

Mission-Driven Momentum

Empowering Women Leaders in Nonprofits and Small Businesses

Episode 10 Companion Blog

Women are leading nonprofits, launching businesses, running teams, and driving real results in communities across the country. That's not a talking point. That's what we see every day in our consulting work. But too often, the conversation about women in leadership starts and ends with barriers. In Episode 10 of Mission-Driven Momentum: Nonprofits, Leadership & Growth, we decided to flip the script. Yes, we name the obstacles. But we spend most of our time on what women bring to leadership, the strategies that work, and the real stories that prove the point.

The Barriers Are Real—So Let's Name Them and Move

We don't pretend the obstacles aren't there. The credibility gap, the funding disparities, the work-life expectations that land differently on women—these are real. Pat shared a story about a woman business owner who started bringing a male colleague to bank meetings because the loan officer took her more seriously with a man in the room. That wasn't from a decade ago. It was last year.

The credibility gap shows up in boardrooms, client meetings, panel discussions, and pitch sessions. It's rarely overt, which makes it exhausting. A question redirected to a male colleague. A suggestion that gets traction only after a man repeats it. A promotion delayed for vague reasons that somehow never apply to the men in the room.

But here's the thing: naming the barrier is the first step. Staying stuck there isn't the second. The women leaders we work with—the ones driving real impact—name it, navigate it, and keep leading.

The Strengths Women Bring to Leadership

This is the part of the conversation that doesn't get enough airtime. Women bring specific, measurable strengths to leadership that directly impact organizational and business success. And organizations that don't make room for these strengths are leaving results on the table.

Collaborative Leadership

Women leaders tend to be more inclusive in decision-making. They build consensus and create space for diverse perspectives. In the episode, Pat described a small business owner who was making every strategic decision herself and wondering why her team never took initiative. When she started including her team in the planning process, better ideas surfaced and her team started owning outcomes instead of just following orders. The difference between a plan people were told about and a plan people helped build is the difference between compliance and commitment.

Emotional Intelligence

Reading a room, sensing when morale is shifting, catching early warning signs before they become full-blown crises—that's not just empathy. That's pattern recognition for people, and it's a strategic advantage. Problems that show up in data eventually show up too late. A leader who catches culture problems early saves the organization real money and real talent.

Resilience and Adaptability

Women leaders have been navigating bias and barriers their entire careers. That builds a specific kind of resilience—not just toughness, but creative problem-solving. When the direct path is blocked, you find another way. That muscle translates directly to how women handle business challenges: cash flow problems, market shifts, organizational crises. Pat put it perfectly in the episode: those skills don't come from a leadership program. They come from experience.

Mentorship and Authenticity

Women leaders tend to mentor more, especially other women, creating a ripple effect that builds pipelines and changes systems. And the most effective women leaders stop trying to fit someone else's leadership mold and start leading as themselves. Authenticity builds trust. In a nonprofit, that translates to donor loyalty, volunteer retention, and team cohesion. In a small business, it translates to client relationships and brand credibility.

Strategies That Actually Work

The episode gets practical fast. Here are the strategies we explored for women building their leadership careers and for organizations that want to get this right.

For Women Leaders

Build your network intentionally. Find other women leaders in your sector and outside it. If you're running a nonprofit, connect with women in small business, and vice versa. The challenges overlap more than you'd expect, and fresh perspectives from outside your usual circles can be the most valuable. Pat has been part of a women leaders group for years that includes nonprofit executives, small business owners, and women in corporate roles—and she says that group has been as valuable to her career as any credential.

Find mentors and sponsors. A mentor gives you advice and guidance. A sponsor advocates for you behind closed doors and puts your name forward when you're not in the room. You need both. And the sponsor piece requires a specific ask: "I'm interested in senior leadership. Would you be willing to recommend me for opportunities?" A specific ask creates a specific commitment.

