

# How to Build a Women's Enablement Program That Works



Akamai Technologies, India and Navigati have been partnering on a learning intervention for women in leadership at Akamai Technologies, India, called Stand Tall, for the last 8 years. It's been an absolute pleasure evolving this together and because both organisations care deeply about having more women at senior roles, we decided to convert all our learnings (successes and mistakes both) into a paper that could serve as a useful, practical guide for any company that is interested in the area.

The "we" in question are Charusmitha Rao, Director, Global Talent Development, Akamai Technologies, India and Sunitha Krishnamurthi, Chief Hatter, Navigati. But whatever we're sharing here is the thinking of the much larger team at Akamai Technologies, India and Navigati so please direct credit there.

We start with a case study of the program at Akamai Technologies, India (to give you an overview of the process we followed) and then provide a set of 9 tools that you can use for all aspects of your work in this space, from getting stakeholder buy in to design to measuring effectiveness.

This paper is intended for organisations at different points in their women's enablement journey — those taking their first steps as well as those looking to deepen, strengthen, or sustain work already underway.

We hope you find it useful – if you have questions or comments, you can find us at [Charusmitha.rao@gmail.com](mailto:Charusmitha.rao@gmail.com) and [sunitha@navigati.in](mailto:sunitha@navigati.in)

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### CASE STUDY



## Designing a Women's Enablement Journey at Akamai Technologies, India

**At Akamai Technologies, India, we began with a question that many organisations eventually face: if women are entering in strong numbers and performing well, why are they not progressing into leadership roles at the same pace?**

Answering that question required that we start from a place of curiosity. The approach that worked well for us was the use of story circles. In a story circle, participants share short stories from their own work experience around a particular theme. Because people are speaking about real moments rather than abstract ideas, patterns tend to surface very quickly.

We ran story circles with two groups: women employees and managers. The stories from women helped us understand some of the internal struggles they were carrying. The conversations with managers revealed assumptions about women that often showed up casually in the way people spoke. Both sets of insights were very helpful in designing the program.

## What Women Spoke About

In the story circles with women, most of the themes around their struggles were not about capability but about how women related to themselves and to the expectations around them.

For instance, many women spoke about the difficulty of paying attention to their own needs without feeling guilty. Several described how they tended to check with everyone before making a decision, even when they knew what the right decision was. Others talked about moments where they did not question leaders even when something felt unfair - for example around maternity leave or work arrangements.

Women also spoke about:

- finding it difficult to hold others accountable without worrying about how they would be perceived
- hesitating to give direct feedback
- struggling to decide which feedback to take seriously and which comments to ignore
- finding it difficult to see themselves as senior leaders even when they were performing at that level

These stories did not come across as complaints. They were often thoughtful reflections on moments where participants wished they had acted differently or had more confidence in their own voice. There were also many stories about the external bias they experienced.

## What Came Up In Conversations With Managers

The story circles with managers revealed a different set of themes. Many leaders genuinely believed they were supportive of women. They pointed to policies such as work-from-home options, flexible work arrangements, and additional leave after pregnancy.

At the same time, assumptions about women's ambitions, availability, and leadership potential surfaced in the conversations - often in passing, and often without the speaker recognising what they were revealing. These were not positions people were defending. They were patterns showing up in the way people spoke about everyday situations at work.

The patterns that emerged from women and managers alike were consistent and specific enough that we felt confident bringing them back to the leadership team. We presented it as an experience instead of a report.

## Bringing The Stories Back To The Leadership Team

Rather than presenting these findings as a traditional report, we chose to bring them back to the leadership team in a more experiential way. Two facilitators from Navigati recreated some of the situations that had emerged in the story circles through short enactments.

Seeing these moments played out in front of them had a very different impact from hearing about them in a presentation. Because the situations were being shown rather than explained, it became harder to dismiss them or analyze them from a distance.

Several leaders acknowledged that they could see their own assumptions reflected in the situations. The need for deeper work around gender and leadership became much clearer. The case for the program almost made itself at this point.

## Getting Nominations

We had to be careful to avoid nomination bias. Managers tend to gravitate toward women who are already highly visible or who resemble their own leadership style. Criteria like 'executive presence' narrow the pool, favouring those already noticed. We worked with HR business partners to broaden nominations across functions, backgrounds, and styles. Cohort size matters too: groups of around 15-18 create enough diversity for strong peer learning without losing cohesion.

