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THE  
**UNWRITTEN**  
RULES **OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP**

Step into your power, write your own rules  
and succeed in your career

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HELEN APPELBY

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HELEN APPLEBY

# R<sup>e</sup>think

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*For my dad, Andy Appleby (1942–2015), who always  
told me, 'Girls can do anything boys can do.'*

# Introduction

**W**hen I was a child, my dad told me that girls could do anything boys could do – and I believed him.

He said nothing about how challenging the pursuit of my career was going to be. Often I was the only woman in the room, and struggled to be seen and heard appropriately. Studies have shown that men interrupt twice as much as women in business, and that when they interrupt, it's more likely to be women they are interrupting.

My dad also never told me how torn I would feel every day between my professional role and my 'other job' as a mum, how I would feel as though I was leaving work too early and arriving home too late – even though I worked only ten minutes from home!

## THE UNWRITTEN RULES OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

I guess he didn't know – because he was a man.

Even now in 2020, only around 5% of Fortune 100 CEOs are women. There are also more Fortune 1500 CEOs called David than there are women CEOs!

It seemed as if all I could do to climb the corporate ladder was work harder. I felt uncomfortable with 'self-promotion', and I thought that if I just kept my head down and did a good job, I'd get noticed. I put in more effort and delivered even better results, only to find that it didn't work like that. When the major global role that I coveted came along, I was excited – until somebody told me the post had already been filled by a man I knew. He was great at talking about his accomplishments, a brilliant golfer, and friends with a lot of the (male) senior managers. But he was also someone who had been more junior than me, so I knew that he wasn't that good. As I sat in my car in the parking lot after hearing this news, in tears of rage and utter frustration, I realised things were different for women. I pledged there and then to make changes. To succeed I needed to wake up and learn from the men around me, from the few senior women who had made it to the top, and from the research available how to claim my rightful place in the corporate world.

And I did. I stepped into my power and made the changes that I'm going to outline to you in the following pages. I was offered a role running a global respiratory health business, which included the launch

of an allergy medicine that was the company's biggest ever consumer launch. I have now lived and worked in six countries: Canada, the UK, Cyprus, Dubai, Malaysia and the US. I achieved all this with a family that moved with me – and I learned a lot on the journey.

I now teach and coach women on my unwritten rules of women's leadership. My curriculum covers all the aspects of a corporate career that women often struggle with, and the obstacles they may meet or unwittingly put in their own way.

All career journeys have accelerators and decelerators – toxic cultures, discrimination and unconscious bias are all real and require systemic change. I believe that change will come from outside pressure (equal pay reporting is a good example of this) as well as from within. The best way to get more women into senior leadership is to get more women into senior leadership. This book isn't about 'fixing women' – women don't need to be fixed. My work focuses on how we can maximise the accelerators in our career and navigate the decelerators and obstacles, and ultimately succeed. We all have opportunities to lift others as we rise and to create sisterhood and support for others behind us.

It's vitally important to have women in leadership roles, not only to promote the principles of diversity and equality, but in order for individual women to be able to fulfil their potential. It's a fact that businesses with women on the board and in senior roles perform better

than businesses that don't. New research shows that, over the past two decades, in the two years after a new CEO appointment, the stock price for those companies that appointed female CEOs outperformed those that appointed men by an average of 20%.

2020 has been a year of unprecedented change and hardship for many, and yet those of us 'knowledge workers' who can work remotely have been fortunate to still be able to work. As we both move through the public health challenges into the economic trials ahead, I see advantages and disadvantages for women. The shift to greater flexibility around remote working and the decrease in travel are long overdue and will benefit us all. However, the closure of schools and daycare centres has highlighted how important childcare is in the ability of single parents and dual career couples to work and I see that their closure has placed a huge additional burden on all of us, but especially women. We know that the data shows that women are disproportionately affected in economic downturn and periods of job loss, and the issues that women often face in making their work visible and finding the mentors and sponsors that they need could be even worse in an era of remote working. The tools in this book and the sisterhood that we can build together are even more important now to help you navigate your version of success – whether you work in an office or remotely.

This book is based on my journey and my experience as a British, cis, middle-class, able-bodied white woman

and, despite the ups and downs of my corporate journey, I know that I have had income and privilege that many others have not. Women of colour, LGBTQ women and those with disabilities face all the issues I faced as well as additional microaggressions, discrimination and unconscious bias barriers too. These women face more barriers to advancement and get less support than other groups of women, face far more everyday discrimination such as having their judgement questioned, being interrupted, or having their ideas co-opted. They are also far more likely than other women to hear demeaning remarks about themselves or others like them.

The world of work doesn't just need the voices of women, it needs the voices of *all* women. I haven't walked their journeys so I don't pretend to speak to those challenges, but I am committed to listening and learning and using my role to drive change for us all. On my podcast and in my community I invite a diverse group of women to share their learnings and resources so that we can all hear and learn from their lessons. When women succeed, we all succeed.

This book is a detailed exploration of all you need to know and do to navigate and thrive. Now is the time to learn from my unwritten rules and find your own, to gain acknowledgement for your achievements, set your sights on where you want to go and claim the leadership that is rightfully yours.

