

From Mary Barra to Whitney Wolfe Herd: 8 leadership lessons from the world's most inspiring businesswomen

We often hear words of leadership wisdom espoused by well-known male business leaders. Some – such as Virgin founder Richard Branson, inventor Sir James Dyson and Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard – have even expounded on their leadership and management philosophies in their own autobiographies. But what about the female entrepreneurs and executives who have also achieved phenomenal success?

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Their advice and experiences are often less widely discussed. Yet they, too, can teach many valuable leadership lessons, both to the women – and the men – who dream of following in their footsteps.

For my book, *21st Century Business Icons*, I researched some of the world's most successful and inspiring businesswomen. I also interviewed some less well-known, but still extremely inspiring, female entrepreneurs who are pioneers in their fields.

These are some of the most important leadership lessons that I took away from them:

2. Have a strong sense of purpose. The world's most successful business leaders – both male and female – tend to have a huge sense of

purpose. They believe that through their work they can make the world a better place. Someone with a great sense of purpose is Nthabiseng Mosia, co-founder and chief commercial officer of Easy Solar, an off-grid solar energy company. Through her business, she wants to bring clean, accessible and affordable energy to people who are currently living off grid in the West African countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia. By doing so, she will help to drive up standards of living, improve health and safety, and create new opportunities for people to build wealth. “In the 21st century, people are walking two to three kilometres to charge their phone at a little kiosk in rural communities,” Mosia told me. “They leave their phone there for two hours and it’s charged by the one person who can afford a generator. Solar energy is the fastest, and most supportable and environmentally friendly way to electrify homes.”

3. Empower your people. Almost all businesses are nothing without their people, so leaders should prioritise getting the very best out of the people who work for them. To do this, leaders need to have a clear purpose, set a clear direction, and then give people “a lane to run in”, according to Mette Lykke, CEO of Too Good To Go, a Denmark-based foodtech business, which is on a mission to reduce global food waste. She adds: “Make sure to remove any barriers and really set people free. Then, naturally, they will want to have as much impact as they can.”
4. Live your values. US entrepreneur Whitney Wolfe Herd founded the dating app Bumble because she wanted to challenge antiquated rules around dating and give women the power to make the first move. She also wanted to address online toxicity and make a positive difference to the lives of others. So, it’s no surprise that Bumble’s values include kindness, respect and accountability – values that have helped to differentiate the brand in a crowded marketplace.
5. Create an environment of psychological safety. Rosalind Brewer, CEO of US retail pharmacy chain Walgreens Boots Alliance, believes that to

build trust, you need to show that you're willing to stand up for your people. "They've got to know that I have their back every single day," she said in *podcast with Stanford Graduate School of Business* in 2021. "I instil that in them. I stand up for them. I fight for them." She also argues that to make people really feel safe, it's important not to blame them when mistakes are made.

6. Be bold about taking calculated risks. Indian entrepreneur Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw founded her biotechnology business, Biocon, in 1978 and has said that for several years she was the *"lone entrepreneur in the Indian biotech landscape"*. She had to overcome credibility barriers as a result of her gender, youth and lack of business experience. Nevertheless, she persisted because of the huge business opportunities she had identified - opportunities that ultimately led to India emerging as a major destination for the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industry.
7. Actively seek feedback. As a leader, you shouldn't be expected to get everything right. But to find out how you need to improve, it's essential to seek out the feedback of others. This is the view of Mary Barra, CEO of US-based General Motors, who has succeeded in rising to the top of the male-dominated automotive industry. As well as seeking feedback yourself, it is key to provide constructive feedback to your team so that you can help them to grow, develop and make good decisions in future.
8. Embrace adversity. Melanie Perkins, co-founder of Australian graphic design platform Canva, was *rejected over 100 times* by investors in her quest to raise capital for her business. She made a point of learning from rejection so that every time an investor asked a hard question, or gave a reason for refusing to invest, she would revise her pitch deck to answer the question or fix the reason for rejection. Perkins has even described her determination in the face of adversity as being "like a magical superpower", saying: *"If it were easy, it probably wouldn't be worth doing."*

9. Invest in yourself. Italian entrepreneur Lucrezia Bisignani, who is based in Kenya, is transforming the world of children's entertainment through her educational cartoon company Kukua. Unsurprisingly, she's passionate about learning. As well as reading as much as possible, she has actively sought out mentors, who give her advice and support. "I'm obsessed by learning and I love learning new things," she says. "I really deep-dive into subjects, like how do we set up a world-class animation process or grow our social media presence?" Bisignani sees her ability to learn as one of her greatest strengths.

Good leadership practice

Leadership is a difficult and demanding art that requires self-awareness, commitment, a desire to understand and help others, and a willingness to constantly improve. No leader can be expected to have all the answers, all the time. By learning from successful leaders, however, we can all improve our own leadership practice - and hopefully serve as an inspiration to others.

Sally Percy is a business journalist and editor, specialising in leadership and management. She is author of '*21st Century Business Icons: The Leaders Who Are Changing our World*'.

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