### What We Told the Nominators

#### **A shift in language helped immensely.**

Instead of asking "Who has executive presence?", we found it more useful to ask: "Who is already demonstrating leadership potential but may benefit from greater visibility, support or opportunities?"

This moved the conversation from selecting the most polished candidates to identifying women who were ready for the next stretch in their growth journey.

## Designing The Program

In all the diagnostic work, it became clear to us that the program needed to go beyond teaching skills: it had to help participants recognise existing strengths, challenge limiting beliefs, and practise behaviours that increased visibility and influence. Participants explored themes including personal power, assertiveness, influence, and career ownership, while examining the particular dynamics women often navigate at work.

A distinctive feature was structured practice. Participants worked through real workplace situations - setting boundaries, influencing stakeholders, handling difficult conversations - using experiential methods including role enactments drawn from psychodrama to rehearse new responses in a safe environment before taking them into real situations.

## Involving The Larger Organization

Early on, we made the mistake of designing the program as if it existed in isolation. As we iterated, we involved men as sponsors, mentors, and allies, and asked managers to actively support participants as they tried new behaviours. This helped position the work as an organizational priority rather than a side initiative.

Managers were asked to actively support participants and reinforce learning in day-to-day work. Leaders participated through mentoring, sponsorship, and visibility opportunities - positioning Stand Tall as a talent priority, not a standalone diversity initiative.

### What Manager Involvement Actually Looked Like

Managers were briefed before the program began and at key moments during the journey. Early conversations focused on helping them understand the purpose of the program, the kinds of challenges participants were likely to work on, and the role they could play in supporting application back at work.

#### We asked managers to commit to a few specific actions rather than broad encouragement:

Observe behavioural shifts over the course of the program

Use regular 1:1 conversations to discuss what participants were learning and experimenting with

Create opportunities to apply learning: stretch assignments, visibility opportunities, difficult conversations

Complete midpoint and reflection surveys

Reinforce experimentation rather than expecting immediate perfection

#### Meaningful involvement sounded like:

“ I noticed you spoke up differently in that meeting. How did that feel? ”

“ What support would help you practise this more? ”

“ Would you like to present this update instead of me? ”

Managers who actively noticed, encouraged and created opportunities often had a much stronger influence on whether learning translated into sustained behavioral change.

## The Outcome?

At Akamai Technologies, India, early shifts appeared in manager and participant observations well before formal talent metrics moved. Across cohorts, 89% of managers observed positive behavioural changes (stronger ownership, clearer communication, greater willingness to take initiative). Participants reported being more willing to speak up, set

boundaries, and take ownership of their careers. Longer-term, 67% of participants were retained within the same organization across the observation period, and 131 women completed the full journey across multiple cohorts over 8 years. 100% of participants across 8 years recommended Stand Tall to other women leaders.

Some of the behavioral shifts observed include:



Unanimous agreement among participants in letting go of guilt, fear, or self-criticism

89%

Experienced a boost in confidence levels

85%

Adopted self-empowering beliefs and improved their self-talk

Some verbatims:

