
CREATE A LEADERSHIP COHORT

**ESTABLISH
A
VISION**

**CHOOSE
YOUR
TEAM**

**CREATE
THE
STRATEGY**

Getting Started

Decades of gender inequality received a massive boost during the “Me Too” movement. Women have begun to feel an even greater urge to step up and fight for respect, dignity, and a seat at the table. While it was once like hunting down the entrance and secret password to a speakeasy, masterminds, leadership networks, and peer coaching groups for women are on the rise.

I have seen a surge of women all over the country hungry to connect with women in similar fields and positions of authority. Many know this is a need, not just for themselves but for thousands of women who are feeling isolated from others in the same situation. They are corporate executives, church leaders, entrepreneurs, up and comers who are fighting harder than they should have to, and so many more in between.

Ideas of coming together in small or large groups is invigorating. The thought of connecting with likeminded women who are dealing with the same challenges and have the same drive is like the childhood story of the ugly duckling who finally found its tribe. Discovering “your people” is a sigh of relief and a surge of motivation all wrapped up together.

Congratulations! You found each other. Now what?

Coming together with a purpose goes beyond a tidy book club or a monthly coffee meetup. There is something deep inside most of us that is aching to effect change, to create opportunity, to push the limits of our own capacity and those around us, and to see a wider path paved for the next generation. Women are multi-talented, multi-tasking

people who have so much to offer and are ready to join forces with each other in a cooperative effort to see everyone allowed to set their own course.

This guide will help you get started in developing and implementing a leadership cohort. I've chosen to use the word cohort because I feel we are all looking for more than a networking group or an accountability group. We want to define purpose, collaborate with other women striving to achieve similar goals, challenge others and be challenged ourselves.

I know you can vastly improve every section that follows as you brainstorm with your peers. My hope is that you do exactly that - use this guide as a framework to start the creative juices flowing, then amp up everything you do to make the greatest impact possible. All I ask is that you pay it forward. Look for the women coming up behind you and pour into them. Mentor them, encourage, challenge, and guide them so that they will take what we are doing and amplify it a hundred times over.

Establish a Vision

Why are you taking time out of your busy life to invest in other women and have them do the same for you?

This is an open book question and there are no right or wrong answers, so you're guaranteed to ace this exam. Don't worry about rushing this process. Your vision will surface organically through conversations and random moments when inspiration strikes. Shared working documents like Google Docs are great places to allow everyone in the group to track their brainstorming.

Here are a few examples of goals to get you started.

Peer Coaching

Best done in smaller groups of three to five people, this allows you to address specific issues individuals are facing and help them process.

One option is to have person A coach person B, person B coach person C, and person C coach person A. You can do these meetings individually and share your progress in the group setting.

Another option is to segment the group time to allow one person a set amount of time to share their challenges and allow the rest of the group to ask great questions helping the focal person process through their situation.

“A vision is not just a picture of what could be; it is an appeal to our better selves, a call to become something more.”

Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Sample Goals

#1: Nonprofit executive women who are interested in sharing best practices. Meetings will be every other month via video conference. A Slack channel is created to provide more frequent communication when necessary. The group is limited to ten women because of the video component.

#2: Women in business to business sales who need a place to vent frustrations, improve sales techniques, and role play various sales situations. The group is set up on facebook where the administrator throws out commonly asked questions on a monthly basis, then encourages members to connect in small groups of 2-3 in person or via video. Throughout the rest of the month, group members can share what they learned in those smaller groups or voice other questions. The group is based on the capacity of the administrators.

I'm a huge fan of the socratic method of coaching, which asks open ended questions to help the coachee move forward. Here is an article to help explain this method: <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/dau/pat-jf3.pdf>.

Here is a list of great coaching questions to use whenever appropriate in your group, sorted by category. <https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/socratic-questioning-help-sheet-11634950>

Best Practices

Groups driven by best practices are typically topical. One of the networking groups I'm a part of spends a lot of time sharing best practices. One member will email a question to the group and there are usually several responses. It's been a great way to get a lot of feedback in a short amount of time with minimal time invested.

These groups can host a high volume of members because there are few meetups and little face to face time. They can also be geographically diverse since there are no schedules to facilitate.

Ground rules are helpful to establish what types of questions and communication are appropriate. For example, the group I mentioned above quit allowing members to share open positions at their organizations. As you might imagine, if 25+ people from around the country are constantly sharing their job boards, it inundates your email inbox and dilutes the more important questions.

Learning

The concept behind a cohort is largely academic, often referring to a class completing a course of study together. Some leadership groups are designed around learning specific concepts such as leading nonprofit organizations. Throughout the lifespan of the cohort, they will continue to keep the main focus as the vein running through every experience and interaction. The focus can be as broad or specific as you choose.

Training may come from outside speakers, experts in their

field. You may attend seminars together with debriefing sessions as a cohort. Another option is to allow a rotation within the group where members train each other on various topics. However you decide to structure learning with your cohort, it is helpful to define goals in the beginning to keep you on track.

Self Discovery

Many women already attend professional training and have robust networks of others in their field. This may be the opportunity to create space for a more inward look. Growing as a person and discovering deep identity leads to greater self awareness which typically enhances awareness of situations and the people involved.

