Building Better:

Rethinking Leadership in Construction

The Leaders We Need-And Why We're Losing Them









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Contents

Βι	illding Better: Rethinking Leadership in Construction	3	
	Why This Work Matters	4	
Tł	ne Leadership Imperative: Why Change is Needed	5	
	Unlocking Profitability Through Leadership	5	
	The Barriers Are Clear—and Costly	6	
Ac	Addressing the Gap Between Words and Actions 8		
	It Takes More Than Good Intentions	8	
	Reason for Wanting to Leave a Company	9	
	Moving from Commitment to Implementation	10	
Bı	reaking Through: Strategies for Advancement	11	
	Unlocking the Potential of ERGs: From Support Groups to Strategic Business Tools	11	
	Making ERGs Work: A Strategic Approach	13	
	Mentorship: A Valuable Foundation, But Not the Full Solution	า 15	
	Beyond Hard Work: What Really Drives Career Growth	16	
	Sponsorship: The Key to Unlocking Leadership Potential	17	
Tr	ransforming Leadership for the Future	20	
	Leading With Action: Rewriting the Leadership Narrative	20	
Tł	ne Blueprint for Change: Driving Industry Progress	22	
	Leadership That Moves the Industry Forward	22	
Sustaining Progress: The Future of Leadership in Construction 24			
About NCCER		25	
Al	About Ambition Theory		
Re	References		





Building Better: Rethinking Leadership in Construction

The partnership between Ambition Theory and NCCER began with a shared mission: to solve one of the construction industry's most pressing challenges—attracting, retaining, and advancing women in an era of unprecedented labor shortages.

Through surveys, interviews, and real-world insights, a deeper reality has become clear:

The industry's most significant challenge isn't just recruiting and retaining more women—it's rethinking leadership itself.

Despite billions spent on workforce development and recruitment, our research reveals a critical disconnect: **68% of women in construction say poor leadership is driving them out**. It's not just about filling jobs; it's about creating workplaces where people want to stay and grow.

Expanding opportunities for women in construction isn't a diversity initiative—it's a business imperative

that directly impacts productivity, project success, and the industry's ability to compete.

68% of women in construction say poor leadership is driving them out.

Leadership models that once thrived in a stable, predictable industry are no longer enough in today's construction landscape—one that is faster, more complex, and increasingly demanding. To succeed, companies need leaders who can adapt, collaborate, and inspire teams to perform at their best. Transformational leadership—an approach built on trust, innovation, and adaptability—improves

retention, engagement, and overall performance. Multiple studies prove that women naturally veer toward this leadership style over more transactional leadership styles, bringing the exact strengths the industry needs most. And yet, this potential remains largely untapped.

This report dives into the hard truths about women's experiences in construction and exposes the gaps between intention and impact.

It also charts a path forward, offering insights and practical steps to equip leaders with the skills and mindset needed to build high-performing teams.

Drawing on insights from a survey of 775 women in construction, the findings emphasize the need to rethink leadership development, expand sponsorship opportunities, and foster inclusive workplaces that empower women-and ultimately everyone-to thrive.

The opportunity is clear: by embracing transformational leadership strategies, companies can unlock untapped potential, drive business results, and position construction as a career of choice for the next generation of leaders.

By embracing transformational leadership and taking bold steps, the construction industry has the chance to redefine itself—not just for today's challenges but for the opportunities of tomorrow.



Why This Work Matters

The construction industry is at a crossroads.

The workforce crisis isn't just about numbers—it's about creating an industry where people want to stay, grow, and succeed. Women represent an untapped resource that could fill critical gaps, drive innovation, and secure the industry's future.

But this work goes beyond fairness or compliance—it's about sustainability and long-term success. Without deliberate efforts to build pathways for all leaders to thrive, the industry risks losing the talent it needs to meet growing demands.

Key actions to move forward:

- Expand opportunities: Ensure equitable access to experiences and exposure for advancement.
- Create fair systems: Align hiring, promotion, and leadership development with real workforce needs.
- Build a culture of excellence: Promote workplaces where everyone can contribute at their highest potential.

The question isn't whether organizations *should* act—instead, it's whether they can afford not to.

The Leadership Imperative: Why Change is Needed

Unlocking Profitability Through Leadership

The construction industry is evolving rapidly, and companies that fail to adapt risk falling behind. Workforce shortages, rising complexity, and increasing client expectations are pushing the industry to its limits. The companies that will thrive are the ones that recognize leadership as a business driver—not an HR initiative.