“

**I had almost decided to quit because of personal reasons. Stand Tall is what made me stay.**

Stand Tall participant, 2019

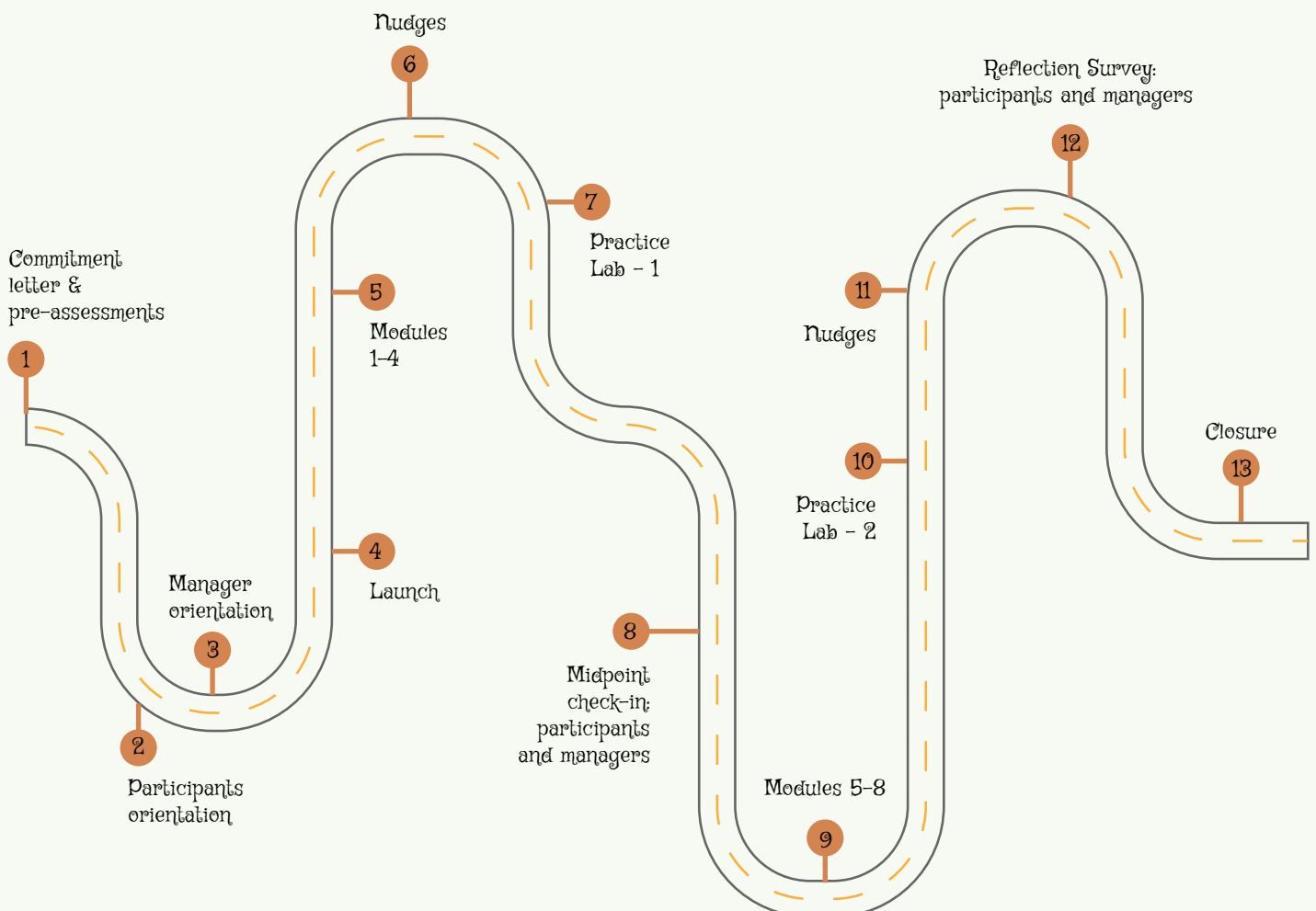
”

“

**I learnt to choose myself. Through marriage, maternity, and every moment of self-doubt that came after.**

Stand Tall participant, 2022

”



## PART II: TOOLS YOU CAN USE

- Tool 1** | Context Mapping: What's the very first thing you should do?
- Tool 2** | Story Circles: How can you collect data that moves sponsors?
- Tool 3** | Sponsor Translations: How can you reframe the issue for sponsors?
- Tool 4** | Launch Readiness Checklist: How do you know if you're ready to start?
- Tool 5** | Stakeholder Mapping: How do you engage the different groups whose support the program needs?
- Tool 6** | Design Questions: What do you need to ask yourself when designing the learning intervention?
- Tool 7** | Preparing Participants: What can you do to make sure the women come in ready to learn?
- Tool 8** | Impact Ladder: How can you measure effectiveness at different stages of the journey?
- Tool 9** | Sustaining Momentum: How do you make sure the benefits are sustained?

### Tool 1: Context Mapping

Most women's leadership programs begin with content decisions - what to teach, who should facilitate, how long the workshops should be. These are reasonable questions but the wrong starting point. Women often blossom in the safe spaces created by the intervention but despair of being able to translate these learnings into work because the system is truly limiting them. Unconscious bias in decision-making; ill-equipped managers and other systemic issues need to be accounted for.

