

# How to Develop Women Leaders: Interview With Author Sally Helgesen

Sally Helgesen is an author, speaker and leadership consultant. For 28 years, she has helped develop women leaders throughout the world. With Marshall Goldsmith, she co-authored the new book, [How Women Rise](#).

**Jathan Janove:** What inspired this book?

**Sally Helgesen:** For many years, I had been conducting women leadership programs using Marshall Goldsmith's book [What Got You Here Won't Get You There](#) in my work on being more intentional. However, over time, I observed that some of the behaviors did not apply to women in the same way or degree as to men. As a result, Marshall and I collaborated on a behavioral leadership template designed specifically for women.

**Jathan:** Your book identifies 12 behaviors most likely to get in the way of successful women. Which ones especially stand out?

**Sally:** Here are four:

1. Women can be reluctant to claim their achievements and uncomfortable bringing attention to what they contribute. As a result, they may expect others to notice their hard work and feel disappointed when this doesn't happen.
2. Women often tend to overvalue expertise. This approach can make them invaluable as employees but not necessarily help them get that next promotion. Being overly invested in expertise can also make women hang back from pursuing a new position because they're uncertain they are up for the challenge.
3. Women often fall into the perfection trap, trying to be precise and correct in everything they do. This can result in unnecessary effort and make it hard to delegate. It's a behavior that often serves women early in their careers but gets in the way as they move higher.
4. Research shows that women ruminate more than men, maintaining an internal dialogue about what went wrong, what they could've done differently and being hard on themselves. By contrast, men are more apt to move on from mistakes, learning from them instead of engaging in self-blame.

**Jathan:** What steps can women take to maximize their leadership potential?

**Sally:** First of all, start with one behavior, or even one part of a behavior. I recently conducted a workshop in which several of the women identified with nine of the 12 problematic behaviors. It's important to narrow that down if you want to make progress. Choose one thing and work on that until you're comfortable practicing a new behavior.

Second, cultivate allies. These are people who can give you feedback and suggestions that will help you achieve your goals. For example, you might say to a colleague, "I'm trying to be more concise in meetings. In this upcoming meeting, will you watch me and give me feedback afterward?" This approach helps you improve and advertises the fact that you're willing to change so that you're not tagged with a limiting label.

Third, let go of self-judgment as well as judging others. Focus on desired results instead.

Fourth, remember that problem behaviors also have their upside. They may be what got you where you are—but they won't necessarily get you where you want to go.

**Jathan:** For leaders who aspire to create organizations rich in diversity and inclusion, what's the single most important step they can take?

**Sally:** Scrutinize your own behavior as a leader. Chances are you are sending signals you don't intend. For example, I worked with a CEO who had a plaque on his desk saying, "Be brief, be brilliant, or be gone." He thought it clever and had no idea of how it intimidated subordinates—and he was one of the good guys! People scrutinize a leader's every word and act, so it's necessary to assess your own behavior and its impact. Also, if you manage other leaders, hold them accountable for their behavior as well.