

ASK Leading Women™

# NO CEILING, NO WALLS



*What women haven't been told  
about leadership from career-start  
to the corporate boardroom.*

SUSAN L. COLANTUONO  
CEO and Founder, Leading Women

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## Advance Praise for *No Ceiling, No Walls*

*“Women of all ages and career levels must incorporate the ideas in this thoughtful book on leadership. The future depends on women acknowledging that there is nothing holding them back from succeeding in business.”*

— VICKI DONLAN, AUTHOR

*HER TURN: WHY IT'S TIME FOR WOMEN TO LEAD IN AMERICA*

*“Colantuono’s book provides thoughtful coaching to women leaders, whether experienced or new to the workforce. Her wise and practical advice is a must-read for individuals who are determined to reach the next level of their careers.”*

— ANNE SZOSTAK, PRESIDENT & CEO OF SZOSTAK PARTNERS AND  
FORMER CHAIRMAN AND CEO, FLEET BANK RHODE ISLAND

*“Informed by her extensive experience, Susan Colantuono offers a refreshingly keen, sophisticated analysis of what women need to do to become leaders. This is a must-read book for women and men who want more women in leadership positions in America.”*

— EVELYN MURPHY, AUTHOR

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## Praise from participants of No Ceiling, No Walls live programs

*“Within a year of completing the program, I was promoted (value \$25K). I live by what you taught and have not stopped training and learning new skills to become a savvier leader.”*

*“...when my boss asked again, ‘What do you want to do next?’ I was direct. I want to manage managers, if not here then somewhere else by the end of the year. Within three months I was promoted to Director. My SVP called me into his office to tell me that he’d seen a significant improvement in my ‘business acumen’ (his words). The program was money VERY well spent!”*

*“The benefits of the program last a career lifetime. I attended three years ago and learned a great deal about power, presence and presentation. I was asked to deliver a career-altering presentation to a national audience this spring. I knocked it out of the park due to what I learned in the program.”*

*“Attending the program made me a more courageous leader. I am able to stay true to myself, while working the strategic and political networks within my company.”*

*“I am a great deal more confident. I keep the workbook next to my desk and refer to it when pondering something I can’t get my arms around. The course was an extremely positive and motivating experience. I completely refined and became more cognizant of my leadership skills.”*

*“I’m more aware of the image I’m projecting and how I was being perceived, as opposed to how I wanted to be perceived. I learned important but relatively simple ways to improve that. I have to tell you, there isn’t a day (or event) that goes by that I don’t find myself using the tools, techniques and strategies I learned in your program!”*

*“Learning to develop and use a strategic network has been invaluable. I never understood what it meant and lost countless opportunities because I didn’t feel comfortable connecting strategically with people.”*

All *ASK Leading Women*™ books offer inspiring and practical solutions for women as they move from career-start to the C-suite and onto corporate boards. When you ASK Leading Women, you get cutting-edge content, ready-to-apply tools, insights from self-assessments, and examples from successful women who act as your virtual mentors.

### **Other Books by Susan Colantuono**

*Build Your Career: Getting Ahead Without Getting Out*

*Make Room for JOY: Finding Magical Moments in Your Everyday Life*



## Dedication

With love and appreciation for the support and love of Mom and Dad without whom I wouldn't have lived a life "in the lead" of my six siblings!

To my sibs, Tom, Nancy, Janet, Lynn, Ann and David, who put up with my first-born position of leadership. Special thanks to my brother Tom, who came along 16 months after I was born to teach me about gender dynamics and who, with my brother Dave, were idolized by our Nana as "Tommy-boy" and "Davey-boy."

To my son Justin and his seven female cousins — may you each have meaningful lives and careers with no ceiling and no walls.

In memory of Nana and Gramma — feisty, proud and strong women both. And Da, who loved us all unconditionally.

I love you one and all.





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# No Ceiling, No Walls

*“We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become.”*

—URSULA K. LE GUIN, AUTHOR

This book is for you if you...