The more useful question therefore is: what kind of environment are participants returning to after each session? Two organisations can look similar on paper and have very different cultures. Some reward visibility and directness; others value consensus and deference. A program designed without this understanding risks preparing women for behaviours the organization does not yet support.

Before designing, map two variables:

**1** The systems (which is how supportive the organization's systems and processes are in terms of things like promotion transparency, manager capability, sponsorship access)

**2** The culture (which is how inclusive the context is in terms of belonging, voice, what leadership behaviours are actually rewarded).

These two dimensions result in a neat 2 by 2 matrix and where your organization sits shapes both what you build and what else needs to happen alongside it.

	Culture: Less Inclusive	Culture: More Inclusive
Systems: Stronger	<p><b>OPPORTUNITY</b></p> <p>Structures in place but culture hasn't caught up. Participants may be structurally supported but experience resistance. Focus: culture shifts alongside skills.</p>	<p><b>ENABLEMENT</b></p> <p>The most favorable environment. Systems support growth and culture reinforces it. Programs here can be ambitious and held to a high bar for demonstrated impact.</p>
Systems: Weaker	<p><b>ISOLATION</b></p> <p>Few structural supports, limited belonging. Programs here risk raising aspirations the organization cannot yet meet. Address structural barriers before, or alongside, any development intervention.</p>	<p><b>FRUSTRATION</b></p> <p>Culture is relatively open but systems lag. Women may develop confidence but find limited structural pathways. A program alone will not close this gap.</p>

Use this map to have an honest conversation with stakeholders before design begins. Ask:

- **What behaviours are rewarded here - visibly and informally?**
- **What leadership styles tend to succeed, and which do not?**
- **What would happen if a woman from this program tried a new behaviour on Monday morning?**
- **What would need to change in our systems for this program to have lasting impact?**

Sometimes the mapping reveals something the organization is not ready to hear. If the honest answer places you in the Isolation or Frustration quadrant, that is still useful as it tells you what needs to happen alongside the program, not instead of it.

## Tool 2: Story Circles

Let's start with why a creative approach to diagnosis is important in getting stakeholders to commit. We've found that leaning heavily on data to make the case for a program does not work as it tends to pull the conversation into an analytical debate rather than a strategic one. Once numbers are presented, leaders often begin interrogating the evidence - questioning sample sizes, contexts, and whether the conclusions actually apply to their organization. The

discussion can quickly shift from the intent of the program to the validity of the research.

A progression chart triggers analytical debate - benchmarks, confounding factors, causation questions. What tends to move people is recognition: the sense that the data describes something they have seen directly. Stories create that recognition in a way that a chart does not.

### How to Run a Story Circle for Women's Programs

Story circles draw from oral storytelling traditions and participatory learning methods, and have been widely used in community dialogue and leadership development to surface lived experience and collective insight.

1

#### Setting the Context:

Start by explaining why the exercise is being done. Emphasize that the goal is to listen and learn from people's experiences rather than to evaluate or judge them. Set a few simple ground rules such as listening fully, not interrupting, and respecting confidentiality.

Spend a few minutes talking about the value of stories. Stories allow people to communicate experiences and emotions that are often difficult to capture through direct questioning. Many participants also find that sharing stories helps them see their own experiences more clearly.

2

#### Warming Up the Group

Before moving to deeper topics, warm up the group with a simple storytelling exercise. A name story works well - participants briefly share the story behind their name or a memorable moment connected with it. The facilitator should model this first. Participants can then be placed into small breakout groups.

3

#### Inviting the Stories

Once the group is comfortable, introduce the prompts you would like them to explore. For a women's leadership diagnostic, prompts such as the following often work well:

- Tell the story of a moment at work when you felt strong and confident in your role.
- Tell the story of a moment when you held back - perhaps when you didn't say something you wanted to say or when you felt you couldn't use your authority.
- Tell the story of a situation where being a woman shaped your experience at work.

Participants share their stories within their small groups while others listen and notice what stands out.

4

#### Bringing the Stories Back to the Room

When the groups come back together, ask each group to share one story that stayed with them. Encourage them to give the story a short title. You can also ask for the titles of other stories that emerged. If the goal is diagnostic, a few well-placed questions can help surface the patterns:

- What kinds of challenges do you notice across these stories?
- What expectations or beliefs seem to be shaping these situations?
- What kind of support might have made a difference?

