

Sustaining Success: Insights from Top Performing Leaders Who Are Also Mothers



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“How do other high-performing women approach the challenge of being a great mother and a top performer at work?”

This question came up in a coaching discussion last year, in which an up-and-coming vice president in a financial services firm talked about the mixed sense of excitement and isolation she was experiencing at work. She was the only woman at her level in her group. She loved her job and enjoyed and respected her colleagues. She had a new baby girl and now was in the midst of recreating her approach to her life at work and home, all with no role models in view. We have heard variations of this theme in countless coaching discussions. This curiosity about how and what successful women are doing led us to assemble this panel of outstanding women across our firm’s clients.

In addition, we have heard from many talented junior women that they are looking upwards for evidence that they are not crazy for pursuing a career and a family. As one manager put it, “I most often see senior women leaders without kids, and sometimes those with kids seem very stressed and at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts who have stay-at-home wives

supporting them.” This young professional was wondering if she ought to lower her professional aspirations if she has children. Instead, we hope she will take heart in the observations and advice assembled here.

The average woman in our study is 46 years old, Anglo, established at work, married, with a couple of kids at home. It is likely that she had limited role models and limited opportunity for dialogue with women in similar positions. We are gratified to see these women who have achieved success on both the work and home fronts, who are in positions to mentor, and who are willing to share their learnings with their “peers” across industries and with the women coming up the ranks behind them. We have heard some of you say you see value in this type of virtual forum, which requires limited time and effort for those participating, but which offers good potential for assembling your wisdom. We thank you for allowing us to ask questions, to listen, and to synthesize what we are hearing.

Key Findings

Many successful women are curious how other successful women approach the challenge of being a great mother and a top performer at work. Leadership Research Institute (LRI) recently surveyed 76 high-performing women who are mothers about their observations and insights. Here’s a snapshot of what we learned:

- 7 in 10 report that life is close to ideal, though nearly a third still struggle with guilt.
- The top piece of advice by far is to be very clear about your priorities and to come back to them as touchstones.
- Explicitly asking for what you need both personally and professionally is essential to getting it.
- Get really, really skilled in delegation. In fact, delegation and executive presence are top areas where women have focused on developing skills.
- Protecting home time from work intrusions is where many women leaders struggle – and putting stakes in the ground makes a difference.

Panel Snapshot

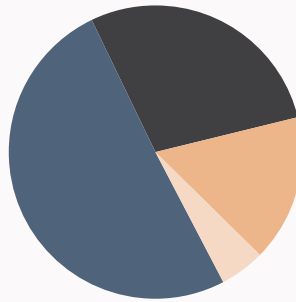
- Our current survey includes 76 high-performing women, including 20 Executives and 25 Senior Leaders.
- It is a cross-industry sample.
- Nearly 7 in 10 women believe that being a mother has made them more effective at work (68%).
- More than 4 in 5 women are satisfied with their progress toward career goals (84% favorable).
- Women feel the greatest sense of accomplishment in their job when they make good use of their skills and abilities and have a supportive manager; overall, the women in our panel are engaged and really enjoy their work.
- An overwhelming majority of women are very happy with their families (95% favorable).

Living the Dream: More Than 7 in 10 Believe Their Life Is Close to Ideal

- The majority of our panel reports a high quality of life, with 72% agreeing that their life is close to ideal.
- Nearly 3 in 5 said that if they could live their life over, they would change almost nothing (57% favorable)!
- However, nearly half of women still feel some guilt about the choices they have to make to execute work responsibilities (48%). About a third feels some guilt about choices they make to support their families (34%). For many, guilt stems from not accomplishing everything that they want to accomplish. The advice offered in the section below might help these women reduce those pangs and reach new levels of comfort with their situations and their choices.