- Believe that the playing field has been leveled and women are as likely to advance as men.
- Need a mid-course correction because your career has stalled.
- Take leadership development courses from your organization and expect them to help you climb the corporate ladder.
- Wonder why a man got the job you thought you were perfect for.
- Can't believe that your excellent interpersonal skills haven't propelled you up the organization.
- Believe in the idea that *leadership* is different than *management* — and think it will help you succeed.
- Can't read a financial report...and don't think it really matters.
- Think that the path upward is deeper professional expertise.
- Think that you are paid to do your job.

- Think that *what* you say is more important than *how* you say it.
- Are at career-start and want to get off on the right foot.
- Need to know what it means to lead at the middle- or senior-management level.
- Wonder what it takes to succeed at the executive level.
- Hope to serve on not-for-profit or for-profit boards.

In other words, if you have unrealized career goals, within these pages you'll gain insights that will help you reframe your thinking and move beyond obstacles in order to achieve your goals.

### **Succeeding “Outside the Box”**

To become the best leader you can be, you will have to succeed outside the box that we've been *told* constrains women. Since the mid-'80s we've heard about the *glass ceiling* that holds women down. In the early '90s, we were introduced to the concept of *maternal walls* that fence us in with negative stereotypes about mothers' lack of commitment to careers (and appropriateness in the workplace). And we've learned about the *sticky floor* — that collection of personal weaknesses that can hold women at the bottom. In other words, we're described as boxed in — ceiling, walls and floor.

Don't misunderstand. I acknowledge the reality of the barriers. Some of our own attitudes and behaviors impede our aspirations (sticky floor); many of us encounter stereotypes that get in the way of career progress and wage equity (glass ceiling); and some women work in mother-hostile organizational cultures that block advancement (maternal wall).

But I'm sure you'd agree that being “boxed in” doesn't describe the career that you want. You might see obstacles, but you don't want to give them power. While you might temporarily feel discouraged by a bump in the road, you want to use your purpose, power and presence to overcome it. You're on a career path, and you want to take the next step.

But to take that next step, there are some things you need to know. First, any step up the ladder will depend solely on your leadership abilities. Second, that next step can seem so daunting, and perhaps even unattainable, because of the important things about leadership that you — and other women like you — haven't been told.

### **What Women Haven't Been Told...**

In 1999, I was called back to an early interest — to focus on powering the success of women by helping them become more effective leaders. Knowing that women are consistently viewed as outperforming men in most skills and attributes traditionally associated with leadership, I turned my attention to these questions:

**If we (women) are so good, why are there so few of us at the top?**

**Why aren't there more of us in senior positions when we tend to have a natural advantage in terms of interpersonal skills?**

**Why, when there's been such great advice offered in books for women, isn't our progress faster?**

Sure, there are still stereotypes that block advancement. Sure, we limit ourselves in some ways. Sure, some cultures, policies and programs put us at a disadvantage. But what if that's not all, I asked. Is there something else? Is there something that women aren't being told?

The answer is yes.

You see, nearly everything we've been told about leadership for the last 30 years has been based on research on *men*. The most outstanding noticeable attributes of successful male executives is their interpersonal skills because that is an area of weakness for most men. Career advice derived from this research states that one needs to be professionally competent and have excellent interpersonal skills to progress up the corporate ladder.

What is unsaid is that one also must have excellent **business skills**. It's the "fish in water" syndrome: A fish doesn't know it's in water until it's pulled out into the air. Leadership gurus don't realize that business skills are crucial because these skills are *assumed*. Successful male leaders tend to have strong business, strategic and financial acumen. That's not what sets them apart. What sets them apart is their interpersonal skills.

So while the traditional leadership success equation involves professional competence and interpersonal skills, there is actually a third factor — business skills — that has been "hidden." Both men and women have been told about only two-thirds of the success equation. Men either have the third part (business skills) naturally, or they are selected for management training experiences where they are coached or mentored in business acumen.