Very quickly, themes begin to emerge. These themes provide valuable insight into the realities women are navigating and help get stakeholder buy-in and ensure that the eventual program addresses what truly matters.

### Tool 3: Sponsor Translations

One of the most useful reframes in stakeholder conversations is shifting from 'we need a women's development program' to 'here is the talent problem we are trying to solve.' These are not the same conversation, and they do not produce the same responses.

Instead of leading with the intervention, lead with the business problem. Three reframes that tend to land better with senior leaders:

#### Talent risk

- Where are we losing leadership potential that we have already invested in developing?
- What does it cost us when a capable woman leaves or opts out of progression?

#### Pipeline health

- Where does progression slow, and what do we know about why?
- What does our leadership look like in three years if current patterns continue?

#### Business capability

- What perspectives and skills are we underutilising at leadership level?
- Where does the absence of diverse leadership cost us in decision-making or market understanding?

### Tool 4: Launch Readiness Checklist

Understanding the context is diagnostic. Preparing the ground is what you do with that diagnosis.

Ground preparation is less glamorous than program design. But it's often what separates programs that land from programs that evaporate. Organisations move quickly from identifying a gap to commissioning a program - but participants who return from a development experience to

an unprepared environment find that old patterns reassert. Managers who were not briefed create no new opportunities. Leaders who endorsed the program publicly have no follow-through.

Ground preparation means answering a short set of questions honestly before launch... and being willing to delay if the answers are not yet good enough.

Before announcing or launching the program, work through these questions with HR partners and relevant stakeholders. These are not bureaucratic gates; they are honest signals of whether the conditions for impact exist.

Use this before you announce the program — not after. Work through it with your HR partner and the relevant stakeholders. It's not a form to file. It's a conversation to have.

- NON-NEGOTIABLES : Don't launch without this    ■ IMPORTANT: but can proceed with a plan to address    ■ GOOD TO HAVE IN PLACE

#### Non-negotiables

If any of these are missing, stop and address them first. Launching without them rarely ends well.

- Which senior sponsor(s) understand the program well enough to explain it to their peers — and what have they specifically committed to doing during the journey, not just at the launch?**  
A sponsor who attends the opening session and disappears is a signal, not a guarantee. Get the specific commitment before you launch.

- What is the talent or business problem this program is solving — and can your senior sponsor articulate it without you in the room?**  
If the sponsor can't explain the 'why' independently, the program will be seen as an HR initiative, not a business priority.

- Have you diagnosed what is actually happening — through story circles, data, or direct conversation — before committing to this design?**  
Skipping the diagnosis is the most common reason programs are well-received and poorly impactful.

### Important — proceed with named gaps

These won't necessarily stop a program from launching, but they'll limit its impact if left unaddressed. Name the gap and have a plan.

- How will managers whose direct reports are participating know what is expected of them — and when will that conversation happen?**  
Managers who aren't briefed create no new opportunities. The briefing should happen before nominations are confirmed, not after session one.
- What specific actions have managers committed to — beyond nominating someone and wishing them well?**  
Think: career conversations, stretch assignments, midpoint check-ins, attendance at the closing session.
- You don't need all barriers resolved before launching. But you do need someone who is willing to act if the program reveals something systemic.

### Good to have in place

These strengthen the program. If they're not there yet, build them in as you go.

- What will participants return to after each session — and are there stretch roles, visibility opportunities, or sponsor conversations already being planned?**  
The program builds readiness. The organisation needs to provide the opening.
- Are hiring and progression processes under review — or at least on the agenda for the next talent cycle?**  
Not a prerequisite. But a program running alongside an unchanged promotion process sends a mixed signal.
- Is there a follow-up mechanism for managers during the program — not just at the end?**  
A midpoint check-in or a brief theme update keeps managers engaged and reinforces that their role doesn't end at nomination.

### If you're proceeding with gaps — name them here

Gap 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Plan to address it: \_\_\_\_\_

Gap 2: \_\_\_\_\_

Plan to address it: \_\_\_\_\_

Gap 3: \_\_\_\_\_

Plan to address it: \_\_\_\_\_

Agreed to launch with these gaps by: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The questions with red borders are the ones organisations most commonly nod past in meetings. Don't. Come back to the full chapter if you need the reasoning behind any of these.