Our research makes it clear: when leadership falls short, retention suffers. 68% of women in the construction industry, across all sectors, cite poor leadership as a key reason for leaving the industry, costing companies valuable talent, productivity, and profitability.

High turnover rates and disengagement don't just impact individuals—they delay projects, weaken client relationships, and ultimately hurt the bottom line.

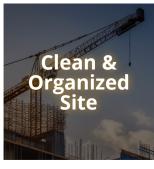
But the solution isn't just about filling positions; it's about **developing leaders who drive real impact**. Research shows that having just one woman on a team—regardless of her role—can boost focus, improve safety, increase attention to detail, and even elevate self-reported performance. The opportunity is even greater when women are empowered to lead¹.

The companies that invest in leadership pathways for women aren't just advancing individuals—they're building high-performing teams, improving retention, and gaining a competitive edge.

What Women Bring to the Industry





















Tree map frequency distribution for the benefits women bring to the construction industry. Source: NCCER In Her Own Words: Rebuilding The Construction Industry.

The Barriers Are Clear—and Costly

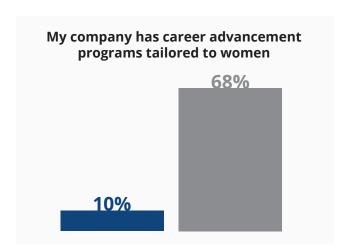
The construction industry faces significant leadership development challenges—challenges that, if left unaddressed, will continue to hinder progress, productivity, and profitability. The current leadership pipeline is struggling to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving industry, where collaboration, adaptability, and innovation are no longer optional—they are essential.

Women want to advance—but the path isn't clear.

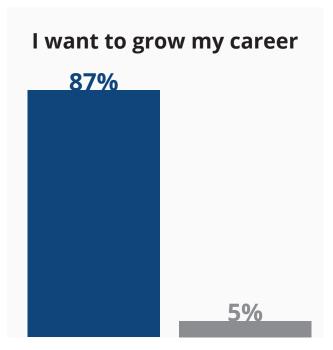
Our study found that 87% of women in construction want career growth opportunities, yet only 47% say their companies offer leadership programs tailored to their needs.

Even among those who participate in leadership training, only 42% feel these programs prepare them for leadership roles.

One of the biggest obstacles women face is the lack of clear pathways to advancement. Promotion criteria are often ambiguous, and access to career-defining, high-profile projects remains limited, leaving women few opportunities to showcase their leadership potential².



"I did everything to get where I'm at on my own and made myself be recognized."



"Managers don't discuss career paths with women as they do with men, leaving us guessing while our male counterparts are being prepared for the next role."





Our research highlights a disconnect.

Leadership development programs frequently reinforce existing power dynamics by focusing on a traditional, transactional approach to leadership. Instead of equipping women to navigate and overcome these dynamics, programs that focus on transactional leadership overlook the distinct strengths women leaders bring—such as collaboration, adaptability, and long-term vision—and fail to address the unique challenges they face².

This gap isn't just about leadership styles—it has real consequences for retention and workplace safety. When employees feel supported in their career growth, they are more likely to stay, reducing turnover and preserving institutional knowledge².

At the same time, research shows that when individuals feel empowered in their roles, they are more engaged, more proactive about safety, and better equipped to prevent small hazards from becoming serious incidents².

Transformational leadership—grounded in trust and collaboration—can help companies unlock higher retention, improved engagement, stronger team performance, and even safer job sites.

Without intentional investment in leadership pathways that foster transformational leadership, companies risk more than losing talent—they risk reinforcing outdated leadership models that stifle growth and innovation. These barriers don't just hold individuals back; they hold the entire industry back.

Women, who naturally embody this transformational leadership style, remain underutilized, leaving the industry with untapped potential that could drive real business impact.

To continue moving forward, companies must embrace leadership strategies that prioritize adaptability and collaboration, creating strongerteams and more resilient organizations.



Addressing the Gap Between Words and Actions

It Takes More Than Good Intentions

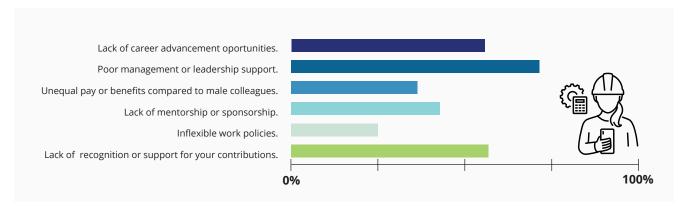
Tackling systemic barriers to women's advancement and success in the construction industry requires more than good intentions—it demands turning policies into real change. Many construction companies publicly commit to advancing women, yet the numbers reveal a persistent gap between intention and impact.

