



## Women & Leadership: How to Overcome Challenges & Be a Great Leader

By Pat Hammond, The Business Guild

**W**e usually start planning Flackery issues about six months before publication so we have time to fine-tune a topic and find resources.

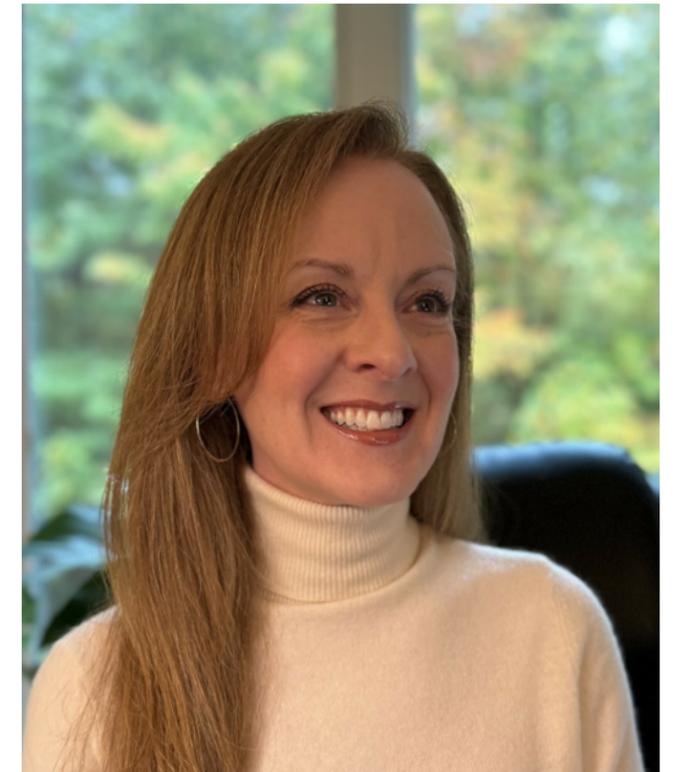
One of my articles for this issue was about women's challenges in leadership. — How to take a leadership role, juggling personal commitments, getting noticed and being taken seriously in the corporate world.

I wanted to interview someone who had worked their way through the ranks. A woman who didn't just do a good job, but exemplified the role of an outstanding leader. Someone who had experienced and understood the challenges of being a woman in the workplace.

Just when I was about to send out a general request for introductions, my husband told me that his manager's boss was leaving the company to start an executive coaching business.

Serendipity.

Jonna Ferguson was his first manager when he made the transition to telecom over twenty years ago. I didn't know her well, but she was someone I had heard about from my husband and his co-workers. She was a well-respected,



*Jonna Ferguson, Executive Coach*

approachable boss who went from an early role as a customer service manager with a small startup to a senior director at Comcast.

I knew she was a person who could, and would, give me the honest skinny about what it takes to be a good leader.

My husband passed on my request and here we are.

Jonna is an experienced, inspiring leader who has a clear view of her role as a business leader. She wasn't afraid to lead our conversation to focus on how people - all people, regardless of their gender - can step into leadership.

Rather than sticking to old tropes, she shared specific skills and mindsets that will

# Vision, transparency, and communication are the hallmarks of strong leadership

help anyone step into a leadership role.

Whether you're new to leadership or just want to be better at it, Jonna has the inside scoop on how to overcome challenges and become an outstanding leader.

**PH: What is the biggest challenge women business leaders face? — How or why is it different?**

**JF: "I don't know that women have different challenges, they just might perceive them differently."**

Setting aside situations where there is bias, many times, women miss opportunities because they hold themselves to much

higher expectations than men.

She gives the example of a person applying for a new job. "A woman will think they need to know 98% of the skills today, where a man will go in with half of the skills and have the confidence to develop the rest they need."

Other common challenges revolve around making proactive connections.

- How are you building relationships?
- Who are your advisors?
- Who can be your champion when you're not in the room?

Jonna stresses the importance of finding trusted advisors, people who have worked in your industry and aren't afraid to tell you the truth.