## Tool 5: Stakeholder Mapping

Leadership programs for women are sometimes conceived and approved within a small circle (typically L&D, HR, and a few senior leaders) without sufficiently involving the broader ecosystem that shapes women's day-to-day experience at work.

Managers who lead women, male colleagues who shape

team dynamics, and the women themselves all play an important role in whether the initiative translates into meaningful change.

Different audiences need different conversations. The table below maps the four groups most programs need to engage and the approach you can take.

Audience	What they care about	Watch for	Conversation approach
<b>Senior leaders</b>	Pipeline health, talent risk, business capability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agreeing in meetings but not following through</li> <li>• Treating the program as an HR event, not a talent priority</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect to concrete talent risks and business outcomes</li> <li>• Involve them early - roles beyond launch announcements</li> <li>• Use stories alongside data</li> </ul>
<b>Managers</b>	Team performance, nominations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nominating only the most visible women</li> <li>• Treating the program as time away from work</li> <li>• Low engagement after nominations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set expectations before nominations begin</li> <li>• Ask for specific commitments: career conversations, stretch opportunities, midpoint check-ins</li> </ul>
<b>Participants</b>	Growth, legitimacy of selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Why me? Am I here because I have a gap?'</li> <li>• Concern about workload</li> <li>• Uncertainty about how to explain it to peers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frame as aspirational, not remedial</li> <li>• Use alumni stories and sponsor messages before session one</li> </ul>
<b>Peers and wider team</b>	Fairness, transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Why only women?'</li> <li>• Perceived exclusivity</li> <li>• Unspoken resentment if not explained</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain the rationale openly and early</li> <li>• Invite the broader team into related conversations - build awareness of bias through pop-up sessions; inclusion nudge campaigns, reverse mentoring etc</li> </ul>

One pattern worth paying attention to is that stakeholder support often looks stronger in meetings than it does in practice. Sponsors attend launches and then disappear. Managers submit nominations and create no follow-through. Leaders endorse the program publicly but never ask about outcomes.

This is not always deliberate. It often reflects the difference between agreeing with something in principle and taking active responsibility for it.

### Get commitments that go beyond symbolic support

When a stakeholder's involvement is limited to a launch appearance or a verbal endorsement, that is a signal - not a guarantee. Before the program begins, get specific commitments where you can. Ask sponsors what they will do during the program, not just at the opening. Ask managers what opportunities they will create. Vague goodwill at the start rarely translates into active support under pressure.

## Tool 6: Ten Questions To Ask Yourself When Designing The Learning Intervention

We use these ten questions as a design check at every stage of the process. They've saved us from some of our bigger mistakes.

### 1. Are you designing a journey or a workshop?

A single event, however well-crafted, rarely shifts something as deep as how a woman relates to her own authority. Participants need time to process what they've experienced, try something new at work, and bring that back into the room. Ask yourself: does the structure give participants enough time between touchpoints to actually experiment?

### 2. Is the content specific to women?

Topics like giving feedback or managing time are valuable, but they belong in general programs. If you include them here, you're inadvertently suggesting that women need extra help with basics. Ask yourself: would a man in a similar role be expected to work on this? If not, it probably doesn't belong in a women's program. The content that does belong focuses on the particular terrain women navigate: claiming authority, setting limits, managing their relationship with their own self-doubt, and dealing with the external dynamics that come with being a woman in a leadership role.

### 3. Have you built in enough space for peer connection, not just peer learning?

Many of the women who join these programs are the only woman in their team or their leadership group. They've often been carrying their struggles privately, assuming the experience is unique to them. When they hear someone else describe the same thing, something shifts. Ask yourself: have I created conditions where genuine connection is likely? That usually means small groups, unhurried time, some laughter, and a facilitator who models openness.

### 4. Does the program hold both the systemic and the personal?

Women need to be able to name what is external and real. If the program skips over systemic bias, participants feel their reality is being erased. But if the design allows groups to stay in that space for too long, the conversation can spiral into something that reinforces helplessness. This is one of the harder facilitation challenges. Ask yourself at the design stage: does the flow actively move participants from naming the constraint to exploring what is within their reach?

