

LeaderMoms Use Self-Compassion As Antidote To Unproductive Guilt



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Our LeaderMom panel seeks to better understand...

...why some high-performing women leaders, who are also parents, not only survive, but thrive. We recognize both positive and challenging realities that LeaderMoms face. We collect insights and advice to help LeaderMoms learn from each other and exchange hard-won lessons faster. And we believe the wisdom these leaders offer can benefit anyone trying to be a great leader and a great parent.

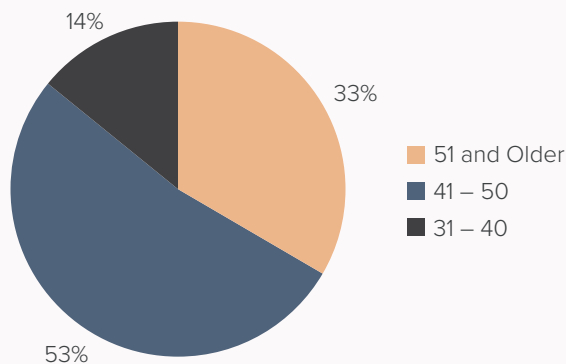
Our LeaderMoms panel currently includes over 300 women leaders, who were recognized and nominated by colleagues as meeting these three criteria:

1. **High performing/high potential leaders** (so remember, the insights below assume competence and contribution).
2. **Mothers with children at any stage** (babies, elementary school, middle school, high school, college, empty nesters).
3. **Leaders** who others believe should be giving advice on how to thrive at work and at home.

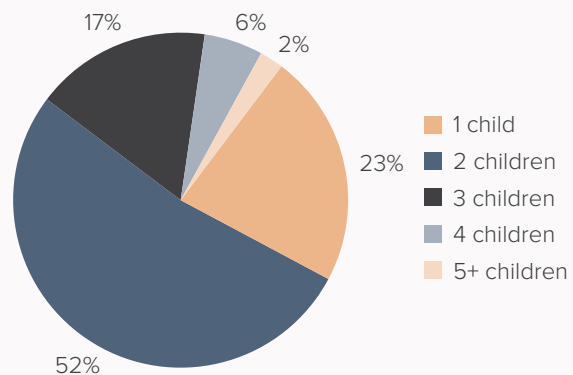
98 LeaderMoms Completed the Spring 2016 Survey

- 34% were rated Outstanding, 49% Exceeds Expectations, 17% Meets Expectations on their last performance review.
- This sample consists mostly of senior leaders with 44% holding executive-level roles, including C-Suite, President, Partner, and other executive titles.
- More than a dozen industries/sectors are represented with the greatest representation in Health Care (22%), Financial Services (16%), and Education (13%).
- 40% of the sample have kids who are 18 or older, 41% have 12-17 year-old kids, 37% have kids 6-11 years old, 13% have kids 3-5 years old, and 3% have kids under the age of 2. (Many have more than 1 child.)
- 88% are married, 10% divorced/separated, and 2% are single moms.
- 82% are White; 11% are African American or Black; 1% are American Indian or Alaskan Native; 1% are Asian or Pacific Islander; 1% are Hispanic; and 3% opted for "Other."

Age Group of Women



of Children in Household



Our previous surveys generated this core storyline:

- Being a LeaderMom can be challenging, and its benefits make it worth it.
- The overwhelming majority of LeaderMoms believe motherhood made them more effective at work, feel a great sense of accomplishment at work, are satisfied with their progress toward career goals, and are very happy with their families.
- Many LeaderMoms still struggle with guilt and gender inequity, which can influence engagement and retention.

Mission & Methods for This Study

In the Spring 2016 survey, we wanted to learn more about how LeaderMoms navigate challenges and pursue their full potential. We launched our reliable and valid Thriving Index™, which measures the extent to which people are pursuing their full potential and bringing their best to work (e.g., energetically pursuing meaningful goals and making good use of strengths, skills and abilities). To examine self-compassion, we included a rigorous measure of self-compassion that taps into self-kindness, self-judgment, and mindfulness among other components.¹ To examine the extent to which work benefits family for LeaderMoms, we used a published Work-Family Enrichment measure.² We also examined strain-based work-family conflict using a strongly recommended measure.³ Finally, we included open-ended questions so we could hear about the rich experiences and advice from LeaderMoms in their own words.

What We Learned: LeaderMoms with Higher Self-Compassion Suffer Less from Unproductive Guilt

Survey results reveal that LeaderMoms who thrive the most have less unproductive guilt and treat themselves more compassionately. It's not that these women don't have any guilt; they do. They just have a bit less, and they manage it better, which makes a meaningful difference in their ability to thrive.