Many women aren't even aware that there is a third part to the equation. We feel so proud when our staff loves us, not realizing that those above us are asking, "Great, but what have you done for the business today?" We're blindsided when an executive says to us, "You're so nice, but are you effective?" Or we believe that if we are but our authentic selves, our career success will be guaranteed.

This discovery — that **women haven't been told about 33% of the leadership success equation and therefore are missing it in their quest for leadership success** — became the foundation of my work. I've seen the profound impact this discovery has had on the lives of hundreds of women — some of whose testimonials are in the front of this book. They have more confidence in their leadership. They network more strategically. They are seen as more credible businesswomen. They have been promoted or received more challenging assignments. They are more courageous. They present with greater impact and poise.

I wrote *No Ceiling, No Walls* to extend these impacts to women like you. In it you'll find something that will help you move to the next level — if not in your current organization, then in another. If you hope to understand leadership at the next highest level, you will. If you need to figure out how to network more strategically, you will.

If you expect to acquire business acumen, you will. If you want to enhance your leadership presence, you will.

### **...And Why I'm Telling You**

Chances are pretty good that I've been where you are. Undoubtedly, I have worked with people who are where you are. My career has spanned every organizational level. Starting as an individual contributor, I moved into a project lead position before becoming a supervisor and then manager. I left corporate life to become a solopreneur and then an executive in boutique consulting firms. Now I am CEO of my own business.

From 1974 to 1979, I was a manager and I taught management skills at Connecticut General Life Insurance Company (now CIGNA). For the next 20 years through my consulting practice, I not only held other leadership positions, I also saw leadership in action as I worked with managers and executives on complex change. I've managed multimillion-dollar global projects and worked with managers and executives of all stripes and both genders. I've worked in or consulted to small not-for-profits, large national companies and Fortune 50 global companies in nearly every industry sector. Some of my managers and consulting clients were superb leaders; others were not. Each manager or client taught me something about leadership.

Through this variety of leadership positions and relationships with those in leadership positions, I learned from my own and others' successes. I also learned from my dismal failures. Like you, I have faced challenges that are independent of gender, and I have faced challenges specific to women. I remember "Bob," who told me I was too emotional. I've pitched new business ideas — and not been taken seriously. When a male peer caught the boss' ear and reorganized the department, I ended up reporting to him. Ideas I presented were credited to men who recycled them at the same meeting. When I think of these challenges, I find myself wishing I knew then what I'm going to share with you in the pages of this book.

Through it all, though sometimes on the front burner and sometimes on the back, my commitment to women's advancement never wavered.

In the early '70s, Priscilla Kania, Pat Minicucci and I launched one of the first women's initiatives in the country in an effort to address stereotypes about women and to correct policies and programs that put women at a disadvantage in advancement and pay equity. Within 3 years, our efforts helped increase the percentage of women first-line supervisors from 9% to 23% and women officers from 3 percent to 7.5%. We caused vacant positions to be posted instead of filled in "smoky back rooms." And we helped open the first on-site day-care center in the country.

Eventually, I founded Leading Women, an organization that is 100% committed to helping women advance in their careers and helping organizations advance the women who work in them. I guide overall strategy and work with amazing women who run our local affiliates. Together we work to inspire, power and honor the success of women leaders in organizations and strengthen and align women's initiatives, networks and affinity groups.

I once read a quote that went something like this: *You are called to the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger.* I believe that Leading Women is the fulfillment of that calling for me. I believe that my profession chose me. It enables me to reach out and support the success of other women — through mentoring relationships, live presentations and resources like this book.

## **Your Role Models and Virtual Mentors**

However, you don't have to rely on just my word. Within these pages, you'll meet many amazingly successful women whose experiences and advice reinforce what it is that women need to know about leadership but haven't been told.

Many of the women who will act as role models and virtual mentors are Fortune 500 women CEOs. Why? Because climbing to the top of an F500 company is arguably the hardest career path there is — especially for a woman — and these women have made it against all odds, in vastly different industries and in many that are heavily male.