### 5. Have you made room for reflective work?

Many of the beliefs that hold women back have been shaped over decades of sociocultural conditioning. You can't shift them with information. Ask yourself: where in the design do participants actually slow down and examine what's driving their behaviour? If the answer is "in the reflection exercise at the end of each module," that probably isn't enough. Reflective work needs to be woven through the journey.

### 6. Are you helping participants understand why they do what they do?

We've heard women say, in frustration, "Why do I keep doing this?" The answer is rarely a personal failing. It is usually a pattern shaped by years of conditioning, and frameworks help make that visible. When participants can see their behaviour as a pattern rather than a flaw, they find it much easier to step out of it. Ask yourself: does the design help participants understand the logic behind their unhelpful patterns? Or does it just ask them to stop?

### 7. Would participants feel psychologically safe in this program?

Women in leadership programs often arrive carrying high expectations of themselves and significant wariness about being judged. Psychological safety isn't just a ground rule you set at the beginning and leave to take care of itself. Ask yourself: what are the specific design choices we're making to protect the group? This means thinking carefully about confidentiality norms, group size, remote participation policies, and how facilitators respond when someone shares something vulnerable. Safety needs to be actively maintained.

### 8. Are participants actually practising what they're learning?

There is a big difference between understanding what assertive communication looks like and being able to use it in a difficult conversation. Ask yourself: where in the design are participants on their feet, doing the thing? Skill practice, practice labs, role enactments: these are not supplementary. They are where the real learning often happens.

### 9. Are there clear commitments that carry the learning beyond the room?

What participants do between sessions matters as much as what happens in them. Ask yourself: are there specific, small experiments participants are committing to after each session? Is there a structure, a buddy pair, a check-in at the start of the next session, a shared channel, that keeps them accountable and supported? Nudges work best when they are concrete enough to act on but light enough not to feel like homework.

### 10. Does the closing session do justice to what participants have been through?

Participants have often done significant personal work over the course of the journey, and that deserves acknowledgement. Ask yourself: does the final session create space for people to reflect on how they've changed, share that with others, and mark the moment properly? A strong closure consolidates what's been learned and sends people back into the organisation with their learning intact.

## Tool 7: Preparing Participants For The Journey

The experience of a program often begins before the first session. Participants arrive with questions they may not ask aloud: Why was I selected? Does this mean I have a gap? What will this ask of me? How you answer these questions, before the program begins, shapes how openly people engage and how much they are willing to experiment.

**Positioning the Program:** The most important signal participants receive is how the program is framed at nomination. Programs positioned as remedial even subtly don't work because participants who feel selected to fix a gap protect themselves. Those who feel chosen for an opportunity lean in. The nomination conversation, the welcome message, the presence of a sponsor voice – all of these signals accumulate before session one.

### Tool: Aspirational Positioning Checklist

**Before session one, check that the following signals are in place:**

- ✓ A senior sponsor welcome that names the program as an investment, not a correction
- ✓ One or two alumni stories about what the experience was like, what changed, what was hard
- ✓ A direct manager endorsement communicated before the participant receives their invitation
- ✓ Selective nomination language that makes it clear participants were chosen intentionally, not defaulted into the program.
- ✓ Thoughtful naming and branding that does not imply deficit

**And avoid:**

- ✗ Framing that implies the program exists because women are underperforming
- ✗ Invitations that arrive without context or sponsor backing
- ✗ Participant groups assembled without thought to cohort composition or size

The most useful pre-program touchpoint is a direct conversation with a facilitator, coordinator, or sponsor that treats participants as adults preparing for something significant.

### Participant Readiness Conversation Guide

This is not an intake form. It is a conversation. Aim for 30–45 minutes, ideally with someone the participant will work with during the program. The questions below are starting points, not a script.

#### On motivation and context

- What is happening in your work right now that makes this the right time?
- What opportunities are you preparing for or hoping to prepare for?

#### On expectations and readiness

- What would make this program genuinely meaningful for you, not just useful on paper?
- What concerns do you have about participating - time, visibility, how it might be perceived?

