when women are talked over and redirect conversation back to them.
2. **Ask curious questions** about different perspectives before sharing your own.
3. **Sit with discomfort** around diversity as a learning opportunity.
4. **Model curiosity** and openness to different leadership styles.

## Women

1. **Trust** your different thinking as valuable.
2. **Be discerning** about feedback and focus on input from people 'in the arena'.
3. **Find spaces for reflection** and shared learning with other women.
4. **Use your voice** early rather than waiting to 'earn' the right to contribute.

## About this research

This focus group was conducted in partnership with Global Women as part of Dr. Amanda Sterling's ongoing research into what has the most positive impact on women's careers into leadership and support for organisations to remove barriers for women into leadership roles.

This focus group was done to compliment the insights from the Women in Leadership: Insights to Action report 2025 which identified the Four Factors having the most positive impact on women's careers into leadership, and the opportunities for organisations to better support women, increase representation, and close gender pay gaps.

You can find out more about this work by contacting [amanda@dramandasterling.com](mailto:amanda@dramandasterling.com)