Never before have there been so many women CEOs of F500 companies. As I write, there are 15. Their successes make it an



exhilarating time for you because their diversity demonstrates that there is no one “right way” to build a career, no single mold you have to fit and no implicit message that you have to be like so-and-so or be like a man to get to the top. This variety makes it easy to learn from the experiences and wisdom of these women and others. While they don’t prescribe a single path to success, their experiences, philosophies and advice do suggest important common lessons.

Some of these accomplished women have achieved and sustained extraordinary outcomes for their businesses. For example, at the end of 2008, after a remarkable turn around, Xerox stock had a net increase under Anne Mulcahy’s reign; Avon’s had grown more than 65% under Andrea Jung; and Susan Ivey had increased Reynolds American’s by more than 20%. Although other women CEOs have not fared as well with their outcomes, they have equally important lessons to teach.

While the titles and companies of the featured women were accurate at the time their stories or quotes were written, things change, and when you read this book there might be some who have gone on to new opportunities. Regardless, they are still powerful mentors. They will give you an inside glimpse into what real women leaders do, think and feel.

If you wonder why most of the women highlighted in this book are CEOs, it’s not because I’m suggesting that you have to aspire to be a CEO (although it’s great if you do). You can learn from these women no matter your specific goals, because the skills they’ve acquired are the same skills you need to move up, no matter your current level. They’ve likely had a job at the same level as yours...and they’ve successfully moved beyond it. So, unless you’re happy right where you are (if so, why’d you pick up this book?), you can use the leadership, career and life lessons of these women to power your success.

### **Getting the Most from this Book**

*No Ceiling, No Walls* will give you a better understanding of who you are as a leader and the leader you may become. It’s not a book you will breeze through on a plane ride or finish in a weekend. It is intended to be a guide to the missing elements of leadership for women. Think

of it like a college course. Give yourself several months (a “semester,” if you will) to read it, re-read it, digest the material, complete the activities and, most importantly, practice your new skills.

The book is divided into two sections. In Part One, you’ll learn why leadership is *the* critical success factor for career advancement and you’ll learn why you should be wary of (or even ignore) much conventional wisdom about leadership. When you’ve completed this section, you will have learned 21 lessons in leadership that women are rarely told but need to know in order to be successful. To help cement these important messages, each is highlighted in the “Lessons in Leadership” section at the end of each chapter.

Part Two focuses on concrete and specific skills and knowledge you can (and must) learn in order to achieve your career goals. In particular, it focuses on areas where women are consistently perceived as underperforming men. You’ll be introduced to seven leadership skills that are seldom taught and *why* they’re essential. You’ll learn how four essential leadership skills differ by level and how to master them at every level. And you’ll discover what your positional purpose is and *why* you have to know it in order to lead.

Within the Lead ON!<sup>™</sup> sections at the end of each chapter you will find self-assessments, practical solutions and ready-to-apply tools. These will help you develop the skills you need to be a more effective leader — no matter the level you are today. They won’t guarantee success, but failing to master them *will* guarantee your career is boxed in.

By reading this book and using the Lead ON! tools, you’ll power up your leadership skills for career success. You’ll find the courage, skills and inspiration to bust out of any box that has kept you confined. Now, to create your No Ceiling and No Walls career...read on!

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PART ONE

**What Women Haven't Been  
Told About Leadership**

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## Beware of Conventional Wisdom

*“Each of us can practice what CEOs with superb business acumen do instinctively: cut through all the clutter using the universal laws of business, and select the right business priorities... Whether you’re a CEO, the head of a department, or someone just starting [her] career, you must be a leader of the business **and** a leader of people. A leader of the business knows what to do. A leader of people knows how to get it done...”*

—RAM CHARAN

WHAT THE CEO WANTS YOU TO KNOW

Several years ago when I was called to focus on powering the success of women by helping them become more effective leaders, I realized that I needed a new definition of leadership. To effectively learn a concept as important as *leadership*, women need to be on the same page.

