

FROM ASPIRATION TO ACTION: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS IN WALES

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FOREWORD



I EXTEND MY SINCERE THANKS TO THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH WALES FOR THEIR VALUED PARTNERSHIP AND TO DŴR CYMRU WELSH WATER FOR THEIR LEADERSHIP AS CORPORATE CHAMPION OF THE 2025 CBI WALES WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP NETWORK. I AM ALSO DELIGHTED TO INTRODUCE AND WARMLY THANK GREER FOR HER CONTRIBUTION.

Russell Greenslade, Director - Wales, CBI

It is a privilege to add my voice, as Chair of the CBI Wales Women in Leadership Network, to this important research and to the words of appreciation extended by Russell Greenslade. Following Russell's thanks to our valued partners at the University of South Wales and to Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water for their leadership as 2025 Corporate Champion, I am deeply honoured to present this year's report.

Every year, our community grows stronger, and the evidence in this report vividly demonstrates both the ambition and the resilience of women professionals across Wales. The insights gathered here are not simply statistics - they are the lived realities and aspirations of leaders at every stage, speaking to the promise and complexity of leadership in our evolving workplaces.

This research, produced with rigour and care by our partners at the University of South Wales, sheds a necessary light on the structural and cultural barriers that women continue to face on their journey into leadership roles. Yet, just as importantly, it highlights practical solutions - how organisations can foster environments where everyone, regardless of background, feels seen, supported, and empowered to progress.

The recommendations set out in these pages are both timely and actionable. They call on all of us - employers, educators, policymakers, and business leaders - to redouble our commitment to building inclusive pipelines, investing in mentoring, and championing flexible, sustainable leadership pathways.

To all those who contributed their experiences and insights, thank you. Your voices are essential to shaping a future where talent and ambition are met with opportunity. Together, we can ensure that leadership in Wales truly reflects the diversity and dynamism of our nation.

Greer Hooper, Chair of the CBI Wales Women in Leadership Network



We wish to thank Dwr Cymru, Corporate Champions of the CBI's Women in Leadership Network



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CONTENTS

Foreword	3	Preparing the Pipeline: Building Confidence and Capability	14-17
About the Authors	5	The Invisible Rules of Leadership	
Our Respondents	7	How People Perceive the Barriers Differently	
About the Methodology	9	Beyond Aspiration: Conditions and Capabilities for Emerging Leaders	
Introduction	11	Closing the Mentoring Gap	19-23
Reluctance and Resistance: Reasons for Avoiding Leadership	12-13	When Mentoring Doesn't Fit	
Workplace culture and the leadership environment		When Mentoring Supports Progression	
Practical barriers: are leadership roles out of reach?		Who Wants a Mentor in Future?	
Personal preferences and values		Recommendations	25
Insights for organisations		References	27



OUR RESPONDENTS

This report draws on responses from 249 professionals in Wales, spanning varied roles, sectors, and career stages. Here are the key details about our respondents:

GENDER:
84% WOMEN, 15% MEN,
1% NON-BINARY.

QUALIFICATIONS:
87% HELD A DEGREE OR HIGHER;
51% HAD A POSTGRADUATE
QUALIFICATION.

AGE:
LARGEST GROUPS WERE 45–49 (21%),
40–44 (16%), 30–34 (15%);
10% WERE UNDER 30, 4% WERE 60+.

SECTORS:
17 REPRESENTED WITH THE BIGGEST
RESPONSES FROM EDUCATION,
PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL SERVICES,
IT/COMMUNICATIONS.

ETHNICITY:
87% WHITE, 7% ASIAN/ASIAN BRITISH,
2% BLACK/BLACK BRITISH, 2% MIXED.

ORGANISATION SIZE:
64% WORKED IN LARGE ORGANISATIONS,
17% IN MEDIUM, 6% IN MICRO, 2%
FREELANCE.

LEADERSHIP:
40% EXPERIENCED LEADERS,
25% NEW, 24% ASPIRING,
10% NOT INTERESTED.

