



LeadHERship in the Federal Government

**In her own words: Recommendations for
building inclusive leadership in the federal
government**

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About the Partnership

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient.

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Background

Women are underrepresented in federal leadership positions, making up just 27.3% of the U.S. Congress in 2021¹ and 39% of the Senior Executive Service—the highest level of our government’s career workforce—in 2022. While various sociological and psychological theories offer insight into why these persistent gender gaps exist, a potential strategy to solve this issue is for researchers and federal agencies to better understand how federal leaders view themselves, as well as how they are viewed by their colleagues, direct reports and supervisors.

Historically, the common conception of what it means to be a leader has been built on characteristics typically associated with white men. Understanding women’s experiences in federal leadership roles, and the barriers and challenges they face, is critical to creating a federal workforce that reflects the diversity of the United States and is better equipped to serve people with different backgrounds and needs.

Collecting and analyzing this information will enable organizations that support the federal government and its institutions—and our government itself—to address the societal barriers that contribute to gender disparities in federal leadership roles and to build a more effective federal workplace.

This is the fourth brief in the Partnership for Public Service’s [LeadHERship series](#), which offers best practices and lessons learned. For more information about this series, please review our [introductory brief](#).

¹ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2021. Retrieved from: www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf

Introduction

The Partnership for Public Service developed the Public Service Leadership Model used in leadership training programs since 2019. The model is grounded in two core values—stewardship of public trust and commitment to public good, and four key competencies—becoming self-aware, engaging others, leading change and achieving results. A proprietary Public Service Leadership 360 assessment tool was also developed based on this model. During the past several years, this tool has been used for assessing leadership skills of more than 2,000 federal government leaders, generating a unique data set that we have used to identify trends in public service leadership.

For the “[LeadHERship in the Federal Government: How Women Lead](#)” series, we complemented this data set with 13 interviews and a focus group of women leaders to specifically highlight the experiences of women in federal leadership positions. One of our goals for this project was to identify best practices and offer suggestions for how individuals and organizations can support more inclusive leadership. This fourth brief in the series focuses precisely on that part of our work.

Advice based on the workplace experiences of our research participants is included throughout the [previous briefs](#) in this series. Here we focus on the lessons learned and best practices shared from women leaders in the federal government.

The tools and strategies presented below are likely to be most effective in supporting more inclusive leadership if they are adopted at the individual, as well as team and agency levels. At the higher levels, this includes organizational policies and programmatic design. While we focus most sections on the leader or individual level, we also offer suggestions for teams and organizations that came specifically from the women leaders in our sample.

These best practices are derived from our data on women federal leaders based on the significant differences in men’s and women’s experiences that [we uncovered](#). However, we also found differences in professional experiences at the [intersection of race and gender for women](#), as well as for men of diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds. The points raised below are relevant for those groups, along with other individuals starting on their journey to federal leadership, and those who are considering the possibility of entering the federal workforce.

If put into action, any improvements for the leadership experience of women or employees of diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds will not only benefit them, but all staff by supporting a more inclusive leadership culture as well as systems and policies affecting leaders in organizations. These actions also support the [Biden administration’s executive order](#) focused on building a federal workforce that is representative of the population of the U.S. A more diverse and inclusive federal workforce will be better equipped to serve our diverse nation in a responsive and equitable way.



Building inclusive leadership for oneself, your team and the entire government

Below are four areas of best practices and lessons learned derived from the women federal leaders that we interviewed or those who participated in our focus group, that are directed at improving the culture of inclusion in the workplace. These are focused on the individual, team, agency and the entire social structure since our data supports the fact that no single isolated solution will be effective. Rather, a system-wide approach is needed to result in positive change for women and *all* federal leaders.

Since a focus of our entire [LeadHERship series](#) suggests that an important area of opportunity for improving inclusion and equity exists at the leader level, we conclude each section with some questions for leaders to ask themselves as they work to support their teams, and especially women.



Taking “the whole person” perspective

A successful workplace that supports federal employees in their efforts to thrive and advance professionally starts with recognizing that every person has multiple facets to their lives and separating those from the work environment is often impossible. One of our participants suggested that honoring the whole person includes being consistent and reliable in providing opportunities for federal employees to take care of life outside of work (childcare, eldercare, self-care, etc.).

Many of the women leaders interviewed discussed the topic of balancing work and life. As one participant said, “There might not always be a work-life balance, but as long as there’s harmony [it’s okay].” Women leaders also shared the importance of leading by example by setting boundaries at work and adhering to them.