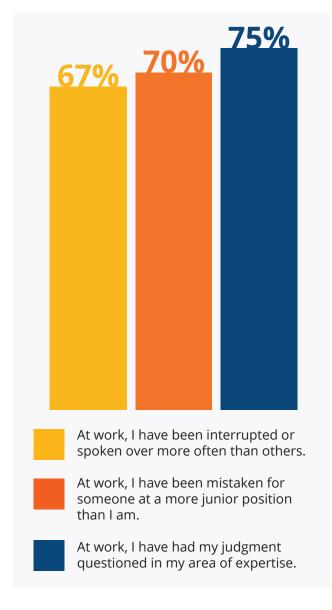
Poor leadership remains a major issue, with **68% of women surveyed** citing it as their key reason for dissatistfaction and their primary desire for wanting to leave the industry. While **84% of women** believe their companies are making progress in supporting women in the industry, only **42%** feel that leadership programs effectively address the unique challenges they face.

Creating a thriving construction industry isn't just about setting goals—it's about embedding effective leadership practices into daily operations. Many companies are taking steps to create more inclusive workplaces, but our research highlights a persistent gap between what's promised and what's actually experienced on the job.



Reason for Wanting to Leave a Company







These findings point to a deeper problem: policy improvements often fail to create meaningful changes in workplace culture or career advancement opportunities. Women in construction continue to encounter both overt and covert challenges, exclusion from decision-making spaces, and unclear promotion pathways—persistent barriers that undercut progress.

Closing this gap means turning words into action and weaving commitments into the fabric of daily work. When policies become more than promises, women don't just get a seat at the table—they get the chance to lead and shape the future of the industry.



Moving from Commitment to Implementation

Many organizations make commitments with good intentions, but the companies seeing real success are the ones that make leadership development a core part of their strategy. They recognize that improving workplace culture, career progression, and employee retention isn't about checking a box—it's about driving business performance and building a workforce that's engaged, motivated, and equipped for the future.

What leading companies are doing differently:

- They cultivate leadership at every level. Investing in leadership training that prioritizes collaboration, communication, and adaptability helps teams perform at their best.
- They create clear pathways for growth. Employees thrive when they understand what's next and how to get there.
 Providing visibility into career advancement opportunities helps keep people engaged and motivated.
- They measure what matters. Tracking retention rates, promotion patterns, and employee engagement offers critical insights into what's working and where improvements are needed.



Breaking Through: Strategies for Advancement

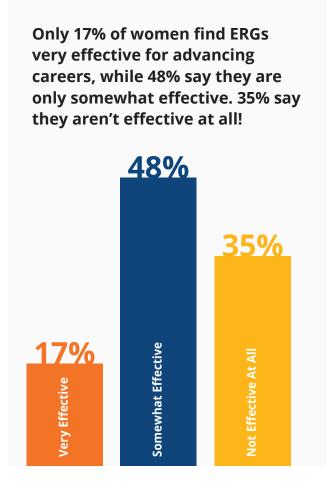


While ERGs offer outlets for emotional support and community, our survey showed a stark reality about their usefulness and influence in the construction industry; their impact on career advancement is limited. Without direct pathways for leadership opportunities and skill-building, ERGs alone are not enough to drive meaningful professional growth for women in this industry.

Unlocking the Potential of ERGs: From Support Groups to Strategic Business Tools

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are often positioned as spaces for connection and support, but their potential as strategic business assets remains largely untapped. When structured effectively, ERGs can be powerful drivers of talent retention, workforce engagement, and organizational knowledge-sharing. However, only 27% of women surveyed are actively involved in their organization's ERG.

"Radical change is needed and the group lacks the cohesive focus and leadership support to make any meaningful changes."



Women Say Their ERGs Need

"More support from leadership - actual support to enact plans, not just a token name of the senior leadership sponsor on the poster."

"Men. The men are not involved and we need their support and buy-in as well."

"Direction. What are we really trying to accomplish?"

"Available time. It is hard to commit time when our industry and women in general struggle with work-life balance issues."

