



# COMPASSIONATE COMMAND: WHY WE NEED MORE WOMEN LEADERS

Jenna C. Fisher



A few times a year, I am asked to talk to MBA students at leading business schools around the country about how to manage their careers. In 2022, I was speaking to a group of undergraduate students at a leading school, and at the end of the session we held a Q&A. In addition to their intelligence, savviness, maturity, and poise, what really stood out to me was that many of the women students asked me essentially the same questions:

- “How can I make my voice heard - and make it to the top?”
- “How should I negotiate my compensation, even when it feels awkward?”
- “How many boxes do I need to check before starting my own company?”
- “Is it really possible to have both a career and a family?”

These were some of the brightest and most accomplished women from all around the world, and yet the undertones of their questions made me realize—at the age of 21—that they were already looking down the barrel towards their futures and questioning whether they could “have it all,” whether they could succeed when they looked at how few women were at the top table today, and when they had seen so many talented women permanently step out of the labor force.

After everything that women have accomplished and the myriad ways in which things are so much better for us than they were only a generation ago, we still have some of the most talented and fiercest women questioning if they can rise to the highest ranks within corporations.

It struck me that businesses and society are failing this generation of young women. We are so far from where we need to be in terms of gender parity.

As a partner at one of the top global leadership advisory firms, I have had a mission to get women to 50-50 representation at the highest levels of management and boards in corporate America, but it's not happening nearly fast enough. In the United States, women comprise 51% of the population; 47% of the workforce; and 70% of high school valedictorians; and yet (at the time of writing) Russell Reynolds Associates' research shows that only 9% of CEOs in the largest 100 companies in the S&P500 index are women.

There are, in fact, about the same number of women CEOs in the S&P500 as there are CEOs named James or Michael. Over my 20-plus-year career, I have met thousands of eminently qualified and intelligent women with long lists of educational and career accomplishments who have struggled to make it all the way to the C-suite. It is a loss not just for these individuals, but for society as a whole.

So how do we get there?

**We still have some of the most talented and fiercest women questioning if they can rise to the highest ranks within corporations.**

As I thought more about the Q&A session with the undergrads, I realized that while some of the answers to these students' questions hadn't changed since I was myself a college student, some of them had—and drastically.

It made me think of a conversation I'd had with Christa Quarles in September 2020, a few months into the global Covid-19 pandemic that, as I write this, is still playing out around the world. Christa had been recently appointed as CEO of the global software company Alludo. She was a client-turned-friend who also happens to be a neighbor of mine in the suburbs of San Francisco. On a scheduled break between Zoom calls, we decided to throw on our sneakers and take a power “walk and talk,” to discuss my concepts for this book. It was a welcome chance to check in with each other in person.

At this point the dramatic shift from office life to working remotely from home was still relatively new. Christa and I started comparing notes about how our professional lives had changed. Suddenly we had a luxury we'd craved for years: time.

As working moms who were no longer spending two hours a day commuting in our cars to and from the office, we were able to see our children more and have family dinners together for the first time. And although I was working intensely, bouncing non-stop from meeting to meeting virtually, networking and writing reports from my craft-room-turned-home-office, I was getting more work done than ever.

It goes without saying that the pandemic resulted in untold personal and economic losses for millions. But some light was emerging from the darkness, and we were just beginning to see it.

“Christa, I can’t imagine ever going back to the old way of working. I am getting a lot more accomplished than when I was sitting at my office desk. Am I crazy to think that this should be the new way forward?” (Little did I realize then that it would be more than two years before I would return to the office.)

“3,000 percent!” said Christa. “The pre-2019 office is a relic. Why would anyone ever want to go back to that artifact of a factory organization? In a digital economy we can talk to someone face-to-face from anywhere, we know how many deal closures you’ve made, and none of it is predicated on whether you did it inside an office. Who cares if you’re picking your kids up from school at three o’clock when you’re crushing it!”

This mindset was a complete change for Christa. Charismatic, with an acute intellect, a razor-sharp sense of humor, and endless reserves of energy, she’d ascended to the highest ranks in the male-dominated software industry, and before the pandemic had been attending every function, event, and leadership forum in her industry, flying across the country and around the world to meet customers and colleagues.