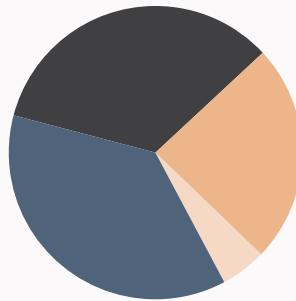
More About Our Panel

79% of the Panel Work 45 Hours a Week or More
Average Hours Worked Per Week (Mean = 53 Hours)



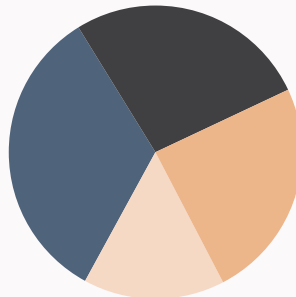
5% < 35 Hours
16% 35 - 45 Hours
28% 45 - 55 Hours
51% > 55 Hours

71% of the Panel Earn at Least Half of Family Income
Percent Contribution to Total Family Income (Mean = 70%)



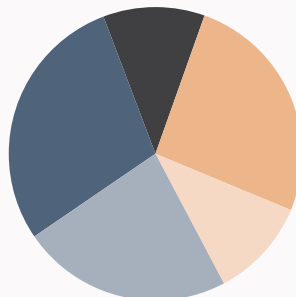
5% 0 - 30%
24% 30 - 50%
34% 50 - 75%
37% > 75%

Half of Panel Do Majority of Child Care
Percent Contribution to Child Care Responsibilities (Mean = 51%)



24% 0 - 30%
27% 30 - 50%
33% 50 - 75%
16% > 75%

Most of the Panel Are in Leadership Positions
Level of Position



12% Individual Contributor
29% Leader
12% Leader of Leaders
33% Senior Leadership Team Member
26% Executive Team Member

What Specific Tips Do These High Performing Leaders Who Are Also Moms Want to Pass Along?

1

Know what really matters to you; be clear about your priorities and come back to them often as touchstones.

Know yourself and hold your ground on what is most important to you; this is, far and away, the top piece of counsel from this group of women. The most satisfied women have identified what is really important to them, made choices and set boundaries in alignment with those, and stopped beating themselves up about things that matter less.

“No apologies! Do what has to be done, make executive decisions, and don’t make excuses (to your family or your work). It’s all about owning your own choices and being responsible to both your clients and your family.”

“Talk to your children about your work and make sure they understand what you do and the value it brings to the family and to others...”

“Try to find a way not to miss the important things in your child’s life. It helps you stay focused and in your career when you feel good about being able to be there for your kid when it really matters.”

“Cut yourself some slack. The house doesn’t always have to be clean, you don’t have to get to work at 8:00, and your kids don’t have to take part in every single activity.”

2

If you don’t ask, you don’t get — so think about what you want and make sure you get what you need, both personally and professionally.

As a high performer who delivers consistently and demonstrates dedication, you have capital to spend. These women know they add a great deal of value, so they advise others like them to be assertive about asking for what you need. Learn to negotiate. Know your limits and be willing to speak up about those. As one example, having a supportive, family-friendly employer is a baseline requirement for many. If you don’t have that, find a place that will offer it to you or negotiate a counter-balancing support at home.

“The job will always want more and more of your time, so know your limits and be willing to speak up.”

“Be very clear about what is important to you and be sure your work environment supports that. Ask for what you want. Ask for flexibility. If you deliver, then you can create what works for you.”

“Get clarity upfront on what the policies are for family situations...Also try to put in place backups for last-minute emergencies, like a missed bus or an unexpected meeting...”

“If an employer shows no flexibility and understanding about the role family plays in employees’ lives, it’s a bad match. Leave.”

“Don’t try to do everything. At work, say no to things you can’t do well. At home, don’t beat yourself up over every missed field trip or soccer game. Be honest with your kids about what you can do...”

3

Get really, really skilled in delegation.

The women in our study talk with passion and clarity about the importance of building a strong team at work and at home. Delegation is the most common area that these women have focused on building skill in by an overwhelming margin! In fact, 76% of the women on our panel have developed delegation skills compared to 46-61% for the next 10 most common strategies (see table). Maximizing the value of developing others is a critical piece of the puzzle for executive women, and this theme came through loud and clear in the written comments as well. At work and at home, sharing the work — and the accomplishments — helps to sustain everyone's motivation.

“Build a strong team. Hire professionals who are smarter than you. Do not even think you are able to do it all yourself.”