LOCATION:
31% CARDIFF, 12% VALE OF GLAMORGAN,
10% RHONDDA CYNON TAFF,
4% OUTSIDE WALES; 55% OF HEAD
OFFICES WERE IN CARDIFF.



ABOUT THE METHODOLOGY

THIS RESEARCH RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH WALES.

RESPONDENTS WERE AGED 18+, LIVING OR WORKING IN WALES, AND VOLUNTEERED VIA LINKEDIN, EMAIL, WORD OF MOUTH, OR BUSINESS NETWORKS SUCH AS THE CBI AND LOCAL CLUBS. EFFORTS WERE MADE TO REACH BOTH LARGE AND SMALL ORGANISATIONS, INCLUDING FREELANCERS.

PERCENTAGES ARE ROUNDED TO WHOLE NUMBERS FOR READABILITY. SOME AGE CATEGORIES WERE ADJUSTED: 18–24 MERGED WITH 25–29, AND 60–64, 65–69, 70+ MERGED INTO 60+ FOR RELIABILITY.



INTRODUCTION

Leadership in Wales is changing, but the routes into leadership remain uneven. For many men, progression still looks like a pipeline: structured, supported, and relatively predictable. For many women, it feels more like a puzzle full of missing pieces, invisible rules, and extra barriers to solve before they can move forward.

This report explores those dynamics through the voices of 249 professionals in Wales. It shows how workplace culture continues to reward narrow traits (86% said leadership still favours certain personalities or groups), how wellbeing pressures hold people back (83% feared burnout, and 87% said work–life balance makes leadership less appealing), and how mentoring can make a decisive difference, yet only 10% currently have access to it.

Centred on women’s experiences but drawing on men’s and non-binary perspectives too, the findings highlight the cultural, structural, and personal barriers that shape leadership ambition and readiness. More importantly, they point to clear ways forward: building leadership roles that are flexible and sustainable, investing in mentoring that works for different career stages, and tackling the “invisible rules” that undermine confidence and access.

Ultimately, organisations can help turn puzzles back into pipelines by creating leadership pathways that are inclusive, supportive, and sustainable, and ensuring Wales’ next generation of leaders are ready to thrive.

RELUCTANCE AND RESISTANCE: REASONS FOR AVOIDING LEADERSHIP

Not all professionals aspire to leadership, and reluctance is shaped by both organisational cultures and personal choices. The survey explored why some respondents hesitate or refuse to pursue leadership roles. Three themes emerged: workplace culture, practical barriers, and personal preferences. Together, they show reluctance is less about capability and more about the structures, expectations, and assumptions surrounding leadership.

WORKPLACE CULTURE AND THE LEADERSHIP ENVIRONMENT

Respondents pointed to cultural signals that shaped confidence and belonging. The most common barriers were:

- **Leadership favours certain personalities or backgrounds (52%)**
- **Leadership rewards self-promotion over collaboration (36%)**
- **Never encouraged or supported to lead (28%)**
- **Mistrust in leadership culture (20%)**

These findings suggest barriers are less about overt discrimination and more about organisational norms. More than half felt leadership rewarded narrow traits, often favouring assertiveness and self-promotion over collaboration and inclusivity. A third believed self-promotion is disproportionately valued, while lack of encouragement (28%) and mistrust (20%) highlight the need for visible role models and inclusive practices (Cook & Glass, 2014). Subtle cultural cues such as who is promoted, supported, or trusted can powerfully shape aspirations.

PRACTICAL BARRIERS: ARE LEADERSHIP ROLES OUT OF REACH?

Respondents also cited structural obstacles that made leadership feel inaccessible:

- **Greater responsibility without enough support (56%)**
- **Time pressures conflicting with family or caring responsibilities (44%)**
- **Lack of flexibility in leadership roles (36%)**
- **Limited training and development opportunities (32%)**
- **Perceived inaccessibility for part-time/flexible workers (32%)**
- **No clear pathways into leadership (24%)**

The most cited barrier was concern about taking on more responsibility without adequate support. Respondents described a lack of mentoring, resources, and structural backup, which undermined confidence in progression. Work-life conflict also featured strongly: nearly half felt leadership would compromise caring responsibilities, and more than a third said roles lacked flexibility. Another 32% believed part-time or flexible workers were overlooked for leadership.

