

Beyond the Ladder: Women Leaders Redefine Ambition

Chief x Harris Poll

A New Look at Women's Ambition

This fall, Chief, the most powerful membership and community platform for senior women leaders, collaborated with The Harris Poll to conduct a study on the current state of women's ambition, surveying over 1000 senior women leaders.

We spoke to a diverse group of highly experienced women including those in the C-Suite, executives, entrepreneurs, founders, fractional professionals and consultants.

The data reveals a powerful truth: *women aren't stepping back from leadership — they're redesigning it **on their own terms.***

Methodology

- This survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Chief from September 18th to October 2nd, 2025, among n=1,008 respondents. The data is not weighted.
- The sample is comprised of senior executive women and non-binary individuals with at least 15 years of corporate and/or non-profit experience, who have had a C-Suite role or a VP level or higher. Those who are no longer in an executive corporate or non-profit role had to be current business owners, entrepreneurs, founders, fractional workers, or consultants to qualify (n=126).

Experience

Current VP level or higher	n=882
Previous VP+ experience	n=126
Total	n=1,008

Current corporate role

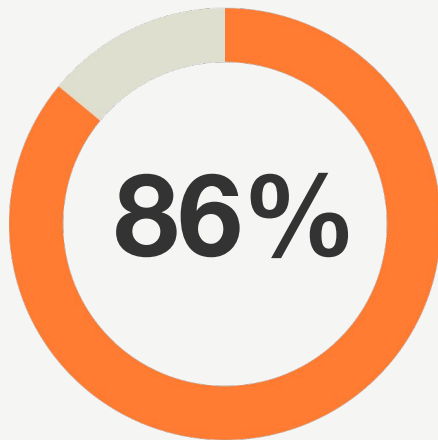
CEO	n=309
Other C-Suite	n=139
Managing Directors	n=89
VP	n=345

1. *Women's Ambition
isn't Dead, it's Evolved*

The *myth*

Senior women leaders are slowing down and not as ambitious as they once were

The *reality*: Senior women leaders are not stepping back, they're stepping into power with renewed focus and redefined purpose



Senior women leaders say they are **more ambitious now than 5 years ago**

Today, ambition looks like autonomy, influence, and flexibility in addition to financial success. And women are fired up.

Ambition looks like...

Sum to 100%

Financial success	19%
Decision-making power	17%
Time and flexibility	15%
Autonomy and agency	14%
Job title	12%
Impact and legacy	12%
Proximity to power	11%

Money,
power, time
and
autonomy
65%
(Net)

92%

agree, “I feel fired up about the professional growth I want to achieve in my life.”

She is reimagining her career around impact, innovation, and growth

The future career she is designing...

Impact + Legacy

"Create legacy through transformational leadership, develop next CEO, and transition to chairman role"

"My ideal role is mentoring young entrepreneurs through a venture fund. I want to give back by shaping future industry leaders"

Innovation + Transformation

"Lead digital transformation initiatives, expand into emerging markets, and establish thought leadership platform"

"Transform industry through innovative solutions, build sustainable practices, and create lasting shareholder value"

Growth + Autonomy

"A portfolio career blending meaningful impact, creative freedom, and flexible leadership opportunities to shape my own path"

"Five years from now, I hope to have enough professional credibility and financial strength to decisively reject meetings and tasks that are repetitive, internally draining, and do not create core value"

The Disruption

- The pandemic proved corporate loyalty and job security/stability are no longer guaranteed
- Career progression continues to be less predictable
- Women are using disruption to design careers with intention

Is a Catalyst for Opportunity

82%

agree, “The changing economy has made my current career progression less reliable, so I’m opening myself up to new pathways of progression.”

61%

of senior women leaders
believe they're at their peak
power years NOW or within 5
years from now

*Women aren't waiting
for permission, they're
leading the future on
their own terms*

2. The Bold Moves Mindset

96% of senior women leaders have made career moves that shatter the myth of “playing it safe”

The moves in the last three years...

68%

(Net)

Stepping up:

More senior role: 40%
C-Suite/CEO roles: 29%
Board roles: 23%

61%

(Net)

Entrepreneurship:

Built portfolio careers: 36%
Started a business: 24%
Fractional / consulting: 20%

45%

(Net)

Getting agile:

Venture outside of current lane: 33%
Changed Industries: 18%

26%

(Net)