ONE

# My Corporate Career Journey

I grew up as the daughter of an accountant who worked for a big company. In my father's eyes, being a director in a big company was the path to success, so I majored in business. As I explored different areas of study, marketing drew me in. Understanding consumer behaviour and why people buy things sounded fascinating.

My third year at college gave me the opportunity to intern with a corporation. I spent a year working in marketing at the corporate offices of the supermarket chain ASDA, which is now owned by Walmart®. At the end of the year, I realised I wanted to work in an environment where I could learn even more about marketing. As I approached graduation, I applied to

global companies like Unilever, Mars and Procter & Gamble. They're virtually universities of corporate marketing.

I was excited to join a major corporation and spent two years in a management development programme, which taught me a tremendous amount about marketing. The early days of my career went well. When you're in your twenties, you don't notice the corporate gender gap. The management training programme rotated us around different departments. No one gets promoted at that stage, so it was hard work but fairly straightforward.

I didn't see men moving ahead of me, though I did note almost all senior management positions were filled by men. I noticed it was easier for the men to be friends with senior men than it was for the women. The guys would play golf together, go for a beer and compare football teams. They also seemed to travel together more often.

After five years, the company began to globalise. This led to a change in my role, which removed some of the strategic thinking I enjoyed. I looked for a job where I could continue to grow my marketing career and moved to a major pharmaceutical company.

As I progressed, corporate life began to grow more complex to navigate as a woman. The sales team's nickname for me was 'Legs'. There were few senior female leaders who could be a role model for me.

## Perceptions

In her 2004 *Harvard Business Review* article, psychiatrist Anna Fels states:

‘Women have more opportunities for forming and pursuing their own goals now than at any time in history. But doing so is socially condoned only if they have first satisfied the needs of all their family members: husbands, children, elderly parents and others.’

It seems paradoxical to me. We have hard-won access to training in nearly all fields, but far from celebrating our achievements in the professions now available to us, most of us deflect attention away from ourselves. We often don't claim a central, purposeful place in our own stories. We eagerly shift credit elsewhere and shun recognition. And it's not only women of achievement who are anxious to relinquish recognition – it's nearly all women. Studies show that the daily texture of women's lives from childhood onward is one filled with micro-encounters in which quiet withdrawal and the transfer of attention or recognition to others is expected, particularly in the presence of men.

Despite societal expectations to push attention away from ourselves, as professional women, we must climb the corporate ladder. If we don't speak up, we'll be left behind or asked to leave. In most organisations, it's move up or you're out.

## THE UNWRITTEN RULES OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

But there are differences in the way women and men are treated as they seek to climb the ladder. When we openly express our ambition, we're perceived as being harsh or strident. For example, I doubt the negative feedback I received for my behaviours in a 360-degree assessment would have been considered negative if the same behaviours had been observed in a man. I was told people viewed me as 'out for myself'.

'What's wrong with caring about progressing in my career?' I thought. 'What do you expect? Everyone wants to move up.' I was frustrated by the double standard. I didn't know what the real issue was, because there was no one to tell me the unwritten rules.

Working for a global company provided opportunities to work overseas. I moved to Cyprus in 1998 and became the third female expatriate in the company. In this massive company that employed 50,000 people, there were only two other women on overseas assignments at the time. I was also their first female employee to give birth abroad. There was some confusion about how to deal with my pregnancy and maternity leave, and no policy for managers working abroad. I felt they were concerned I would quit so I was extremely quick to correct them and let them know I would be coming back (and soon). I gave birth four weeks early.

My maternity leave was only one week long because I wouldn't hand over my job to anyone. Back then, that was fine by me. I ran the consumer business, and we

were busy. For five weeks, I worked from home (they wouldn't let me set foot in the office because of the insurance). I simply asked the people I was due to have meetings with to come to my apartment, and I kept up with all my emails. I didn't stop working because I didn't want to step off the promotion ladder and harm my career.

If anyone had said to me, 'You should take six months off. You'll want to be with the baby. They grow up so fast, you'll miss it,' I probably wouldn't have listened. Would I recommend my path as the right way for other women? No, but it was right for me then. You should do whatever feels right for you.

The dangers of the 'mummy track' are real though. Ariane Hegewisch, Program Director for employment earnings at the Institute for Women's Policy Research in Washington, said, 'Evidence from a variety of countries reveals that the longer new mothers are away from paid work, the less likely they are to be promoted, move into management, or receive a pay raise once their leave is over. They are also at greater risk of being fired or demoted.' A 2014 survey of more than 25,000 Harvard Business School graduates found women in fields like finance and consulting reported that taking more than six months of leave hurt them professionally.

Admittedly, the path I took would be considered extreme today. My advice is to choose what works best for you. If you want time with your new baby, do

it. If you want to return right away, do it. No one else can tell you what's right for you.

I also noticed I was treated differently once my first child was born. My boss was genuinely concerned and asked how I was doing all the time. 'How are you?' he'd ask. 'Did you sleep? Is Alex OK? Is everything all right?'