Conventional wisdom about leadership leads people astray. There is an astonishing number of definitions of leadership — many focusing on different things. Not only is there great variance among definitions, there are problems with many of them. Let’s take, for example, the fundamental idea that a leader is someone with followers. Well, unless you’re comfortable being lumped in with Hitler or Osama bin Laden, that definition is useless and not prescriptive.

The definition that “leadership is action, not position” has its pluses and minuses. People like this definition because a management title does not a leader make. On the other hand, undisciplined or unfocused action can drive a company in circles or into the ground — and that’s not what we want from leaders. So, again it fails the useful test.

#### Women Haven’t Been Told...

That conventional wisdom about leadership leads them astray.

Or consider, “a leader is someone you choose to follow to a place you wouldn’t go by yourself.” There’s a positive aspect to this definition — we want inspiring leaders who are worth following. But, at the same time,

we don’t necessarily want to follow people to places we wouldn’t go if we knew better — consider Jim Jones and his followers’ mass suicide, Ken Lay and Enron’s demise or all the executives who inspired followers into the dot-com bust or the financial meltdown.

Some people define a leader saying what it is not — a manager. This definition doesn’t work in all organizations — not all social movements have anointed managers. And, you’ll read more later on about why this definition isn’t useful.

I couldn’t find a single definition that I felt comfortable with, so I set out to create one. Because of my 20 years practicing leadership and observing leadership in practice, I had developed a long view. And because I was refreshingly unencumbered by conventional wisdom, I could look at the concept of leadership with fresh eyes.

I began by identifying very specific criteria that my chosen definition would have to meet. It would have to be:

1. **Universal.** Apply to leaders around the globe, of all races, genders and nationalities.
2. **Ubiquitous.** Apply to leaders of all types of organizations: corporations, not-for-profits, social movements, governments, NGOs and religious institutions.
3. **Prescriptive.** Define what a leader *should* do, thereby ruling out people like Hitler or Osama bin Laden.

4. **Relevant to every level.** Conventional wisdom had long (and rightly) held that leadership can exist at any level from the individual contributor on the front line to the executive in the C-suite.
5. **Useful.** At the end of the day, someone would be able to use it to assess whether she had done a good job at leadership that day.

Next, I created a long list of people considered by many to be exemplars of leadership. Among the dozens of names on the list were:

- Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Wangari Maathai from Africa.
- From Asia, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Aung San Suu Kyi.
- From the West, several U.S. presidents, Winston Churchill, General Patton, Queen Elizabeth, Joan of Arc, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, Oprah Winfrey, Anne Mulcahy and Margaret Sanger.

Then I carefully studied this list for what it could teach me about leadership, and I learned three things:

First, to get on the list, each of the individuals had produced some outcome. They had created social change, built organizations, rescued failing organizations, empowered vast numbers to improve their lives, won wars, extended empires and more. Clearly, one element of leadership had to do with producing outcomes — in some way, changing the status quo.

Second, the exemplars of leadership behaved differently from other outcome-producers such as Hitler, Osama bin Laden and others like them. Both groups produced outcomes and had followers, but what they engaged in their followers was dramatically different. The exemplars engaged hope, optimism, egalitarianism, compassion, inclusion, passion, freedom, understanding, tolerance and the creative spirit. Hitler and others in his set engaged fear, hatred, bigotry, superiority; they used suppression and repression.

So to be prescriptive, another element of the definition had to touch on engaging the best in people.

Third, all of the exemplars drew on personal qualities that enabled them to lead effectively. For example, Eleanor Roosevelt's commitment to human rights and personal courage, Mahatma Gandhi's belief in the power of non-violence, Joan of Arc's fearlessness and faith, women's and civil rights advocate Sojourner Truth's resilience, Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai's vision and more. No two of them were exactly alike, each drew on unique strengths, attributes and beliefs. So the third element of leadership has to do with using personal greatness.