“Make sure you have a strong support network through your spouse, family and friends to help you juggle the many commitments your family has...”

“Delegate, delegate, delegate! It grows your staff's confidence and skills and improves your leadership abilities.”

“Be self aware of your strengths and weaknesses and be okay with it. Surround yourself with people who compliment your weaknesses.”

Remember to share credit for your professional successes not just at work, but at home. As one woman advises,

“Include your family in your successes and thank them for helping you get there!”

In addition, women with excellent personal support systems — including friends and family — are happier with their families. Making time to take care of yourself is essential to sustaining your energy.

“Befriend other working mothers. It does take a village.”

“Have backups to your backups. Life happens.”

“Get regular spa treatments of your choice...”

Delegation and Executive Presence are Top Areas of Focused Skill Development

More than 3 in 4 of our panel members strengthened their delegation skills as they advanced to their current role. Women who strongly agree that they benefitted from leadership development or mentoring at work were even more likely to point to delegation as an area of personal growth (81% compared to 76% overall). In addition, the women who strongly agree that they have benefitted from leadership development also point to executive presence as an area of personal growth (76% compared to 59% overall).

Which of the following, if any, have been areas where you have had to learn and grow personally as you advanced to your current role? (Select all that apply.)

Delegation or working more effectively through others	76%
Saying no	61%
Organizational skills, planning, time management	59%
Executive presence	59%
Networking; relationship-building	59%
Financial acumen	58%
Prioritizing or divesting less important responsibilities to focus on higher value work	57%
Efficiency of work processes or productivity	54%
Assertiveness	53%
Strategic thinking	51%
Stress management or composure	46%
Business development	34%
Establishing boundaries	32%

4

Protecting home time from work intrusions is where many women leaders struggle – and putting stakes in the ground makes a difference.

Being present wherever you are, at home or work, helps high-performing women be at their best. With more demands than hours, many women in our study advise others to get the most out of what different moments offer, particularly on the home front. Limiting multi-tasking and spillover of work into family time is an important area of focus for many. Making and protecting personal commitments is part of that. Above we noted that more women feel guilty about work's intrusions on their families than the other way around; being firm about finding space just for family and limiting intrusions is a logical counterbalance to the constant pull of work.

"Full, sequential focus works better than trying to multitask all the time... You have to decide what is important to you and focus on it in the moment."

"It's important to be present during whatever function you are fulfilling, whether it be work or family... When at work, 100% focus on work is critical. When at home, 100% focus on family is equally important – and the latter is likely harder for ambitious women..."

"Identify specific times you can commit to being at home – e.g., work late on weekdays if you can commit to being at home on weekends."

"Schedule family events with the same (or higher) urgency as you do work tasks."

What Do I Do When My Child is Sick?

A sick child has a way of disrupting work-family balance and many women struggle with what to say to colleagues. Here's what the high-performing women in our study advised:

- Tell colleagues that you have a personal matter or family emergency. Be honest, but also quiet; limit the details that you share.
- Don't apologize. Communicate your plans for covering your work responsibilities. Provide contact information to colleagues.
- Maintain a strong support system to assist you at home during emergencies.

"Don't expect people to say, 'That's okay' when you leave to pick up a kid. Just make sure you aren't a slacker when you are there and you help others on an ongoing basis. Be more available at other times to build goodwill that you can draw on when you need it..."

"Remain authentic; do not apologize for being a mother..."





The most ambitious women in our study work 5 hours more per week than others (56 vs. 51 hours). These highly ambitious women are also significantly more likely to say motherhood has made them more effective on the job, put their careers first when negotiating with their spouse, and are more confident that they will advance in the ranks at work.

So far, we've talked about sustaining performance in current roles. What about career advancement and ambition?

Yes, differences in levels of ambition matter for confidence and for self-perception of effectiveness. Consistent with the advice on prioritizing, knowing what you want and where you want to go, and asking for what you need along the way, make a big difference.