That means:

- Giving the opportunity for employees to set boundaries at work and openly and directly communicate what works for them in terms of flexibility and what does not to supervisors/managers, peers and direct reports.
- Recognizing and supporting the need for employees to build their own unique version of “work-life harmony” that comfortably fits all parts of life, including workplace ambitions as well as interests outside of professional accomplishments.

“What we do to support women at work is only a part of the solution, what we do to support women at home is equally important.”

– Shared by one woman federal leader.

Here are some specific examples of biases and barriers encountered by our participants that could be addressed if a whole person approach is taken in the workplace:

- A federal leader in the defense sector mentioned she learned “early” to “not mention she had a family.”
- Another leader who does not have a spouse or children shared having to deal with expectations from colleagues to take on more work and experiencing a lack of consideration for her commitments and interests outside of work.
- A few participants agreed that women in general, and single women in particular, are sometimes expected to do the so-called “office housework,”

including organizing and community-building tasks that are often not considered as an additional reason for promotion, and not rewarded in any other way. The women leaders also noted the potential for that to happen more in the hybrid environment when meetings can happen anytime or anywhere.

“We're the people you come to say, ‘I have a problem, I need it solved,’ and I find that women tend to take on those tasks that are often thankless that are for the good of the institution.”

– Shared by one woman federal leader.

Leaders might consider the following questions to incorporate the “whole person” perspective into their work:

- How might I create safe spaces for all members of my diverse workforce to feel supported and empowered to advocate for their own needs and professional goals?
- How might implicit or other biases get in the way of my performance assessments? For example, do I have a bias toward those who are in-person or those who work the same hours that I do?
- How might I ensure that “other duties as assigned” are being equitably distributed among my team?



Taking a systems-approach

Leadership is a group effort and collective success depends on working as a system. Each leader is a part of a whole, and even when they are at the top, there is always a legacy they rely on and a team supporting the work. In addition to focusing on leadership competencies and tools to improve leadership capabilities in their teams, leaders can focus on making sure everyone works as part of a cohesive entity and understands their role in the organization. Additionally, fostering a two-way conversation between a leader and their team will help make the federal government a more inclusive and effective workplace where all employees can thrive.

Here are some ideas shared by our research participants in support of this part-of-a-whole approach to leadership, which can be implemented by individual leaders:

- Recognize everyone’s contributions and give individual team members proper credit.
- Uplift others, be intentional about it and create space for it. This motivates everyone and benefits the whole team and agency mission.
- Advocate on behalf of those who might not be your direct reports, but whose contributions you happen to be witnessing.
- Include diverse perspectives in relationship-building—work closely with communities, customers, colleagues and bosses.
- Be a team player—working only on your own part of the big picture creates redundancies and silos that hamper both individual and collective success.

Example shared from a focus group participant:

Two very influential senior leaders tapped her on the shoulder and said, “You should put yourself forward, this is how to do it, and I want to support you” because there were few women in leadership positions then.

Additional ideas and suggestions focused on promotion, advancement and performance plans, highlighting the need to focus on the process and system include the following:

- Remove barriers for others to perform their best and advance.
- Create and support mentorship and sponsorship opportunities for the employees, both formal and informal. A workplace mentor can provide their mentee with knowledge, guidance and career advice. Different from a mentor, a sponsor is someone who directly advocates for their protégé, recommending them for promotions and other opportunities. Both types of relationships help individual professional development and career advancement, but also support workplace cohesion and its effectiveness as a system.

- Address gaps in Senior Executive Service for women and individuals of a variety of races and ethnicities by specifically identifying ways to reduce bias in the process of career advancement. This is important since [our data analysis](#) highlights the gap cannot be explained by leadership skills. Members of the Senior Executive Service serve in important roles at the highest levels of government, just below top presidential appointees.
- Design performance plans to ensure they clearly map progress toward SES (Senior Executive Service) positions if that is a goal for the employee.
- Provide opportunities for employees to seek and receive personalized feedback while seeking promotion in government. Although the process currently formally allows for it, in practice the federal women leaders in our study highlighted that it is not always provided. Improving the process for seeking and receiving feedback would allow for more transparency and clarity in the career advancement process.

