

Breaking the Mould: What Women Leaders Told Us About Identity, Pressure & Potential

Summary of the Study: “Self-Identity Conflict Among Women Leaders”

Thank you for participating in this research.

Over 150 senior women across 21 countries and a wide range of industries contributed to the study - and your input helped shed light on a persistent, yet under-recognised challenge facing women in leadership roles.

The study explored a specific question:

How do women leaders experience internal identity tension in response to gendered expectations of leadership - and what supports resilience?

Why this matters.

Even in progressive workplaces, women in leadership face a persistent and often invisible strain: the pressure to fit a narrow model of what a leader ‘should’ be. This internal identity tension - when left unaddressed - can quietly erode confidence, wellbeing, and engagement.

Your data showed that self-identity conflict is not only common, but also a credible explanation for the leaky pipeline of women progressing into senior roles - particularly when performance is affected by hidden pressures to conform.

By identifying and addressing this form of identity strain, organisations have the opportunity to unlock leadership potential, reduce attrition, and realise a more authentic return on inclusion efforts.

Through a robust, quantitative methodology and validated measurement tools, we were able to test hypotheses around identity expectations, related psychological stress, and leadership style in a way that offers both clarity and direction for development.

Key Findings

1. Identity Conflict Is Common

Over **40%** of participants reported significant internal conflict when trying to balance authentic leadership with external expectations about how a leader ‘should’ behave.

This form of conflict—called **self-identity conflict**—is statistically associated with:

- Lower confidence
- Emotional strain
- A reduced sense of authenticity at work

2. Stereotypical thinking is a Key Driver

A major contributing factor was **gender stereotype threat** - defined as the concern that one may be judged or treated differently due to not fitting traditional gender norms.

Examples include:

- A fear that being “too soft” will undermine credibility
- Or that being “too direct” will render female leaders unlikable

While not always consciously acknowledged, the data showed that **when stereotype threat is high, identity conflict rises sharply.**

3. The Challenge Spans Organisations and Industries

This trend held true **across sectors and organisational types**, including those considered inclusive or progressive.

This indicates that even well-intentioned environments may still perpetuate subtle expectations about how women ‘should’ lead.



What Helps Lessen the Strain

✓ 1. Positive ‘Collective Self-Esteem’

Women who reported feeling proud of their identity as **both women and leaders** experienced **significantly lower identity conflict.**

This suggests that when leaders can integrate both aspects of their identity positively, they are more resilient to external pressures.

✓ 2. Paradox Mindset

A **paradox mindset** - the ability to embrace seemingly opposing traits (e.g., being both warm and assertive) - was also tested.

- On its own, it didn’t reduce identity conflict directly.
- But among participants reporting **high stereotype threat**, paradox mindset significantly **reduced psychological strain.**

In short: **Paradox mindset helps leaders thrive in environments where expectations have historically been rigid or traditional. Or where the fear of leading differently exists.**

✓ 3. Leadership experience plays a role

Contrary to some assumptions based on more fluid gender expectations of younger generations, women earlier in their leadership career, reported **higher levels of identity conflict** than those with more years' experience.

This may suggest that:

- Parenthood contributes to a more integrated sense of identity (as most of the older participants had children)
- Or that early-career leaders may be more susceptible to stereotypical external pressures

Paradox mindset was particularly protective for this group.

What Organisations Can Do

Even with excellent policies and procedures, identity conflict can persist. Here's how organisations can respond, using insights from the data:

1. Audit for Hidden Expectations

Even inclusive cultures may subtly signal that certain behaviours are more “leader-like” than others.

Action:

- Use survey-based audits to test for stereotype threat and identity conflict
 - Conduct anonymous forums to identify common patterns or language cues
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2. Elevate Diverse Leadership Styles

Showcase and reward a **range of leadership approaches** - not just those aligned with traditional norms.

Action:

- Ensure visibility of varied personalities in leadership
 - Avoid tokenism by showing **real, sustained success** across styles
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3. Support Identity Integration in Development

Too often, development focuses on ‘fixing gaps’ rather than building on who leaders already are.

Action:

- Design leadership programmes that **affirm identity**, not erode it (rather than a traditional strengths and weaknesses approach)
- This boosts self-assurance showing leaders they can develop without changing who they are.
- Include modules on leadership identity, not just improving performance

4. Build Paradox Mindset Capacity

This trait can be developed - and is especially valuable for women under stereotype pressure. It also has proven benefits across innovation, creativity, people management and more...

Action:

- Add paradox mindset modules to leadership programmes
- Use it as a lens in coaching, peer mentoring, and values-based development

5. Tailor Support for Early-Stage Leaders

This group showed **greater vulnerability to identity conflict** in the data.

Action:

- Offer focused mentoring for those earlier in the leadership pipeline
- Pair high-paradox mindset leaders with those navigating early tensions

Want to Learn More?

More detailed findings are available, broken down by industry, role level, and demographic factors. But the central insight remains:

Leadership identity conflict is common, measurable, and addressable.

Turning Research into Impact

If you'd like to explore how these findings can shape leadership development initiatives, culture and change management programmes, or 1:1 coaching approaches, I'd love to connect.

We offer:

- Data-backed leadership development
- Athenaship®: Identity-safe executive coaching, with tailored programmes for the c-suite track
- Paradox mindset training
- Strategic consulting and storytelling for inclusive cultures: Be/You Be/Long

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