Specifically, LeaderMoms who rarely feel guilty about choices they make to execute work responsibilities, are significantly more likely to:

- Have enough energy to do what they need to do at work
- Make time on most days to prioritize work
- Look forward to each new work day
- Energetically pursue goals that really matter to them
- Trust people at work enough to let go
- Believe that being a mother has made them more effective at work
- Practice self-compassion, especially self-kindness and mindfulness
- Face challenges without getting swept away by negative reactivity
- Report that their involvement in their work makes them a better family member
- Experience a sense of thriving at work

Data analysis shows that LeaderMoms with more self-compassion experience less work-family conflict and are more likely to be thriving. Digging deeper, what distinguishes the most thriving LeaderMoms is the absence of negative “mental traps” that can become habits (e.g., getting caught up in feelings of inadequacy, assuming other people are happier or do not face challenges, fixating on what's wrong, focusing on aspects of themselves that they don't like).

¹ Raes, F., Pommier, E., Neff, K.D., & Van Gucht, D. (2011). Construction and factorial validation of a short form of the Self-Compassion Scale. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 18, 2509-255.

² Kacmar, K.M., Crawford, W.S., Carlson, D.S., Ferguson, M., & Whitten, D. (2014). A short and valid measure of work-family enrichment. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 19, 32-45.

³ MacDermid, S. M., Barnett, R., Crosby, R., Greenhaus, J. Koblenz, M., Marks, S., Perry-Jenkins, M., Voydanoff, P., Wethington, E., & Sabbatini-Bunch, L. (2000). *The measurement of work/life tension: Recommendations of a virtual think tank*. Boston, MA: Sloan Work and Family Research Network.

4 Pieces of Advice: Limit Unproductive Guilt and Foster Self-Compassion

In examining verbatim comments from the 25% of LeaderMoms who are thriving the most, we found that these LeaderMoms express a resilient mindset and note habits that prevent energy-depleting behaviors and overly-negative thought patterns. Specifically, we found four main themes in their advice. The most thriving LeaderMoms do the work to cultivate high levels of self-awareness, develop ninja skills at prioritizing across their whole life, focus on growth, and attend to self care. Here's our summary of their counsel.

Advice Point #1

Cultivate self-awareness and authenticity because knowing what's truly most important to you is harder than it looks.

Advice Point #2

Develop very specific, disciplined daily practices—at both work and home—to prioritize, and to make and live with mindful tradeoffs.

Advice Point #3

Use setbacks and guilt to learn and improve, so you can succeed over time.

Advice Point #4

Factor in care for self, not as a nice-to-have; it is a must-have.

Advice Point #1

Cultivate self-awareness and authenticity because knowing what's truly most important to you is harder than it looks.

The most thriving LeaderMoms go beyond statements like “let go of other people’s expectations” and “do what matters,” and are vigilant about clarifying what is really important to them. Indeed, the higher they are on the Thrive Index, the more precise they are about what’s important to them. Because these LeaderMoms are grounded in their own values, they appear better able to fend off negative self-judgments, to field judgments from others, and to restrain pernicious social comparison. They also report consciously working from a place of strength, meaning and purpose.

*It feels like what is important to you should be obvious, but I have learned that understanding yourself, what is important to you and what your true priorities are takes commitment. Commitment is a fancy word for time and effort. **You really have to be self aware.** Invest the time to think about how you feel – ask yourself what makes you get up in the morning and what makes you want to pull the covers up over your head? Be honest with yourself and do not judge yourself by other people’s standards. It takes work to be self aware, but it is the key to everything.*

*Every child grows at his/her own pace, and that to compare ours to others is unfair to them. I took that lesson and applied it to myself, **thinking how my journey is different than anyone else’s, and only I can determine what is right...**as long as I know why I’m making the choices I am and feel confident in those, then that is how I can live my best life to be my best self. For example, I don’t try to do it all, nor do I set an expectation that I can. My family doesn’t expect that of me, and I don’t expect that of them...*

At home it is a choice between what I should be doing versus what my children should be doing to become responsible functioning adults. At work I prioritize based on where I will add the best value and use of my skillset.

Advice Point #2

Develop very specific, disciplined daily practices – at both work and home – to prioritize, and to make and live with mindful tradeoffs.

From many women in our sample, and leaders generally, we hear statements like “everything is not important” and “be ruthless about how you spend your time.” Notably, the most thriving LeaderMoms describe not only the cognitive awareness of that necessity, they share their own disciplined practices and an emotional staying power around actually doing those things. They are fierce about how they choose. It’s noteworthy, too, that many of the most thriving LeaderMoms prioritize in an integrated way (e.g., their lists include work and home, and they engage their children and partners in their process of prioritizing). This highly honed skill at making tradeoffs and letting go pushes LeaderMoms toward an authentic alignment of values and behaviors, and thus lessens their experience of excess guilt.