Document your achievements. Every successful project, every major grant, every problem solved—write it down with the measurable impact. "Led a strategic planning process that increased program enrollment by 30 percent" isn't bragging. It's evidence. And evidence is your best answer when someone questions your worth.

Negotiate for what you're worth. Frame it around value, not apology: "Based on my experience, my track record, and the market value for this role, here's what I should be compensated." That framing works for salaries and consulting rates alike.

Don't wait until you feel ready. Research shows that men apply for roles when they meet 60 percent of the qualifications, while women wait until they meet 100 percent. That gap isn't about competence—it's about confidence. And confidence follows action. Take the role. Start the business. You'll grow into it, just like every leader before you did.

For Organizations

Conduct equity audits. Look at compensation, promotion patterns, and your leadership pipeline. If you find gaps, fix them. Data without action is just documentation of a problem.

Make criteria visible. One organization Pat worked with had an unwritten committee requirement for leadership consideration. Men who'd been mentored by existing leaders knew to volunteer. Women didn't know the rule and weren't advancing. Once the pathway was explicit, things changed immediately. Remove the hidden curriculum.

Formalize mentorship programs. Informal mentoring favors people who already have access. Structured programs with accountability create more equitable pathways to leadership.

Address bias directly. Use structured interviews. Evaluate against explicit criteria instead of vague “culture fit.” If women are consistently interrupted in meetings, name it. If credit is going to men for women’s work, correct it. This isn’t comfortable. But skipping the conversation is riskier than having it.

Stories from the Field

The Real Talk Roundtable section of this episode is where the conversation really came alive. Pat shared stories from her consulting work and career that put every strategy into context.

A woman Pat mentored had been an associate director for five years, doing executive-level work without the title or pay. The organization kept saying she wasn’t ready, but there were no clear criteria for readiness—just vague concerns about “executive presence.” Together, they documented her achievements, practiced her pitch, and when the executive director position opened, she applied with confidence. She got the job. Under her leadership, the organization expanded programming and improved staff retention. The talent was never the issue. The system around the talent was.

A small business owner had been undercharging for years because she kept comparing herself to larger firms and discounting her own expertise. When she documented her client outcomes and mapped them against market rates, she realized she was charging about 60 percent of what her work was worth. After adjusting, she lost two clients who were only there for the discount and gained four new clients who valued her expertise. Revenue went up. Stress went down. She stopped treating her own business like a charity.

And Pat shared a story from early in her career about a male executive director who questioned whether she was worth her rate. Her response was calm and direct: “Based on what I deliver, I’m worth more. But I like your organization, so this is what I charge.” He hired her and never questioned her value again. The lesson isn’t about having a clever comeback. It’s about knowing your value because you’ve documented your results. When someone questions your worth, evidence is your best answer.

The Big Takeaway

Empowerment isn't something someone gives you. It's something you build—with evidence, with networks, with mentorship, and with the courage to lead as yourself. The barriers are real. Name them, navigate them, work to change them. But don't wait for the world to be fair before you lead. The mission needs you now. The business needs you now. Lead from where you are with what you have.

And this isn't just on women to figure out alone. Organizations and businesses have a responsibility to remove barriers, create equity, and build genuine pathways to leadership. Individual strategies only go so far if the system itself isn't changing.

Download Your Free Resource

We created a practical Women in Leadership Action Guide that includes:

- Leadership strengths self-assessment to identify and build on what you bring
- Achievement documentation template with examples
- Negotiation preparation worksheet for salaries and consulting rates
- Network-building action plan
- Organizational equity audit conversation guide

Download it now at missiondrivenpod.com

Let's Keep the Conversation Going

Want to go deeper? We're here for it.

Podcast/blog feedback: **contact@missiondrivenpod.com**

Support for your team or organization: **contact@thescanlandgroup.com** or visit **thescanlandgroup.com**

From our family—including Gracie, Moody, and Diamond—to yours: keep leading with heart, keep showing up with purpose, and keep creating a world where everyone belongs.

Until next time—stay focused, stay mission-driven.