Unclear progression routes added to the challenge. Nearly a quarter reported no visible pathways into leadership, while others found processes opaque or overly competitive. Together, these issues reinforce the perception that leadership pipelines are narrow, demanding, and often closed to those with different working patterns (Triana, Song & Huang, 2023).

PERSONAL PREFERENCES AND VALUES

For many, reluctance reflected a deliberate, values-driven choice rather than external barriers. Four main reasons emerged:

- **Valuing work-life balance above career progression (84%)**
- **Satisfied in current role, uninterested in added responsibility (64%)**
- **No interest in managing people (64%)**
- **Avoiding office politics or conflict (64%)**

Work-life balance was the most significant factor, with the majority prioritising it above career advancement. Many expressed contentment in their current roles and felt fulfilment did not depend on leadership. Leadership was also associated with emotional labour, conflict management, and political manoeuvring, responsibilities participants wished to avoid.

These insights suggest opting out of leadership can be a rational and positive choice. It reflects priorities such as stability, wellbeing, and fulfilment rather than lack of skill or ambition. As Brue (2018) notes, women leaders with strong boundary strategies manage work-family conflict more effectively, but for many in this survey, leadership was seen as incompatible with a healthy working life.



INSIGHTS FOR ORGANISATIONS:

Across culture, structure, and personal choice, leadership reluctance emerges as a multi-layered phenomenon. Barriers are rarely about skills alone but about how organisational signals, practical realities, and personal values interact. For organisations, this means two things: create inclusive, supportive systems that make leadership feasible and attractive, and respect that for some professionals, choosing not to pursue leadership is a valid and healthy decision.

PREPARING THE PIPELINE: BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND CAPABILITY

We asked participants to share the barriers they believe are holding back aspiring and emerging leaders. Their responses, shaped by lived experience, give us a grounded view of what leadership really looks like inside organisations. One clear pattern stood out: the more leadership experience someone has, the more aware they are of the scale and variety of obstacles facing those coming through the pipeline. This perspective comes less from age and more from time spent in leadership.

When asked about the biggest blockers, both experienced and aspiring leaders pointed to the “invisible rules” of leadership, unspoken cultural signals, insider networks, and expectations that shape who feels welcome to lead. Emerging leaders, and those not seeking leadership, were more likely to highlight the emotional and mental load, which can make leadership seem overwhelming or even undesirable. The sections that follow explore these barriers in turn: first the cultural and informal rules, then the structural and organisational barriers, before moving to the personal challenges that shape confidence and capability.

THE INVISIBLE RULES OF LEADERSHIP

Cultural expectations and workplace norms strongly shape how employees feel about themselves, their work, and their prospects for leadership. Even in organisations that value formal equality, informal rules often uphold the status quo, favouring dominant groups and limiting who feels welcome to lead. Participants across all stages of leadership highlighted two major themes within

these “invisible rules”: perceptions of access and the wellbeing of leaders.

Perceptions of Access to Leadership

- Leadership still tends to favour certain personality types or social groups (86% agree)
- Leadership roles often feel exclusive or unwelcoming (78% agree)
- Organisations often undervalue alternative leadership styles (67% agree)
- Informal networks (like insider social groups) limit who gets ahead (56% agree)
- Emerging leaders struggle to find role models who reflect their background or values (55% agree)

Wellbeing and the Emotional Load of Leadership

Burnout and wellbeing emerged as some of the most pressing concerns for aspiring and emerging leaders. Many felt leadership demanded personal sacrifice, leaving little space for balance or specialist skills. Key challenges included:

- Burnout as a serious concern (83% agree)
- Expectation to overwork or sacrifice wellbeing to succeed (82%)
- Lack of confidence or self-belief preventing people from seeing themselves as leaders (87%)
- Work–life balance making leadership less appealing (87%)
- Fear of burnout or inadequate support (74%)
- Personal or health-related challenges as barriers (72%)
- Lack of mentoring or encouragement (76%)
- Few psychologically safe spaces for leaders to grow and fail (52%)

These findings show wellbeing is not just an individual issue but a systemic one. Without stronger organisational support, many aspiring leaders remain hesitant to step forward. Beyond these cultural and wellbeing pressures, participants also highlighted visible structural barriers in organisational policies and practices that restrict access.