Our study confirms that ambition is required to reach the levels these women have achieved; nearly the entire panel of women in this study describe themselves as ambitious (98%). Of them, 48% “Strongly Agree” that they are ambitious while 50% “Agree” that they are ambitious—and while that seems like a matter of degree, it’s a difference that matters, as follows:

- Nearly 4 in 5 of the more ambitious women believed that being a mother made them more effective on the job (79% versus 60% percent of somewhat less ambitious – a significant difference).
- More ambitious women are TWICE as likely to be highly confident in achieving a higher leadership role (41% of the more ambitious women had high confidence versus 17% of somewhat less ambitious women).
- Women with high levels of ambition were TWICE as likely to strongly agree that their career usually came first compared to their spouse or partner (40% vs. 20% of somewhat less ambitious).

Nearly 3 in 4 of the Women in Our Panel are Confident that They Could Achieve a Higher Leadership Role.

It's encouraging to see that women believe they could attain a higher role if they set their sights on one. Further, if women who desire a higher leadership role saw gender parity in their organizations, confidence in future opportunities for them would be even stronger.

- The 3 top predictors of confidence in achieving a higher leadership position are: (1) happiness in progress toward career goals so far, (2) seeing gender parity within reach in the company, and (3) ambition.
- Only half of the women in our panel see gender parity within reach in their organizations today. Those differences effect how women think about their future opportunities, which LRI research has shown to be a critical factor in engaging and retaining top performers in general. Specifically, more than 3 in 5 women who definitely saw gender parity within reach at their company also expressed high confidence in achieving a promotion (63%) – 3 times higher than women who are less certain about gender parity being within reach.
- Seeing these organizational challenges could be disheartening, but it also pushes women to choose where they work with care (e.g., valuing flexible, inclusive cultures) and to be assertive about their career progression. That's what makes intentional development so critical. Women who have benefitted from development and mentoring were more than TWICE as likely to be confident in achieving a higher leadership position (47% High Confidence versus 22%). Our panel indicated that “if you don't ask, you don't get” — and that advice applies to your development. Be smart in determining where you need to grow and then find a way to develop those skills.

A View From the Executive Suite

For women to aspire to leadership roles in the top echelon of organizations, we offer these insights based on the 26% of our sample who identified themselves as Executive Team members.

- 1 Women executives cite the same challenges and engagement levels as high performers at other levels.**
 - Executives, too, strongly emphasize the need for a reliable support system and back-up childcare.
 - They also strongly recommend deciding what is really important and focusing on the work that really must be done.
- 2 Take heart because executive women actually report higher levels of family satisfaction.**
 - Executive-level women express significantly higher levels of happiness with their families than women in lower levels of the organization.
- 3 Executives, more than others, have focused on building their understanding of, and their skill sets around, financials at work.**

The message: If you aspire to senior leadership roles, make sure you have a strong grasp of financials.

 - Executives are more likely to point to financial acumen at work as a development area as they advanced (75% compared to 52% of other women).
 - Executives are less likely to mention working on networking and relationship building (45% versus 64% of other women), likely because they have developed a strong network throughout their careers.

What Advice Do These Women Offer to the Managers of Other High Performing Working Moms?

Although we asked our panel about what managers of high-performing mothers need to know, note that the top 2 themes are likely to be increasingly important to younger generations in the workforce, whether they are men or women, kids or no kids.

- 1 Focus on performance and achievement of results, not how much time is spent in the office. Support flexibility.**
- 2 Mentor, develop, and invest in the long-term success of these women. Help them identify what their ambitions and goals are. Be intentional in providing performance feedback and recognition – “here’s where you are contributing” and “here’s where you could contribute.”**

Many women in the study pointed out that when organizations and managers invest in their people and give them what they need to sustain their performance, they are rewarded with top performer loyalty and commitment.
- 3 Give employees a chance to make choices and apply the resourcefulness that got them where they are today. Treat them like you would a father in the same position. Don’t assume that mothers automatically can’t make a meeting, go on a business trip, or finish a presentation on time. Instead, ask.**

Looking Forward: Mentoring Through This Kind of Panel Research

There is not a single “one size fits all” approach to integrating a career and family. Approaches vary by person, by company, and by family. Success is defined by the values you have and the choices you are making. Some days are better than others, certainly. As you figure out what works best for you, we hope it helps to hear about the strategies and tactics that other high-performing mothers have found effective.