#### On experimentation

- This program will ask you to try things that may feel uncomfortable. What is one area where you already know you want to work differently?
- What support will you need to experiment - from your manager, your team, or this program?

#### What to do with the conversation:

- Share relevant themes (without attribution) with facilitators before design is finalised.
- Flag anyone who seems uncertain about their nomination
- Use what you hear to calibrate the opening session.

## Tool 8: Impact Ladder

Not all impact becomes visible at the same time. Some shifts appear immediately; others take months (or years) to show up in talent data. Programs that measure only satisfaction scores or only retention figures miss most of what is actually happening.

A more useful approach is to track impact across four timeframes, each capturing something the others cannot.

- Immediate feedback tells you whether the experience was credible and relevant.
- Application data, collected three to six months in, tells you whether participants are trying anything differently
- Behavioural shifts, visible at six to twelve months, tell you whether those experiments are becoming habits.
- Talent outcomes, at twelve to twenty-four months, tell you whether the organisation is responding.

### Tool: Impact Measurement Ladder

Track impact across four timeframes.

Timeframe	Level of impact	What to look for
Immediate	Experience & Relevance	Session feedback · Reflections · Recommendation scores
3–6 months	Application	Behavioural experiments · Practice stories · Manager observations
6–12 months	Behaviour shifts	Speaking up · Visibility · Ownership · Difficult conversations · Confidence
12–24 months	Talent outcomes	Retention · Career movement · Succession participation

#### A practical note on data:

- Collect manager observations at three to six months and not just at program end. Managers often notice behavioural shifts before participants do.
- Treat satisfaction scores as hygiene, not evidence. High scores confirm the experience was well-received. They do not confirm that anything changed.
- If talent outcome data is not yet available, say so. Absence of data is not the same as absence of impact but it should prompt a plan for when and how you will collect it.

## Tool 9: Keeping Momentum Alive

The period immediately after the program ends is when impact is most at risk. Participants return to the same environments, the same meetings, the same managers. Without reinforcement, newly developed behaviours tend to recede. This is rarely because the program failed; it is usually because the environment has not yet caught up.

Sustaining momentum requires creating conditions for reinforcement rather than adding more content. A few mechanisms that have worked:

- Alumni communities: a structured forum where past participants continue to share experiences, hold each other accountable, and support new cohorts. Works best when it has a light facilitation structure rather than being left entirely self-directed.
- Sponsor touchpoints: periodic one-to-one or group conversations between participants and senior leaders, focused on career conversations rather than program debrief. These signal that the organisation's interest in participants did not end with the final session.
- Visibility opportunities: deliberate offers of stretch assignments, speaking opportunities, or project leadership roles in the months following the program. The program builds readiness; the organisation needs to provide the opening.
- Behavioural nudges: brief prompts, sent every few weeks, that invite participants to reflect on a recent experience or try a specific behaviour. Low effort to send; disproportionately useful for maintaining focus between formal touchpoints.

From our experience, alumni communities often start well and fade. They require more active stewardship than most programs plan for. If you cannot resource them properly, a lighter-touch approach is more sustainable: a quarterly gathering, a shared channel with periodic prompts, rather than an ambitious structure that goes quiet.

## CLOSING REFLECTION

### What This Work Is Really For

The most memorable moment from running Stand Tall was not a programme metric. It was a participant, several months after the program ended, describing a conversation she had finally had with her manager. She had been preparing for it, and avoiding it, for two years. She had asked for a role she wanted. She had named what she needed to do the job well. And she had stopped waiting to feel ready.

That conversation did not happen because of a workshop. It happened because of the cumulative effect of diagnosis, design, practice, preparation, and an environment that was imperfectly but genuinely trying to support her.

Women's enablement programs succeed when they are honest about what they can and cannot do. They can build capability, shift behaviours, and create stronger networks.

They cannot fix structural barriers on their own, and programs that position themselves as the solution to inequity tend to obscure the harder organisational work that still needs doing.

The best programs we have seen do something more modest and more durable: they help organisations notice what has been invisible, give women the tools and confidence to navigate their environments more effectively, and create the conditions, over time, for something more systemic to follow.

This work is harder to sustain than it is to start (yes – not for the faint hearted), and the person holding it together is usually someone in L&D or HR who believes it matters more than the organisation currently does. All the very best!