Structural Barriers to Progression

These barriers are embedded in organisational structures, processes, and resources, and can unintentionally exclude capable people. Our 2024 research identified challenges such as childcare, flexible working, and access to mentoring (Thomas, Howard & Khan, 2024). In 2025, we found similar issues:

- 82% agreed caring responsibilities make it harder to take on leadership roles, consistent with 2024 findings.
- 72% felt part-time or flexible workers are excluded from leadership opportunities, contradicting the 2024 view that flexibility would aid progression.
- 65% believed emerging leaders lack access to mentoring, coaching, or sponsorship, up from 52% in 2024.

Together, these findings show that leadership pathways are shaped not only by informal norms but also by formal structures that can unintentionally exclude capable people. Cultural signals, workplace expectations, and organisational policies combine to create an external environment where access to leadership remains uneven. These barriers set important context: they shape the conditions in which aspiring and emerging leaders must navigate their development.

HOW PEOPLE PERCEIVE THE BARRIERS DIFFERENTLY

A recurring theme in our data was the lack of clarity and support surrounding leadership pathways. Three-quarters (75%) of respondents agreed that routes into leadership roles are often

unclear or inaccessible, while 68% felt new leaders are not given sufficient stretch or shadowing opportunities to develop their skills. For many, progression feels less like a structured pipeline and more like navigating an opaque or inconsistent process.

Alongside this, respondents highlighted issues of support and resourcing. Nearly two-thirds felt that leadership roles come with too much responsibility and not enough backing (65%), while 64% pointed to a lack of leadership development or training opportunities. A further 62% believed leadership development is underfunded or not prioritised, signalling that capability-building is too often treated as optional rather than essential. Yet not all professionals interpret these barriers in the same way. We identified three groups with distinct perspectives on what holds people back and what support is most valuable.

Barrier Maximalists (41%):

Represent the loudest call for change. Their experiences often reflect intersecting disadvantages (racial, sectoral, or generational), leaving them more likely to feel systemically blocked. They emphasise the need for reforms to culture, accountability, visibility, and access. Most common in: Health & Social Care (62%), Manufacturing (57%), Professional & Technical Services (55%).

Holistic Realists (47%):

The pragmatic middle ground. They recognise leadership access is difficult but are not cynical. Many already hold leadership roles or feel well-placed to access them. They are most responsive to mentoring, skill-building, and values-based or peer-led interventions. Most common in: Other Services (67%), Construction (50%), IT & Communications (50%), Education (49%).

Internalisers (12%):

View leadership challenges primarily through a self-help lens, often downplaying structural or cultural barriers. While this may reflect confidence or privilege, it can also mask isolation or low awareness of systemic exclusion. They benefit most from exposure to lived experiences and critical mentoring that surfaces hidden barriers. Most common in: Finance (25%), Utilities (27%).



These groupings are valuable because they highlight that one-size-fits-all interventions are unlikely to work. A strategy that resonates with Holistic Realists may miss the mark with Maximalists, while Internalisers may need a completely different approach. While this report does not explore demographics in depth, the evidence shows that organisations must tailor their leadership development and support to the different ways people experience barriers. Further analysis could help refine how best to engage with each group and ensure interventions meet their distinct needs.

BEYOND ASPIRATION: CONDITIONS AND CAPABILITIES FOR EMERGING LEADERS

We asked participants how cultural expectations, workplace norms, and personal readiness affect aspiring and emerging leaders. The results highlight both environmental conditions and individual capability gaps, showing that progress depends on addressing both at once.