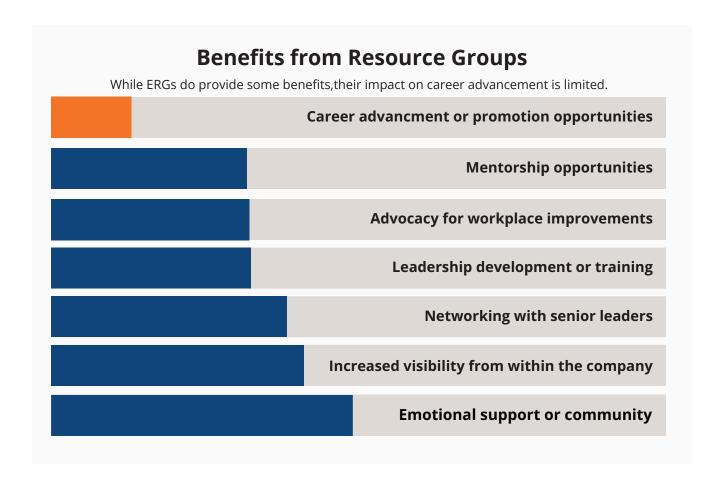
"Time. We don't have time to properly do our jobs and volunteer for meaningful impact."

"Direct support from HR and leadership, more budget support."

Qualitative responses reveal frustration with ERG objectives, lack of resources and support from leadership and men, and low participation.



Many women value the connection, support, and advocacy their ERGs provide, but far fewer see these groups translating into real career growth. While leadership development opportunities exist, it's worth asking—are they truly opening doors, or just checking a box? Without clear pathways to leadership visibility and advancement, ERGs risk becoming isolated spaces rather than catalysts for real change.



Making ERGs Work: A Strategic Approach

To maximize the business impact of ERGs, companies must redefine their role and structure:

- Set Clear, Business-Aligned Objectives
 ERGs should focus on measurable goals that align
 with organizational priorities, such as leadership
 development, mentorship programs, and
 influencing company policies to support
 workforce retention.
- Shift from Support to Sponsorship

 ERGs should go beyond providing a space for connection and support by embedding behavioral expectations that drive career growth. Encouraging members to actively share contacts, advocate for one another, and connect peers to leadership opportunities ensures that ERGs serve
- as launchpads for advancement rather than just forums for discussion. Shifting from emotional support alone to a model focused on sponsorship, strategic networking, and leadership development transforms ERGs into high-impact communities.
- Strengthen Leadership Engagement
 Providing ERG leaders with direct access to senior leadership ensures that these groups are positioned as valuable contributors to company strategy rather than isolated initiatives.



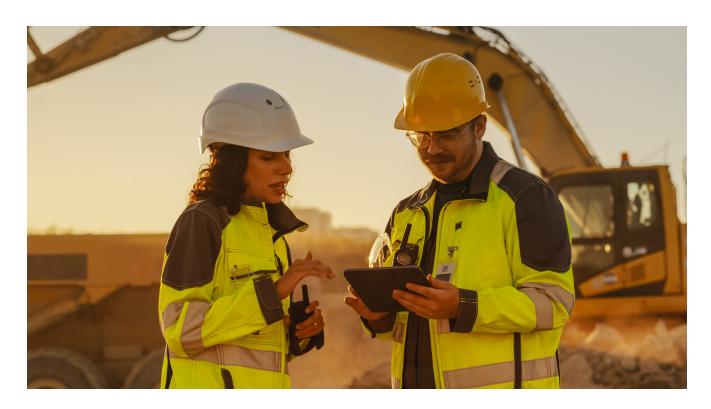


"While having a venue in which to air complaints did instill a sense of belonging, it often exacerbated feelings of powerlessness ... this shifted as these groups adapted some of the practices of traditional OBNs (old boys' networks), putting the focus on mutual advancement. Establishing mentoring circles, matching members with sponsors, sharing connections, and focusing on leadership skills helped transform many ERGs into highly effective networks."

–Sally Helgeson, Rising Together

With the right structure and support, ERGs can be more than just spaces for connection—they can become dynamic business assets that empower employees, support leadership pipelines, and drive organizational success.