“If you’d asked me in 2019 whether I would ever become an advocate for remote work, I would have absolutely said no. I’ve got to corner that person in the elevator. I’ve got to stop people at the coffee machine. Being an in-person leader was part of my special sauce. I loved getting in front of that town hall meeting. I fed off the energy of it all.”

Long before the lockdowns, many Alludo employees were already working hybrid or remotely in different locations across the world, from Ottawa to Tokyo, to Frankfurt, to Austin and Seattle. But it was an ad hoc approach that left some on the sidelines. The pandemic changed that, establishing a new normal that created the opportunity for a more inclusive work environment that took into account different approaches.



The tech industry has historically been a man's world where the most vocal—or perhaps the tallest—get recognized. But Christa began to appreciate the individuals who were quietly getting it done.

“Do you think the universal remote work situation was empowering to certain personality types who may have been overlooked in the past?” I asked her. “And to women in particular?”

**If these dynamic times have taught us nothing else, it's that our well-being as workers and future corporate leaders matters.**

“The thing about remote meetings with larger groups is that everybody's Zoom box is the same size,” Christa observed. “It enables you to go around the room, or I should say the screen, and ask people's opinions. It engenders a kind of equality. Everyone's viewpoint gets represented and it becomes much harder for a few people to dominate.”

As Christa spoke, it occurred to me that we were in a rare moment in history where we could completely reset the workplace culture in a way that would be more inclusive. We were undergoing the biggest shift in how we work since the Industrial Revolution. And with more leaders like Christa at the helm who were reshaping organizations to allow for more multidimensional ways of working, communicating, and thinking, a long-overdue change could be here to stay.

Through the forced circumstances of the lockdown, many of us were given our first delicious taste of what a healthy work-life balance could be. It showed us that this way of operating wasn't just new, but better—and it could potentially become the launch pad for more women to reach the highest level of corporate leadership.

This was our chance to finally break through, in what Arianna Huffington described as a “Third Women’s Revolution: The first one was giving us the vote; the second was giving us access to all jobs in the top of every profession; and the third one is women saying, ‘We don’t just want to be at the top of the world, we want to change the world, because the way the world has been designed is not working.’”

Fundamental to this revolution is a workplace environment that’s more authentic and welcoming to all genders, where leaders empower and enable the best from individuals, whether they are new moms pumping breast milk at home before jumping onto the next client call, a young, newly “out” gay Black man struggling to find his voice in large group meetings, or a “sandwich-generation” person in need of a more flexible schedule to care for an aging parent with dementia.

It is about taking into consideration the life circumstances of an individual—male, female, or non-binary—and giving the trust and work style options necessary to bring out their best as professionals and create a pathway for them to rise in the organization. In short, it is nothing less than a transformation of the world and its social values to welcome all genders and backgrounds.

But it’s not just the changing working practices that made me optimistic for women. The global pandemic helped to rewrite the rules on what it means to be a great leader.

The seeds of this change were planted long before Covid-19 hit, but there is no doubt that the pandemic accelerated the shift.

## Fundamental to this revolution is a workplace environment that's more authentic and welcoming to all genders, where leaders empower and enable the best from individuals

We are living through a moment in history when the old definitions of success and what it takes to lead are giving way to something that is altogether more collaborative and more inclusive.

Gone are the days of the "hero CEO," who mimicked a wartime general to exercise absolute authority and control. Today's world is a much more complex world, as events like Covid-19, and issues like sustainability and digital disruption, force every business to rethink their business models, their operations, and yes, their leaders.

We are seeing a demand for leaders who cultivate a kind of compassionate command. A study of thousands of direct reports published in the Harvard Business Review found that, during a time of crisis especially, there was a strong desire to be led by individuals



who could “pivot and learn new skills; who emphasize employee development even when times are tough; who display honesty and integrity; and who are sensitive and understanding of the stress, anxiety, and frustration” that people were feeling, listening without judgment or recrimination.