Psychological safety was one of the strongest themes. Over half (52%) agreed there are few safe spaces for leaders to grow and fail. Older respondents were especially likely to report this, perhaps reflecting long-term experiences of unsupportive environments. Either way, the absence of psychological safety remains a major barrier, despite its importance for learning, innovation, and leadership development (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

Insider dynamics were also raised. Those with higher educational attainment were more likely to agree that informal networks limit progression (56%), while respondents in smaller organisations were more likely to feel alternative leadership styles are undervalued (67%). Both point to the persistence of narrow, traditional leadership norms.

Alongside these cultural and structural challenges, participants identified clear skills and confidence gaps.

Emerging leaders

struggled most with negotiation (73%), difficult conversations (37%), and managing wellbeing in senior roles (29%).

Aspiring leaders

also cited negotiation (66%) but were less able to rely on colleagues for support (24%) and more uncomfortable with difficult conversations (24%). For them, mentoring, peer networks, and structured opportunities to practise leadership behaviours could be particularly valuable.

Together, these findings show aspiring and emerging leaders face a double challenge: building the skills and resilience needed to lead while navigating environments where access, safety, and inclusion remain inconsistent.

Finally, it is clear these groups are not homogenous. While our sample of LGBTQ+, disabled, and neurodivergent professionals was too small for detailed analysis, their voices highlighted the importance of inclusive networks, accessible opportunities, and visible senior support. These perspectives underline the value of intersectional approaches that ensure leadership pathways work for all, not just the majority.

INSIGHTS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Aspiring and emerging leaders in Wales face barriers rooted as much in culture as in structure. The “invisible rules” of leadership remain powerful: many felt leadership favours certain personalities and social groups, reinforced by insider networks and a lack of visible role models. Wellbeing pressures are equally critical, with burnout, overwork, and the absence of psychologically safe spaces leaving many hesitant to step forward. Structural barriers compound these issues.

Respondents pointed to unclear pathways, limited stretch opportunities, and the exclusion of part-time or flexible workers. Mentoring and coaching remain unevenly accessed, leaving gaps in support. For organisations, the priority is clear: tackle cultural norms and invest in inclusive, flexible, well-resourced pathways that build confidence, capability, and wellbeing.



CLOSING THE MENTORING GAP

Mentoring consistently emerged as one of the strongest levers for leadership growth, yet access and uptake remain uneven. Only 10% of respondents currently had an official mentor, and while most said they would welcome one in future, many still hesitate. Concerns ranged from mentoring feeling irrelevant or too time-consuming to deeper worries about judgement, power dynamics, or negative past experiences. These barriers show that for some professionals, mentoring is not yet seen as a safe or valuable investment of time.

At the same time, the benefits are clear. Across career stages, professionals highlighted mentoring's role in building confidence, navigating workplace culture, and supporting progression. Demand is strong, but it takes different forms: some want broad, ongoing support, while others seek targeted input at critical points. By addressing hesitations alongside aspirations, organisations can design mentoring that is accessible, trusted, and flexible, turning it into a system-wide tool for developing confident, capable leaders.

WHEN MENTORING DOESN'T FIT

Mentoring is a proven lever for building confidence and progression, yet not everyone chooses it, and understanding why is vital. Our analysis highlights two themes: some feel mentoring does not align with their personal goals, while others worry about its "dark side," such as judgement or power dynamics.

Mentoring takes many forms, formal schemes, external programmes, or informal relationships. By recognising hesitations as well as aspirations, employers can design opportunities that feel relevant, accessible, and trusted, strengthening leadership pathways across sectors and stages.

Personal Goals

Table 1 shows that many professionals decline mentoring because they do not see how it connects to their goals. Among those who currently have, or previously had, a mentor, 50% felt a future mentor would not help with their objectives. Yet only 13% described mentoring as "extra work," suggesting that once experienced, it is generally valued but seen as less relevant at later career stages. By contrast, those who have never had a mentor were more likely to say they would not know what to ask (48%) or felt it would take too much time (40%).