While ERGs help build networks that support career growth, sponsorship remains one of the most effective ways to accelerate advancement and open doors to leadership opportunities, while mentorship plays a key role in fostering connection and belonging



Mentorship: A Valuable Foundation, But Not the Full Solution

While mentorship provides valuable guidance, it often falls short of creating high-impact career opportunities. Mentorship does play an essential role in professional development by helping people build confidence, develop industry knowledge, and navigate workplace challenges. However, despite the widespread existence of mentorship programs, our survey found that participation remains low—indicating a fundamental disconnect between what companies offer and what employees need.

"Women experience mentorship at twice the rate of sponsorship."

While 63% of companies report having mentorship programs, only 37% of women have participated in one.

This gap suggests that traditional mentorship approaches aren't delivering the career advancement women seek. Guidance alone isn't enough—what's missing is direct access to leadership opportunities and career-defining experiences for women who want these pathways.



Beyond Hard Work: What *Really* Drives Career Growth

Career advancement isn't just about skill or effort—it's about being seen, advocated for, and given access to the right opportunities. While mentorship offers critical support and guidance, it's sponsorship that accelerates growth by opening doors to leadership roles, high-profile projects, and influential networks. When asked what influences promotions at their company, survey respondents overwhelmingly pointed to relationships, visibility, and advocacy. When asked what influences promotions at their respondents overwhelmingly company, survey pointed to relationships, visibility, and advocacy.

> "Many times we see promotion by politics – or promotion to the folks that the promoter is comfortable with or gets along with."

"It's about knowing the right people"

"You have to be part of the favorites to get promoted. That's a hard group to break into."

Our survey found that career advancement isn't just about working hard—it's about who sees your work, who opens doors for you, and who ensures you have a seat at the table. This is why sponsorship—not just mentorship—is critical for career growth. It's the difference between waiting for an opportunity and having someone actively open doors for you.

Sponsorship: The Key to Unlocking Leadership Potential

Unlike mentorship, which provides guidance and support, sponsorship actively creates opportunities by advocating for the advancement of talented individuals into leadership roles, recommending them for high-profile projects, and ensuring their visibility within the organization.

Sponsorship is not just about career advancement—it's about **changing who has access to leadership opportunities**. Employees without sponsors are often left waiting for the right moment, while those with sponsors **gain access to career-defining projects**, **visibility among key decision-makers**, **and direct advocacy from senior leaders**.

"Sponsorship is a step beyond mentorship—it's active advocacy and support that directly influences career advancement. It's about being your cheerleader when you are and are not present and helping you navigate moving up in the company. It's not just about guidance or advice but about bringing you into conversations and letting you get real exposure, even if it means taking risks on your behalf."



Only 31% of women reported participating in sponsorship programs, revealing a critical gap in career advancement opportunities.

Without sponsorship, career-defining opportunities often remain locked within informal networks, making advancement difficult for those without the right connections. Women aren't just looking for guidance—they need champions who will advocate for them in the rooms where decisions are made.



Embedding Sponsorship into Workplace Culture

Sponsorship doesn't have to be confined to formal programs—it can and should happen organically and informally. The key is ensuring that leaders at all levels of the organization recognize their role in advocating for talent and creating opportunities for professional growth.

Organizations can take intentional steps to foster a culture of sponsorship by:

- Educating leaders on sponsorship vs.
 mentorship: Helping managers and executives
 understand how they can be active sponsors by
 providing visibility, advocacy, and career advancing opportunities.
- Embedding sponsorship into company culture: Encouraging a sponsorship mindset within leadership training and development initiatives.
- Creating visibility opportunities: Ensuring women have access to high-profile projects, leadership training, and influential decisionmakers.
- Tracking impact: Measuring the effectiveness of sponsorship efforts through career progression metrics and employee feedback.

Sponsorship isn't just about individual career success—it's a business strategy that fuels innovation, strengthens leadership pipelines, and improves retention. When organizations actively sponsor talent, they build stronger, more inclusive teams and position themselves for long-term success.

68% of women and 70% of men with sponsors reported feeling more satisfied with their career progress and more likely to envision a long-term future with their current employer³.

Additionally, research indicates that sponsorship can lead to increased career mobility, satisfaction, and representation of women in key leadership positions⁴.

By embedding sponsorship into leadership development strategies, the construction industry can unlock the full potential of its workforce and create an environment where everyone—both men and women—can thrive and succeed.

CASE STUDY



How Sponsorship Changed the Game: A Real Story of Career Growth

Many companies offer mentorship, but true advancement comes from sponsorship—putting high-potential employees in the room, giving them visibility, and ensuring they have the backing to succeed.