This is good news for women. Among top leadership characteristics, according to Pew Research, women were perceived to be more compassionate, empathetic, and able to reach compromise. Women also rated higher in terms of resilience, integrity, taking initiative, and showing a willingness to learn—traits highly valued not just in a crisis, but in the new and inclusive workplace that must define the post-pandemic world.

For example, an analysis of 122 speeches of men and women leaders during the pandemic also showed that women were more likely to use terms of compassion, reassurance, and unity, compared with war analogies and threats to keep their populations in line. The gentler, more sober messaging worked.

Studies even found that countries with women leaders during the pandemic had better outcomes, including fewer Covid cases and deaths than nations led by men, while states in the U.S. with women governors fared better in terms of Covid deaths than those with men holding that office.

So the evidence is in that with traits like compassion, empathy, the ability to listen, mentor, nurture, and collaborate, it can be argued that women leaders have certain advantages.

That is not to say men can’t also possess these qualities, or that women don’t possess so-called male traits. Great leadership surpasses gender. But there’s a reason why more male C-suite leaders are brushing up on their “soft skills.” It is what their employees want.

The table was set for change by the seismic global events of 2020 to 2022, and there has been widespread recognition that there is a better way to manage our world. But gains from this moment could so easily be lost if organizations don't become more intentional about building flexibility into the workplace and codifying a hybrid model that allows people of all genders to channel their whole, authentic selves into their professional lives. If these dynamic times have taught us nothing else, it's that our well-being as workers and future corporate leaders matters.

## We are seeing a demand for leaders who cultivate a kind of compassionate command.

I have always believed that if more women governed nations, there would be less war. If women wielded equal economic power to men, there would be less domestic violence, because financial empowerment would give women the strength to leave. Economies around the world would be bolstered if half their country's inhabitants didn't step down prematurely, unable to maximize the full potential of their careers.

And if more children saw examples of highly successful women, both men and women would be empowered to follow their passions, which would ultimately make the world a happier and safer place.

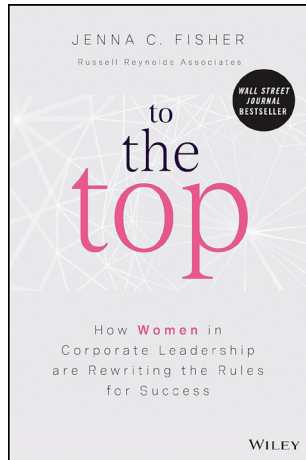
Let this be the beginning of a new era where women take their rightful and proportional place among the leaders of the world. Let us collectively uplift and support each other to create a society where each individual's talents are captured and deployed in ways that are most rewarding and recognized.

If you are a young woman embarking on your career path, believe in yourself and have the confidence to get what you deserve. If you are running a company and managing people at work, read and learn how to better support and inculcate the kind of widespread change and thought leadership that will uplift and improve our professional lives. And if you are parents, set the example to help your children be their best selves and get them to 50-50, one little girl and boy at a time.

We still have a mountain to climb before we achieve true parity in business. But it's also clear that we now face the opportunity of a lifetime to fast-track progress and accelerate the stubbornly slow trajectory of change. Women are now standing on the most solid foundations for success than ever before. **It's time to grab this opportunity with both hands.** 📌



# Info



Ready to dig deeper into the book?  
Buy a copy of [To The Top](#).

Want copies for your organization or for an event?  
We can help: [customerservice@porchlightbooks.com](mailto:customerservice@porchlightbooks.com)  
800-236-7323

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenna Fisher is an executive, a thought leader, and a mother who has spent her career placing women and men in top jobs and on boards at the country's most powerful organizations, including Visa, Amazon, Ford, Adobe, and Lyft.

Jenna received her BA, with honors, in sociology from Rice University and her MBA from The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. She also attended Duke University Law School and studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

She lives in the Bay Area with her husband, two children and two poodles.

## SHARE THIS

Pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.

## SUBSCRIBE

Sign up for our newsletter.



## Porchlight

Curated and edited by the people of Porchlight, ChangeThis is a vehicle for big ideas to spread. Keep up with the latest book releases and ideas at [porchlightbooks.com](http://porchlightbooks.com).

This document was created on December 20, 2023 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit Creative Commons. Cover art from Adobe Stock.