Table 1 Why Some Professionals Do Not Want a Mentor

STATEMENT	Currently have or had a mentor	Never had a mentor
I don't think mentoring would help me with my specific goals	50%	35%
I prefer to figure things out on my own	31%	30%
I'm not sure what I'd even ask a mentor for	25%	48%
I don't want to feel dependent on someone else for guidance	19%	9%
Mentorship feels like extra work I don't have time for	13%	40%

For this group, the barrier is largely perception: mentoring feels unclear or too demanding. For organisations, the lesson is to frame mentoring more clearly, showing its benefits and offering flexible options suited to different career stages.

The Dark Side of Mentoring

While less common, worries about the dark side still deter some professionals. Those who had been mentored were more likely to worry that “mentorship doesn’t work well for people like me” (19%). Those without mentors were more likely to fear being judged or misunderstood (35%), not taken seriously (22%), or uncomfortable with power dynamics (13%).

Negative experiences were rare but significant: 6% of those with prior mentoring reported a bad relationship, while 17% of those never mentored said they had “never found someone they trusted enough.” Research shows power dynamics, when mishandled, can lead to indoctrination, hazing, or toxic practices (Coppola et al., 2021).

For organisations, the lesson is clear: mentoring must be structured as a safe, inclusive process, with trained mentors and safeguards that prioritise trust, respect, and psychological safety.

WHEN MENTORING SUPPORTS PROGRESSION

Mentoring emerged as one of the strongest levers for leadership growth in our findings. Across the survey, professionals highlighted its value for building confidence, navigating workplace culture, and supporting progression. Yet access remains uneven. Only 10% of respondents currently had an official mentor, with another 21% drawing on informal support. Strikingly, most (69%) had no mentor at all, even though the majority said they would welcome one. Among current mentees, 79% wanted another mentor, and of those who had one in the past, 81% said the same. Table 2 shows the reasons why.

Table 2 Why People Want a Mentor.

REASON FOR WANTING A MENTOR	Currently have a mentor	Have had a mentor in the past	Never had a mentor
I’d like honest feedback and constructive challenge	62%	67%	68%
I want to learn from someone with more experience	60%	64%	68%
I want help building confidence in my abilities	59%	59%	61%
I’d like support developing leadership or management skills	55%	54%	60%
I want guidance on how to progress in my career	50%	54%	65%
I think a mentor could help expand my network or open doors	47%	46%	53%
I want support with big career decisions or transitions	45%	33%	39%
I want help navigating workplace culture or politics	37%	41%	40%
I want to feel more supported and connected in my role	27%	34%	36%
I’d like help setting and sticking to career goals	25%	23%	39%
I’d like support balancing work with personal or family responsibilities	23%	24%	32%



Across career stages, the motivations for seeking mentoring were remarkably consistent. The four most common drivers were:

- **Honest feedback and constructive challenge**
- **Learning from someone with more experience**
- **Support to build confidence**
- **Guidance in developing leadership or management skills**

These form the foundation of what people look for in mentoring, regardless of whether they currently have a mentor, had one in the past, or are seeking one for the first time.

Beyond these shared priorities, however, the emphasis shifted depending on experience. Those who had never had a mentor placed greater weight on career progression (65%), networking

(53%), goal-setting (39%), and balancing work with personal life (32%). Current mentees, in contrast, highlighted mentoring’s value during career transitions (45%), while past mentees were more likely to emphasise support with navigating workplace culture and politics (41%).

Together, these findings highlight mentoring’s flexibility and impact. For those starting out, it provides access and opportunity; for those more experienced, it can provide lasting awareness of how culture and politics shape progression, and targeted guidance at critical career turning points. For organisations, the message is clear: mentoring strengthens confidence, retention, and leadership readiness across the workforce. As the CIPD notes, it is most effective when designed as a long-term approach that supports succession planning and creates learning opportunities for both mentees and mentors (CIPD, 2025).



WHO WANTS A MENTOR IN FUTURE?