Scarlett's journey is a prime example. Coming from a family business, she transitioned to a new company where leaders immediately recognized her potential. "I didn't have to prove myself first—they saw my potential and made sure I had the support to succeed." Given a high-profile project early on, she felt the weight of the opportunity. "I was nervous about taking on a project that big, but I knew I had people behind me who wouldn't let me fail."

Similarly, Katie stepped into a leadership role knowing she wasn't alone. "The biggest difference was knowing I wasn't on my own. I was given the opportunity, but also the backing to make it work."

Their leaders embraced a sponsorship mindset. "When you see someone who's talented and works hard, the dollar figure on the project doesn't matter. They have the fundamentals to succeed. Our job is to push the boundaries of what they think they can do—while making sure they have the support to get there."

This approach has led to real results: women in leadership roles, clear career pathways, and an engaged workforce. Organizations looking to make a real impact should ask: Are we identifying potential and providing real opportunities, or are we making women prove themselves over and over again?

Transforming Leadership for the Future

Leading With Action: Rewriting the Leadership Narrative



The construction industry stands at a pivotal moment. Labor shortages, burnout, and evolving workforce expectations demand more than incremental change—they require a redefinition of leadership itself.

Transformational leadership, which research shows comes more naturally to women leaders, offers a way to unlock the full potential of individuals and teams. This leadership style—rooted in inspiring and motivating others—drives productivity, focus, safety, and innovation. By setting a clear vision, fostering trust, and challenging teams to reach their full potential, transformational leaders create an environment where employees are engaged, proactive, and continuously improving.

Why Transformational Leadership Matters

Organizations that embrace transformational leadership report significant gains, including 30% higher employee engagement and retention rates, as well as stronger financial performance. These leadership models foster innovation, collaboration, and trust—essential qualities for navigating today's complex challenges.

Yet, transformational leadership remains underutilized in construction. While 42% of women surveyed said their companies' leadership programs fail to address the challenges they face, the companies that actively embrace this model are seeing real solutions emerge.

The Power of Transformational Leadership

Unlike transactional models, which focus solely on task execution, transformational leadership:

- Drives productivity and innovation by setting a clear vision, challenging teams to think critically, and fostering a proactive mindset that leads to better problem-solving and efficiency.
- Enhances focus, safety, and accountability by creating environments where employees feel invested in outcomes, take ownership of their work, and prioritize quality and risk mitigation.

 Develops high-impact leaders by identifying and nurturing talent, increasing confidence, and providing opportunities that accelerate career growth and strengthen the leadership pipeline.

Redefining Leadership for the Future

Rewriting the leadership narrative in construction requires systemic shifts that prioritize impact over hierarchy:

- · Redefine leadership success
 - Move beyond outdated models that prioritize hierarchy and tenure. Value behaviors like collaboration, adaptability, and trust-building as core leadership traits.
- Revamp leadership development
 Equip leaders with skills like emotional intelligence, team-building, and strategic vision.
- Reward transformational leadership
 When relationship-building, strategic thinking,
 collaboration, and team development are
 formally recognized and rewarded, those who
 demonstrate these behaviors will naturally rise
 into key leadership roles—driving stronger teams,
 better outcomes, and long-term success.

By embracing transformational leadership, the construction industry can cultivate a workforce that isn't just managed it's inspired.



From Task Manager to Transformational Leader: Nicole's Story

Nicole, a project manager with two decades of experience, was thriving in her career but felt stuck on autopilot. Despite her technical expertise and success, she knew leadership required more than just checking off tasks—it meant inspiring people and driving change.

Through leadership coaching, she shifted from a transactional, task-driven approach to a transformational one—focusing on strengths, fostering collaboration, and empowering others. She saw immediate results, both in her own productivity and in her team's engagement.

"I always thought good project management meant being at my desk, answering emails, writing procedures. But I realized I'm most productive when I'm with my team, solving problems together. Naming my ambition allowed me to truly practice what my company and I believe."

By integrating leadership coaching into her daily work, Nicole not only reignited her own purpose but also sparked a culture shift within her organization. This is the power of transformational leadership—not just advancing individual careers, but reshaping how construction teams work together to build something greater.



The Blueprint for Change: Driving Industry Progress

Leadership That Moves the Industry Forward

The construction industry's ability to thrive hinges on leadership that fosters innovation, collaboration, and adaptability. These recommendations aren't about meeting quotas—they're about building a resilient, high-performing workforce that attracts and retains top talent.