**PH: Looking beyond women-specific issues, what is the biggest challenge all business leaders face right now?**

**JF: "The biggest challenge right now is constant change, and trying to keep up with**



being relevant and innovating or maintaining your business."

Trying to anticipate what those things might be in 6 months, 12 months, or even 5 years down the line takes effort.

"Since COVID, people are being more intentional in their planning, knowing things will change."

She's talking about the big picture.

Jonna doesn't mention concerns about hiring, skills, or artificial intelligence. I suspect they're not such a challenge if you plan well.

**PH: Why is it still so hard for women to rise into key leadership roles?**

**JF: "You have to want to swing for the fences on change, and I think people who play it safe aren't going to get those roles."**

High-level roles undergo constant change. You're going to have to come up with strategic or dramatic methods to manage change and explain how you're going to achieve results.

You also need to sway your team — both your bosses and employees.

If you aren't able to show how you've brought about a change in the past and brought your people along with you, you're not going to get the job.

**PH: Who is more critical of a female**

## 3 career tips for leaders:

1. Foster strong relationships.
2. Embrace change and be willing to take on new roles.
3. Don't be afraid to take risks.

boss, men or women?

**JF: "I've been so fortunate that I've had male and female bosses that were supportive."**

She says while most of the bosses she's had were supportive, women leaders can be more critical because we think more alike.

"We have the same challenges and experiences if they've come from the same industry."

She's talking about bosses she's had, but what about employees?

Who is more critical of a female leader, men or women?

Jonna says it really comes down to how the leader communicates.

"If the leader doesn't take the time to position change well, or doesn't ask the team, or connect with people on an individual level, those teams are more

## Who is your champion when you're not in the room?

critical.”

### People know when you don't take ownership.

If you don't position things genuinely, you will have no respect from your team.

### PH: How can women plan their career so it leads to the type of leadership positions that open the door to senior management and C-suite opportunities?

JF: “The first thing is to think about your own values and what you want.”

A lot of people think they want an executive role, only to realize it's not what they really wanted.

The C-suite is a 24/7 role.

Go into it knowing that and how it will affect your family. Are they on board with this? Talk to them

about what their roles will be if you're not available.

Maybe put a time-frame on it.

Demonstrate a willingness to be mobile in geography and accept a variety of roles.

Most people in c-positions have very diverse backgrounds. They've worked in marketing, sales, and finance. Leap into different areas of the company so you have a full picture of the business when you move to that level.

“Most successful women I know have done that. They take on different roles and change positions every two years.”

You also need advisors and mentors who've done it who can point out your blind spots and how to overcome them.

### PH: What was your biggest win/success as a business leader?

JF: “I think it's not one thing, but great things have always happened when I've been courageous and taken a risk.”

Taking risks is scary!

“I tell myself I don't want to do this, but I know I should, and will regret it if I don't try. And every single time it's paid off. ”

### PH: Who has the hardest time breaking into leadership?

JF: “People who don't reach out to peers, or those who try to work in a silo don't do well in leadership.”

Leaders have to understand how things affect upstream and

downstream. They need to have the support of their team.

Instead of holding themselves apart from the group, they should think more about vision, transparency, and communication. These are hallmarks of strong leadership because they build trust and cohesive teams.

It's not a weakness to ask for help.

People appreciate honesty, and feeling valued.

### PH: What skills do good leaders need?

JF: “First and foremost, good leaders need to listen more than they speak. They need to really hear the feedback and take action on things that might be challenging or difficult to take action on.”

That speaks volumes about you as a leader when you move to

right something that's wrong and get involved. Show you're embracing change and lead by example.

People will accept change more easily when you can get on board, show everyone you believe in it.

You also have to be resilient.

“For me personally, being a strong person — active, energetic, and healthy — for yourself, so you can be there for the people around you. I'm better for myself when I prioritize being healthy.”

### PH: What skills do more

women need to master to be seen as a leadership candidate/good leader?

JF: “I would say start measuring things. I think sometimes women tend not to want to measure achievement and publicize it.”

Learn how to set goals and targets.

Sometimes there's a fear of failure.

It's okay if the measurement falls short. It's a process. If something isn't working, find out why and fix it.