I finally told him to stop asking. 'Look,' I said. 'Can we make an agreement that you simply don't ask? If everything's not fine, I'll certainly tell you.' He was trying to be supportive, but I didn't want to be treated differently from men whose wives had had a baby.

### **Taking a chance on a woman**

Later in my career, I was placed in a programme for high-potential leaders.

'Why are you still a Marketing Director?' a senior leader asked me. 'Why aren't you a Vice President yet?'

'I don't know, Stan. I don't know why I can't seem to break through,' I answered.

'It seems to me,' he said, 'nobody is prepared to take a chance on you.'

And he was right. No one was prepared to see the potential of what I could do and take a chance on me.

I was viewed as 'risky', even though I had an amazing track record of achievements globally. Despite my successes, I couldn't shatter the glass ceiling.

After a while, a new position in his group came up. The role was somewhat vague and undefined. He walked into my office, closed the door and took a seat.

'I've got a role spearheading a new team,' he said. 'It's not working on an existing brand. It's exploring what our future global brands will be. Are you brave?'

Someone was finally willing to take a chance on me and see my potential. I said 'yes' immediately.

The new job pulled me into a higher peer group and got me onto the leadership team with the Vice Presidents. I participated in top-level meetings and became more visible. I proved I could do it and was later promoted to Vice President too. I'll always be grateful to Stan because he saw I could lead a business and operate at a senior level.

A 2011 McKinsey study discussed the contrast in how men and women are judged for promotion. Women are more likely to be promoted based on their track record while men are more likely to be promoted based on their potential. For example, let's assume a man and woman have completed A, B and C in their careers. They both apply for a promotion which will require them to do D, necessary for the next level up.

## THE UNWRITTEN RULES OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

In reviewing applicants, employers evaluate the man and say, 'He's done A, B and C. He's got such potential. Therefore, he can certainly do D!'

When they evaluate the woman, who's also accomplished A, B and C, they say, 'She's only done A, B and C. She's never performed D before. She's not qualified for this role.' That's unconscious bias. And this reflects what Stan said when he noted, 'No one's taken a chance on you.'

During the four years I was a fully-fledged Vice President, a realisation grew within me. While I liked and even loved what I did, I finally realised, 'I'm doing this because it's what my dad wanted. It doesn't feed my soul and never did. What feeds my soul is growing people, how can I do more of it?'

At the time, I was working with an executive coach.

'I get to travel business class,' I told him. 'I get limos to pick me up from my house and take me to the airport. I get to say I'm a Vice President.'

'All that stuff,' my coach said, 'keeps you comfortable. It's all good, but it can get in the way of *great*.' He was right.

Jim Collins, in his ground-breaking 2001 book, *Good to Great*, said:

‘When what you are deeply passionate about – what you can be best in the world at – and what drives your economic engine come together, not only does your work move toward greatness, but so does your life. For, in the end, it’s impossible to have a great life unless it’s a meaningful life.’

I developed and started implementing a five-year plan to become an executive coach and corporate trainer. As part of my plan, before leaving, I wanted to complete our work on a major project. I wanted to leave on a high note.

A year before the launch, my boss and I were talking about what I should do next. I’d been in the role of Vice President for two and a half years.

‘Leave me on the project, but once it’s launched, I intend to leave the company,’ I told him.

He was surprised, and he wasn’t pleased, but that’s what happened. Even though he offered alternatives, they simply left me cold. I knew I wouldn’t want to get out of bed in the morning if I was doing those other projects. No longer would I allow good to get in the way of my great.

After the launch, I started the next chapter of my career and my business. In June 2015, I left corporate life and Powerful Growth Group was born.

## Looking back with pride

I'm grateful for all the opportunities that working for major companies gave me and there are many things that I'm proud of in my career. One particular highlight was achieving the switch of the leading allergy medicine from prescription to over-the-counter status. The company had tried to get this project off the ground a decade earlier, but it had become stuck in internal issues. I led the team and we broke the deadlock. My team and our agencies developed all the materials, the advertising, the packaging and the launch advertising. The product quickly grew into a huge business with half a billion dollars annually in global sales.

So much of what I enjoyed at work was developing and growing the people in my teams and I'm proud that many of these people and others I mentored or coached over the years have continued to succeed in senior roles all over the world. As leaders, our real legacy is the people we grow and help to succeed.

## And counting the mistakes...

But, when I reflect on my career and how I stumbled before learning the unwritten rules, I realise I made the same mistakes millions of women make in business.

If I could go back and coach myself when I was younger, these are the pitfalls I would warn myself about:

- I did a poor job with stakeholder management
- I did a horrible job of making my work visible and I undersold my strengths
- I took conflict far too personally
- And, as a working mum, I held a lot of guilt because I felt I left work too early and got home too late

If I had known then what I know now, I'd have managed myself differently. I would talk more about what I did and the value I added. I would find mentors and sponsors and manage stakeholders differently. I'd learn to manage conflict with ease and, finally, I'd stop feeling guilty about my kids or my career.

Later in my career, once I had understood the unwritten rules, I left my doubts and reticence behind and eventually excelled. I finally broke through, but it could have been easier, which is why I have written the book that I needed to read back then, for you now.

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