I continually remind myself that I am one person and cannot be all things to everyone.

You need to give up perfection, and sometimes control, to accomplish what you need to do at work and home, and recognize that that is not necessarily a bad thing. Tactically, I am a big list maker and like to write things down so I can keep myself and others accountable.

Delegation can be liberating!

My advice would be to schedule time for both and give yourself permission to manage those priorities even if others don’t appear to understand. Decide what you value and stick with your objectives.

Decide what you must do at home that is non-negotiable to you (e.g., observe holidays, attend a family/spouse/child event, and make sure you do). Decide what you must do at work and make sure to share/communicate with your family.

The parts of family time that are essential – eating meals together, reading together, talking, homework, recreation – those must be priorities. The other stuff can slip or be delegated. Commit to doing your best at the job within the time capacity that you have (around the family essentials) – it will be good enough.

I have clearly identified two non-negotiables: two activities per week that I will not miss (extracurricular lesson with child, and volunteering, each about 1 hour plus travel time). Everything else has to give sometimes in order to make those two things work. I can feel pretty good about other trade-offs when I know that I’m fully committed to those two items. I had to reach out to colleagues at work to have recurring meetings moved to accommodate, which I felt selfish about at first, but in all cases, I was met with support and approval. If I need to decline a work activity for home, I try to be open about it (not hide it or act as though I’m busy with other work) and most times my colleagues completely understand. If I have to miss a school activity, I tell my son, “Sorry, Mommy scheduled this meeting a long time ago, before we knew about the lunch party at school.” I still have major guilt sometimes, but that has helped me quite a bit.

I write out a daily list of things I want to do every morning while I am getting ready. My list includes both personal and work-related to-dos. I take this list to work and cross off throughout the day as I complete. I also keep a longer list in a notebook and at the end of the day, I copy the items from my daily list that I did not complete to that longer list which I also then actively work against. I do try to work through my lists based on what is more important (for both my family and my job) and find that things that stay on my notebook list for too long really weren’t that important.

Top LeaderMoms Excel at Prioritizing

I separate the must dos from the should dos.

I decide which has the largest and long-standing impact.

I assign A, B, C and most time I don't even look at Bs and Cs unless they become an A. I don't feel guilt about what I don't get done. I focus on accomplishment of As.

*I use the "big rocks" strategy: decide what is important in my week (across family and work) and **fit other stuff around it. And let it go!** Perfectionism is toxic and makes so many of us crazy. Embrace "good enough."*

The way that has worked for me to identify priorities is to make sure that they align with my core values. These are the things that not only demand my time and attention, they make me the happiest as a person.

Just like work, my home life needs to be planned and structured for our at-home success and peace of mind. Having good communication and sharing responsibilities is how we, my husband and I, make it work.

Each night, I think through the goals and priorities for the next day for home and work. Agree (with yourself) that they are realistic; if not, rethink them.



Advice Point #3

Use setbacks and guilt to learn and improve, so you can succeed over time.

We know from previous LeaderMom research (and, of course, from life experience) that dropping balls is inevitable. How LeaderMoms react to those slip-ups matters a great deal. The most thriving LeaderMoms are less likely to over-identify with their guilt or grip on it so hard that it takes on a life of its own. Instead, they use guilt as a prompt to restore integrity between their values and their behaviors, and to make things better the next time. Guilt is a reminder to reflect, calibrate course if needed, and to learn. The data in this study are striking in showing that LeaderMoms who thrive the most are not as hard on themselves and demonstrate more self-compassion. Without that self-compassion, people risk holding on to negative feelings and burning energy as they push for some unattainable ideal.

*I am now conscious that life is a series of transitions—there is only learning and growing. What may have been a priority at one time perhaps moves down in importance later on and vice versa. **There are some aspects of my life that are consistently my priorities.** Through reflection and soul searching, I am becoming more aware of how to keep those priorities in focus. It is not about having it all. It's about looking at what you have and asking yourself if it is what you want. If it is wonderful, great; if not, that's ok too. Now shift your priorities to make the necessary changes.*

*My ability to effectively prioritize has come through **trial and error** and trying to balance what I can in the moment. Being flexible (at work and with your family) is key.*

***Catching myself** to not always be in a rush. Enjoying the little things, for example making a date to have breakfast or lunch. Always making my son and husband feel most important – being present when at home and with them.*

*I clarify through action...**as I take action I learn, and reflect on how it unfolded personally and professionally.** Based on that, I do more of some things, less of others.*

***Sometimes you'll have balance and other days you won't; it's a lifelong challenge/adventure for every working mother.** Check in with yourself on occasion, are you keeping your priorities in focus or are you letting other demands get you off track. If you have slipped, refocus and get yourself back on track.*

Advice Point #4

Factor in care for self, not as a nice-to-have; it is a must-have.