### **A New — and Useful — Definition of Leadership**

Based on this analysis, I came to understand that, simply stated,

*Leadership is using the greatness in you to achieve and sustain extraordinary outcomes by engaging the greatness in others.*

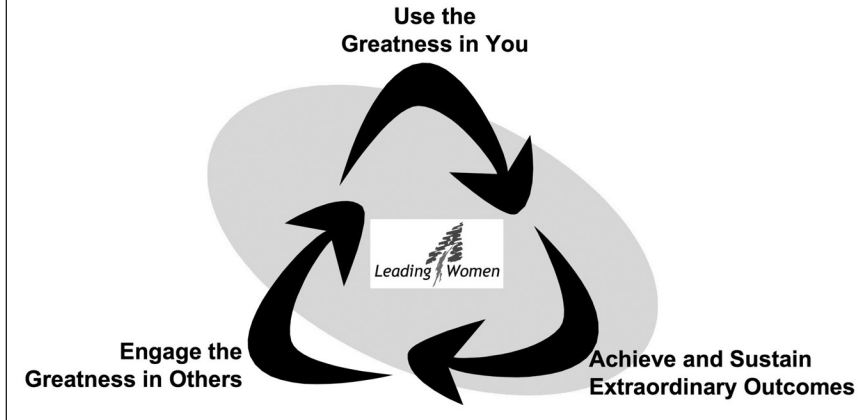
This definition works because it is prescriptive (rules out Hitler), universal (applies to anyone, anywhere), ubiquitous (works for corporations and any other entity), relevant to any level (individual contributors to executives can find guidance in this definition) and it is useful (you can guide and evaluate your leadership behaviors with it).

In the model below, you can see the three interrelated elements of the definition. Each feeds and is fed by the other. Everything a leader does can be tied to these three components. No leader can execute the practice of leadership nor fulfill the promise of leadership without all three. This is another thing that women haven't been told about leadership.



“Leadership is using the greatness in you to achieve and sustain extraordinary outcomes by engaging the greatness in others.”

Susan L. Colantuono



I’ve been privileged to share this definition and model with many women (and men) who have used it to become increasingly effective leaders and to make progress in their careers. And that’s what *No Ceiling, No Walls* is about — helping you to understand and use this definition as *your* foundation for continued career success.

### **The Missing 33%**

Once I came to this definition, I discovered an unexpected and very welcome side benefit. Not only is the definition new to women, it also highlights another thing about leadership that women haven’t been told. I call this the Missing 33%.

For years, you’ve probably heard a career success equation that touches on two of the three parts of my definition. It goes something like this:

**Professional Competence + People Skills =  
Higher Leadership Positions**

*Professional competence* is one aspect of “using the greatness in you.”  
*People skills* are one element of “engaging the greatness in others.”

You find the formula embedded in advice like this from coaching guru Marshall Goldsmith, “...*your people skills often make the difference in how high you go. Who would you rather have as a CFO? A moderately good accountant who is great with people...or a brilliant accountant who’s inept with [people]...The candidate with superb people skills will win out every time, in large part because he will be able to...lead.*”

While the traditional formula touts “superb people skills” as the make-or-break element for career success, it’s not the make-or-break element in the success formula for women. If it were, we’d already be represented in higher numbers at the top of organizations because study after study touts our superb people skills.

For us, the make-or-break element missing from this success equation is *business skills*. It’s the assumed competence and is generally unspoken in discussions about leadership. But my definition of leadership brings it into the spotlight. It’s the Missing 33%.

Assuming that professional competence also includes personal excellence, the true career success formula for women *and* men is this:

### **Professional Competence + People Skills + Business Skills = Higher Leadership Positions**

We don’t hear about it this way because, as mentioned earlier, the traditional success formula has been based on studies of men. Men are assumed to have a more natural inclination toward business skills and are more likely to be mentored or groomed for them. This explains why a recent DDI report found that at the first-line supervisor level 28% more men are in “high potential” programs, a variance that increases to 50% at the executive level!

#### **Women Haven’t Been Told...**

About the importance of business skills to their success.

When it comes to leadership and career success, women haven’t been told about the importance of business skills in leadership and achieving career goals. With its focus on achieving and sustaining outcomes, my definition of leadership, unlike others before it, puts as much emphasis on business skills (including business acumen,