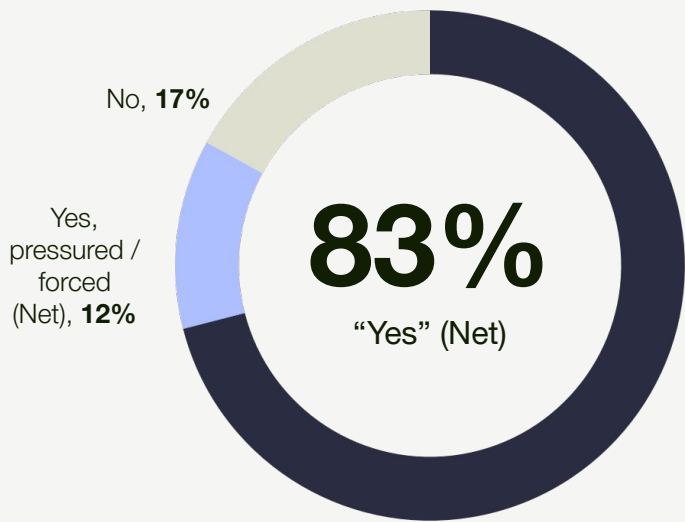
Recalibrating:

Less demanding role: 16%
Took a “power pause”: 13%

96% (Net) have taken at least one bold career move

The power of choice: 83% of senior women leaders have navigated major career transitions, 71% by choice

Experienced a major career transition in the past 5 years



Yes, and it was my choice, **71%**

Top 5 reasons motivating career change by choice:

Finding opportunities for creative growth and challenge	50%
Making a more meaningful impact	47%
Seeking better alignment with my values	45%
Wanting more autonomy and decision-making power	44%
Pursuing greater salary growth opportunities	39%

93% agree, "My career journey involves **constant reinvention** and strategic thinking"

92% agree, *“I never stop thinking about how I can do more or something different with my career”*

GROWTH

"I want a career that constantly challenges me, allowing me to learn new skills, technologies, or methods that keep me ahead"

ALIGNMENT

"I refuse to sacrifice other areas of my life that are important to me"

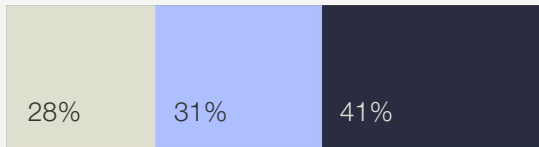
IMPACT

"I want my efforts acknowledged based on actual impact rather than simply my title"

Senior women leaders are embracing courage and getting to the agility quotient

72%

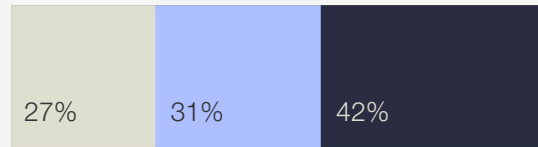
aren't afraid of **straying from the "perfect" career track**



0% 25% 50% 75% 100%

73%

aren't afraid of **breaking from corporate or title identity**



0% 25% 50% 75% 100%



Currently fear



Once feared



Do not and have
never feared

*3. The Multi-Hyphenate Era is
Now*

Multi-hyphenated reality: average senior woman leader holds 3 professional identities simultaneously

3

The average senior woman leader has three professional identities

Roles & identities held...

Corporate executive	52%
Board member	37%
Entrepreneur/Founder	27%
Advisor	25%
Consultant	25%
Investor	24%
Fractional leader	17%
Producer	15%
Coach	14%
Educator	13%
Nonprofit leader	12%
Author/Speaker	12%

"I would love to have a diverse portfolio career with established roles in decision-making and leadership"

Success is no longer linear, even in the C-Suite, it's multi-dimensional and portfolio based

Approaching the C-suite differently...

Those in a CEO/C-suite role who've recently made a corporate progression

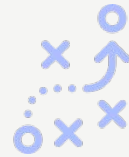
52%

Maintained a portfolio career approach
even within a corporate role

The old playbook is dead: new rules, new game, new winners

 83%

agree, “The playbook for career success I was handed 20 years ago is completely outdated”

 92%

agree, “I feel more emboldened to create my own career path than ever before”

*Networks are the New
Power Source*

94% agree, “*Being around other ambitious women leaders fuels my own ambition*”

The force multiplier effect: two thirds of women believe their problem solving is accelerated when brainstorming with other women leaders on business challenges

WHEN WOMEN COLLABORATE:

42% experience
improved problem solving 50%+ MORE

21% experience
improved problem solving by 2X MORE

3% experience
improved problem solving by 3X+ MORE

Women are
building their *own*
futures *together*

93%

agree, “**Women have the collective power to “build new tables”** (i.e., create our own centers of influence)”

Networks as infrastructure: from nice-to-have to must-haves

Stability

90% agree,

“My network of seasoned leaders is my lifeline during economic uncertainty”

Possibilities

93% agree,

“The more women leaders I know, the more opportunities I discover that align with my interests”

Values

90% agree,

“I'd rather invest in a community of women than navigate today's world in isolation”

Thank you!

CHIEF