LeaderMoms are more matter of fact about the need for renewal time to support sustainable performance as a leader, and effectiveness as a parent and partner. And they have figured out ways to factor care for themselves into their days, whereas for many busy leaders it's the first thing to go when the days get full. In previous panels, LeaderMoms counseled each other to let go of the superwoman syndrome or the martyr complex. The most thriving LeaderMoms in this study again say self-care as essential. They do not feel guilty about it. Quite the contrary, self-care curbs their guilt!

***Give yourself time to relax and recharge.** Think outside the box in terms of what makes you a good mother and a good person. Be willing to see self-care as a priority and to accept that good mental health isn't a given, it takes work.*

*For me to show up as my best self, I have to take care of myself physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. **And I do that without any guilt.***

Applying Insights Personally and with Colleagues

Knowing a good thing to do does not always translate into actually doing it. So don't under-estimate the importance of being reminded to do the things you know help you thrive. And some of the points in the data – e.g., the idea of self-compassion being a positive differentiator – may be news to you. Whatever the case, this data, and much of our work with senior leaders, show that incremental improvements make a huge difference in performance over time. You might ask yourself – or a colleague or a direct report – what makes you just a bit more effective on any of the following – and then set out to do it.

- Committing to disciplined prioritization, letting go of less important things, and making more mindful choices about where your energy goes and doesn't go.
- Factoring personal life goals into your to-do list.
- Doing work that plays to your strengths and aligns with your passions.
- Differentiating unproductive guilt from the kind of guilt that helps and guides you in staying grounded in your own values – and using it to calibrate, not to torture yourself.
- Bringing more kindness to slip-ups; talking to yourself like you would to a friend.
- Cultivating care for yourself and attention to the things that support your health and well-being.

We believe that focusing on what works will advance the retention and engagement of women leaders, for everyone's benefit.

Quick Look at Where LeaderMoms Have the Most Agreement

If faced with a problem, I am confident I can find a solution.	93%
My job makes good use of my skills and abilities.	86%
I see myself continually learning and improving.	85%
I often find opportunities to play to my strengths.	83%
I am more motivated by clear purpose than by external pressure.	81%
When something painful happens, I try to take a balanced view of the situation.	79%
I feel a strong sense of belonging and connection with the people with whom I work.	77%
When something upsets me, I try to keep my emotions in balance.	77%
I desire to move to the next level in my career.	75%

**Percentage saying Agree or Strongly Agree on the 7-point agreement scale*

About the Study Authors

Catherine Flavin

Is the LeaderMom founder. For the whole of her career, she has focused on engagement and leadership, first in politics and then in organizations. By culling practical insights from research, she enables leaders to understand their own and others values and perceptions to work together more effectively and get better results faster. By strengthening authentic bonds between leaders and followers, sharing wisdom and learnable skills, she enables leaders to deepen engagement and craft sustainable, competitive cultures where talented people want to be. A commitment to diversity and inclusion (identity, ideas, ways of thinking) underscores her work, and is coupled with an unrelenting focus on excellence and positive impact.

Catherine received her M.A. in Political Science with distinction from the University of Connecticut, where worked at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Her B.A. is in Government from Franklin & Marshall College. She also pursues and works to bring insights offered by research on emotional intelligence and positive psychology (CIPP) to her work and life. She and her husband, Steve, have three children and are living the dual-career dream in West Hartford, Connecticut.



Cathleen Swody

Is a LeaderMom researcher and advocate who specializes in analytics. Cathleen was an Associate at LRI when this study was conducted. In all her work, she takes a data-driven approach to link leader behaviors to business performance and success. To help clients engage and retain their best people, Cathleen applies her expertise in analyzing employee surveys, 360-degree performance assessments, coaching, designing training, and pre-employment tests.

Earlier in her career, Cathleen worked as a selection expert and research consultant for a Fortune 50 company. She earned her Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from the University of Connecticut. As a member of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology and the Academy of Management, and now adjunct faculty at the University of CT School of Business and Director of Assessment at Thrive Leadership, Cathleen often presents at professional conferences on topics such as leader credibility, the transition of leaders into new roles, and workplace stress. She lives in Glastonbury, Connecticut with her husband, Steve, and sons.



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