Redesign Leadership Development for a Changing Workforce

Tailor training for real-world challenges
 Leadership programs must equip emerging
 leaders with the tools to navigate bias, visibility

challenges, and team dynamics. Currently, only 42% of women feel leadership programs prepare them for the reality of construction leadership.

- Promote psychological safety
 Build cultures where everyone feels safe to speak up, take risks, and lead authentically.
 - Prioritize potential over proof

 The most successful companies develop leaders before they hold leadership titles—focusing on potential rather than waiting for years of experience.

Sponsorship: A Strategic Lever for Growth

- Train leaders to be advocates
 Sponsorship must be seen as a strategic tool for building internal talent pipelines.
- Make sponsorship systematic
 Instead of relying on informal networks, embed sponsorship opportunities into performance evaluations and leadership development initiatives.
- Bridge the exposure gap
 Women need access to high-profile projects and key decision-makers. A proactive approach to creating these opportunities is essential for workforce sustainability.

Building Clear, Transparent Pathways to Leadership

- Clarify what it takes to advance
 Transparent promotion criteria ensure all employees understand what's required to progress.
- Ensure opportunities align with aspirations
 Placing women in leadership pipelines and
 high-stakes projects makes career growth
 tangible, not aspirational.

Strengthening Leadership Culture, Not Just Policies

 Cultivate inclusive workplaces that drive performance

Leadership training should go beyond compliance, fostering environments where diverse perspectives fuel innovation and decision-making.

Develop high-impact ERGs
 Employee resource groups should align with
 business goals, providing leadership exposure,
 project involvement, and strategic input—not just



social support.

Sustaining Progress: The Future of Leadership in Construction

To keep up with the demands of a changing workforce and evolving project complexity, construction needs leadership that prioritizes adaptability and long-term success. Companies that invest in transformational leadership don't just retain talent—they create stronger teams, drive innovation, and make construction a career people choose, not settle for.

The Industry Shift: A New Era for Construction Careers

Empowering women in leadership strengthens resilience, enhances performance, and makes construction more attractive to top talent. Studies show that women on construction teams improve focus, morale, and productivity, creating safer, more cohesive workplaces⁵.

When leadership supports adaptable teams, companies see measurable gains in efficiency and culture.

Driving Innovation and Resilience

Companies that embrace diverse leadership navigate industry challenges—supply chain disruptions, new technologies—more effectively. Transformational leadership fosters cultures where ideas flourish, risks are shared, and setbacks fuel creativity and resilience.

Expanding leadership styles strengthens problemsolving and unlocks new growth potential.

Strengthening Workforce Retention and Engagement

With ongoing workforce shortages, retention is a business priority. Leadership that values contributions and offers growth keeps employees engaged.



Retention isn't just about pay—it's about feeling valued, having opportunities, and working in environments where leaders invest in people.

From a Last Resort to an Industry of Choice

Construction's future depends on leaders who foster collaboration, adaptability, and impact. Advancing women and creating pathways into the field help solve workforce challenges while driving innovation.

Transformational leadership makes construction an industry of choice—one that attracts top talent, builds high-performing teams, and ensures long-term success.

Recognition and support were among the most frequently cited factors influencing women's decisions to stay with their current employer³.



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About NCCER

The National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) education foundation created in 1996. It was developed with the support of more than 125 construction CEOs and various associations and academic leaders who united to revolutionize training for the construction industry. Sharing the common goal of developing a safe and productive workforce, these companies created a standardized training and credentialing program for the industry. This progressive program has evolved into curricula for more than 40 craft areas and a complete series of journey level assessments offered in over 4,000 NCCER-accredited training and assessment locations across the United States.

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About Ambition Theory

At Ambition Theory, we're dedicated to driving systemic change in the construction industry. We offer leadership training and coaching that equips individuals with the transformational leadership skills essential for advancement. We firmly believe that it is the responsibility of industry leaders and companies to create a more inclusive and diverse environment, and we work collaboratively with organizations to make this a reality. By sharing our expertise and proven approach, we're able to shift the burden of change from individual women to the industry as a whole. Ambition Theory is unwavering in our commitment to leveraging research and data to drive tangible outcomes and create a more equitable industry for all. Listen to our twice-monthly Women in Construction podcast to discover your part in closing the gender gap at work and learn more about our Leadership Accelerator and corporate programs at AmbitionTheory.com.

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