Our analysis shows that mentoring needs are not uniform. As Table 3 illustrates, Foundational Support Seekers (25%) want broad, ongoing support across many areas, while Strategic Support Seekers (75%) prefer selective, situation-specific guidance. For some, mentoring is a vital lifeline; for others, a precision tool. Organisations must recognise both to design inclusive and effective programmes.

Together, these findings show mentoring is not one-size-fits-all. For some, it is the bridge that makes leadership possible; for others, it is the fine-tuning that strengthens confidence at pivotal moments. Organisations that design programmes with space for both broad and targeted support will not only widen participation but also nurture leaders who feel equipped, connected, and ready to thrive.

Table 3 Comparing Broad and Targeted Mentoring Needs

THEME	Foundational Support Seekers (25%)	Strategic Support Seekers (75%)
Approach to Mentoring	Broad, ongoing support across multiple areas	Selective, situation-specific guidance
Top Needs	Workplace culture, career progression, networks, confidence, goal setting	Career transitions, new responsibilities, specialist advice, refining leadership style
Career Stage	Often early-career	More established leaders
Barriers Highlighted	More likely to cite health/personal challenges, lack of stretch/shadowing, and narrow definitions of leadership	Less concerned with broad barriers; confident about progression and pathways
View of Mentoring	Essential for breaking into leadership; need structured, accessible schemes with clear entry points	Precision tool; value comes from senior or specialist mentors at key moments

INSIGHTS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Where mentoring is declined, the reasons are rarely about distrust. Instead, they stem from perception and fit: some professionals feel unclear about what mentoring would offer, worry about the time commitment, or recall negative experiences such as poor matches or power imbalances. These concerns highlight the need for mentoring programmes to be safe, inclusive, and clearly communicated.

Yet overall, mentoring remains one of the strongest levers for leadership growth. Professionals across career stages value its benefits; honest feedback, confidence-building, and leadership development, even if how they use it differs. Early-career or less confident professionals need broad, structured schemes that help them navigate culture, build networks, and set goals. More experienced leaders benefit most from targeted, specialist guidance at critical transitions. By addressing hesitations while widening access, organisations can turn mentoring into a powerful tool for confidence, retention, and leadership readiness across the pipeline.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this report highlight both the barriers and opportunities shaping leadership in Wales, showing that while pathways remain uneven, there are clear ways forward. These recommendations focus on tackling cultural norms that limit confidence, widening access to flexible development, and expanding mentoring to meet the needs of professionals at different career stages.

Employers, universities, policymakers, and professional networks must now work together to co-create evidence-based solutions that make leadership pathways inclusive and accessible to all. While centred on women's experiences, the lessons here apply more broadly, demonstrating the value of interventions that are grounded in data and designed with those they aim to support. Acting on this evidence will help build leadership pipelines that are supportive, sustainable, and beneficial to individuals, organisations, and the Welsh economy.

1. MAKE LEADERSHIP SUSTAINABLE AND SUPPORTIVE

- **Redesign roles to enable work-life balance, flexible working, and manageable responsibilities.**
- **Invest in wellbeing and create psychologically safe spaces for leaders to grow.**

2. EXPAND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT AND MENTORING

- **Provide visible role models, structured mentoring, and development programmes that value diverse leadership traits.**
- **Offer flexible models: broad mentoring for early-career staff, targeted support for experienced leaders.**
- **Train and support mentors, with clear processes to build trust and prevent negative experiences.**

3. ADDRESS BARRIERS WITH AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

- **Audit progression pathways to remove "invisible barriers" such as insider networks and narrow leadership norms.**
- **Strengthen inclusion for LGBTQ+, disabled, and neurodivergent professionals through research, networks, and accessible opportunities.**

Taken together, these actions provide a practical roadmap for building leadership pathways that are inclusive, flexible, and sustainable. By tackling cultural norms that limit access, protecting leaders' wellbeing, and expanding mentoring opportunities, organisations in Wales can create a leadership culture where talent is recognised, diverse experiences are valued, and the next generation of leaders are ready to thrive.



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