To facilitate an ongoing conversation, we raised the idea of future studies and an overwhelming majority of study participants expressed interest in participating. A few topic areas that we’re considering include: mastering delegation, developing executive presence, ambition, mentoring, dealing with business trips, and sustaining success during pregnancy and after maternity leave. If you have other topics that would interest you, definitely let us know. And, of course, please let us hear your feedback on this summary. Thank you!



Participant Demographic Profile

Age (Mean = 46 Years)	Race/Ethnicity	Education Level
30 - 35 / 7%	White / 86%	Doctorate (i.e., Ph.D, Ed.D.) / 4%
35 - 40 / 15%	Hispanic / 1%	Professional (i.e., JD, MD) / 21%
40 - 45 / 29%	African-American / 9%	Master's / 42%
45 - 50 / 27%	Asian or Pacific Islander / 4%	College / 29%
50 + / 23%		High School / 5%

Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Participant Family Profile

Age When Became a Mother (Mean = 32 Years)	Number of Children	Marital Status
25 and Younger / 13%	One / 29%	Single / 0%
25 - 30 / 13%	Two / 51%	Married/Partnered / 86%
30 - 35 / 47%	Three / 15%	Divorced/Separated / 11%
35 + / 26%	Four / 3%	Widowed / 4%
	Five / 3%	

Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Participant Professional Profile

Industry	Years with Current Employer (Mean = 7.8 Years)	Years in Position (Mean = 4.7 Years)
Financial Services / 20%	Less than a Year / 4%	Less than a Year / 4%
Health Care / 17%	1 -3 Years / 29%	1 -3 Years / 49%
Advertising/Marketing/Sales / 12%	3 - 5 Years / 13%	3 - 5 Years / 22%
Human Resources / 8%	5 - 7 Years / 9%	5 - 7 Years / 5%
Pharmaceuticals / 7%	7 - 10 Years / 22%	7 - 10 Years / 12%
Consulting Services / 4%	10 + / 22%	10 + / 8%
Information Technology / 4%		
Education / 3%		
Entertainment / 3%		
Other (law, non-profits, etc.) / 22%		

Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Sample and Methodology

The data for this study was collected through a confidential online survey. This survey covered the following content areas:

- Questions about engagement and satisfaction at work and at home
- Questions about balancing work and family responsibilities
- Questions about ambition, development, and career progress
- Behaviors and strategies for high performing mothers to sustain success
- Behaviors and strategies for managers of high performer mothers to enable continued success
- Approaches to best handling work interruptions such as a sick child
- Perceptions of barriers to gender parity in organizations
- Questions about current work situation and demographic background

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.



Acknowledgments

We are tremendously grateful to the women who took time out of their busy schedules to complete our survey. Many of you also nominated other accomplished women in your networks and we highly value your recommendations. We thank you for your continued participation and look forward to feedback and ongoing dialogue.

Special Thanks to Our Friends from Leadership Research Institute. The seminal LeaderMom studies were designed and conducted during our time at Leadership Research Institute (LRI). This work was encouraged by our colleagues from its early days. The fire in our bellies to do this work, above and beyond, our day jobs, was fanned by our bosses – Paul Gaske, Howard Morgan, Tony Smith – and by our amazing colleagues who were then at LRI – Steve Williams, John Gates, Sacha Lindekens, Rob Fazio, John R. Streitmatter, Irene McPhail, Rich Silvestri, Jeff Graddy, Steve Rumery, Joelle Jay and others. With deep knowledge of what exceptional leadership looks like, each of these people took the time to help us identify panelists who met the rigorous criteria of our study (very high on competence and contribution, and admired as parents). Most of all, they encouraged us to explore the idea and keep working at it.

We extend a special thank you to Jay Caldwell for his survey administration work, to Nancy Knowles for her content review, and to Katie Prosko for her administrative and editorial support. Thank you also to Terrence McNally. We are fortunate to be part of such a great team.



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