Leaders might consider the following questions to improve their “systems-approach”:

- How clear are all members of the team I lead on their path to promotion and advancement or other desired professional goals? What can I do to further clarify and support this path?
- How might I help those in hiring roles check their biases that may be preventing women and individuals of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds from being hired or achieving their desired professional goals?
- What role, if any, did sponsorship and mentorship play in my career? How might I provide or facilitate sponsorship and/or mentorship for individuals on my team?



Advocacy and being flexible, adaptable and open to opportunities

Flexibility and adaptability were frequently discussed in the context of achieving professional goals and becoming a successful leader. This section highlights recommendations for women at all levels of federal leadership. While we focus the first part of this section on the individual, the recommendations can also be used by federal leaders to better understand their employee's professional development motivations and interests to help support them on their professional journey.

For women at all levels of the federal government this includes:

- Getting clear about professional goals and understanding the importance of self-advocacy especially if experiencing delays or barriers for those desired professional goals, such as advancement or promotion.
- Being open to new opportunities, even if they may not have been sought or anticipated.

“Try to say yes when you can so you can say no when it matters.”

– shared as a personal motto by one woman federal leader.

This at times means:

- Recognizing opportunities when they arise and actively pursuing them before they are offered. Self-promotion and self-advocacy are important parts of being open to opportunities. Leaders need to know their strengths and be able to share those with others² with confidence and persistence.
- Getting comfortable asking for opportunities.

² For more on self-awareness as well as self-confidence, see our brief, “Leadership Self-Efficacy and Self-Doubt: A Look at Women in the Workplace”: <https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/leadership-self-efficacy-and-self-doubt/>

“You absolutely cannot wait for someone else to give you recognition and to notice what you are doing well. Self-promotion throughout your career is essential. There are many ways to do that, from getting on panels for internal events to being sure you are telling your boss what you did and not just hoping they notice.”

– Shared by one woman federal leader.

Also related to flexibility and adaptability, but from the perspective of leading others, the importance of deeply knowing the strength of one’s team members and making use of these accordingly was highlighted by our participants.

“I manage different people, and each person needs to be managed and led in a different way.”

– Shared by one woman federal leader.

Leaders might consider the following questions to support adaptability and self-advocacy:

- How well do I know the individual motivations, strengths, skills and areas for development of the individuals on my team?
- What rotational assignments or cross-team efforts exist in the organization that individuals on my team could take on to further demonstrate their strengths and skills?
- How might I invite and encourage all members of my team to regularly share and celebrate their accomplishments?



Focusing on core skills and continuous learning

Some key leadership skills were consistently mentioned as areas to focus attention on, both at the individual and the organizational level. This included confidence, active listening, humility, authenticity, integrity, humor and risk-taking. And as one woman leader stated when reflecting on her own leadership approach, “Remember to be human!”

Women leaders also shared the importance of being curious, open to feedback and scheduling time for continuous and intentional improvement. Below we share specific strategies for women, by the women in our sample, but they can also be incorporated by leaders at any level to support a more inclusive federal government.

This includes:

- Taking the time to learn and understand the system in which you operate.
- Seeking opportunities for training, especially those focused on leadership.
- Understanding that it is sometimes easier to notice your own weaknesses than strengths. Use coaches or other available tools to help focus on areas you are already strong in and identify growth opportunities. This includes areas where you had a larger gap between your own and others’ ratings, such as in the context of a 360 leadership assessment tool.
- When others formally or informally rate you lower than you feel you are performing, view it as an opportunity to learn and improve, but also consider and, if possible, address any potential implicit bias you may be facing.

Leaders might consider the following questions to support a culture of continuous learning:

- Is my feedback focused on continuous and intentional improvement?
- What professional development opportunities do I provide to members of my team?
- How might I cultivate a culture of continuous learning in my organization? Am I highlighting and sharing my own journey, including successes *and* failures to reduce fear aversion and a focus on perfectionism?



Conclusion

LeadHERship, just like leadership, does not include one-size-fits all recommendations, but we hope our summary of best practices and lessons learned is useful for a wide variety of federal leaders. The more leaders regularly incorporate these best practices, the more inclusive the workplace will become.

We also encourage readers to join the discussion and share strategies that have been successful by using #LeadHERship on LinkedIn or connecting directly with the authors. As we have highlighted throughout our “[LeadHERship in the Federal Government](#)” series, creating a more inclusive federal workforce takes commitment at the individual, group and entire social system level. The more individuals, teams and agencies are committed to continuous improvement in this area, the more likely we will see a government that is truly representative of our society.

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