Taking time to evolve in your spiritual life is one of those things that many aspire to, but often don't invest the time in. Using books, spiritual directors, or spiritual disciplines as foundational tools will help you start a group focused on the inner self.

Personality assessments are plentiful and chances are you've taken several. From MBTI to StrengthsFinder to the Enneagram, there are resources available for deep exploration of your soul and motivations. Recently, I decided to take the plunge into the world of the Enneagram and it has been eye opening for so many things I do and say. I am much more aware of why I do what I do now and am able to pause and question myself when I do something I'm not proud of. The Enneagram has also helped me understand people around me as I try to meet them where they are, coach them to grow, and improve communication.

Working to know yourself better is never ending. It might seem like an odd focus for a cohort, but you are complex as a human. Every season of life unearths new layers of our identity that need to be learned and trained.

Business Development

Cohorting with women passionate about doing what they do better is one of the most exciting environments. Studies have shown that women in the marketplace tend to be more cooperative and willing to work in team, supporting the greater good of the vision. This is an important factor in networking with other women. In a cohort setup each woman plays off the energy and drive of the others. When someone is already committed to making their organization the best it can be, stepping into an arena with other women of equal passion only causes that flame to burn brighter and stronger.

Leadership involves creativity to deal with the numerous challenges and problem-solving abilities to navigate constant speed bumps. Choosing to focus on the evolution of the organizations represented will breed a think tank of exceptional ideas and business strategies. These topics may consist of areas such as marketing, digital strategy, communication, increasing pricing or revenue, and appropriate times to add staff.

Woven throughout each of these categories is leadership development. There are wonderful resources that can offer you further insight on building trust, increasing effectiveness, how to lead through change, and every aspect of evolving into the leader you want to become. Because there are so many ways to design a cohort, it's helpful to define the goal at the beginning. That doesn't mean you can't shift along the way, just keep a clear picture of where you're headed. Each person who chooses to join to your cohort wants to become a better person, a stronger leader. Give them a reason to commit and you'll create synergy within a powerful team dynamic.

Pick Your Team

You or those involved in the initial formation should create an avatar for who you picture joining your cohort. Define criteria to select members so that you form a productive and beneficial group. It's okay to move through multiple iterations of your ideal group member before settling on a profile. One of the cohort groups I helped form spent time during our first three meetings spread out over four months working through how we visualized other invitees. There is no rush, so take your time determining this aspect.

Below are a few factors to consider in creating your invitation list.

Size of Group

Figuring out how many people to include will set the tone of relationship dynamics in your group.

Demographic

Who are you trying to connect? Do you want them to be similar or different in lifestyle and life phase?

Profession

Bringing together women who have a lot in common is fun and can promote quick empathy. Women from a variety of backgrounds can spice things up, bringing interesting ideas to the group's focus. One of my favorite podcasters, Sara Fennel from The Fulfillment

Sample Goals

#3: A group of women from various industries and backgrounds who commit to a one-year track of leadership development. The content is defined up front so women know what they are getting into and what they can expect from the group. This might be geographically based or video based, with one to two in person meetings through the year. Coaches or professionals are invited to speak to the group and facilitate challenging conversations. Group size is flexible dependent on how the track is designed.

Project, is focused solely on the fitness industry. Listening to her business coaching gives me the opportunity to hear business practices from an angle I don't usually consider and that forces my brain to think differently.

Create a Schedule Frequency

Online

Each person in your cohort has a busy schedule and will be making a sacrifice to be part of this group. Meeting online has the advantage of reducing travel time if everyone is in close geographic proximity. This may mean you can meet more frequently since the time commitment is slightly less.

When the group members are spread out geographically you may also need to contend with a time difference and this could encourage fewer meetings.

Determine a regularly scheduled meeting time as early as possible. Doing so will reduce the number of conflicts. Apps such as Doodle or FreeBusy allow multiple people to sync their calendars and do the nearly impossible task of finding time slots when everyone is available.

In-person

It's a great benefit to have the time and space to bring the cohort together face to face on a regular basis. Depending on your cohort's focus and personality mix, this style may also be the most productive.

Keep in mind that logistics such as parking, extra travel time, and determining a host are important considerations to the frequency of your gatherings. Just because all the group members live near each other doesn't mean the best choice for every meeting is in person.

Social

Groups that are more socially driven may choose to meet more often. Social gatherings provide a break from the mental rigors of work and relationships and provide health for the soul. A meetup such as a happy hour might even be weekly and simply open to whomever is able to make it, requiring less rigid commitment.

**STRATEGY IS
YOUR FRIEND**

Agenda-Driven

Tricky at times, agendas can be helpful, but limiting if not used well. Decide early what types of items can go on an agenda and how various topics will be handled from a time

standpoint. One agenda item can overwhelm the entire meeting if time is not managed well. If the cohort meets infrequently, this may be a concern for group members.

Factor both the frequency of meetings and how the content will be controlled to determine the best approach for your cohort.

Retreats or Annual Gatherings

Especially for cohorts that are geographically spread out and who also may not convene online very often, a regularly scheduled meetup is a great idea. This gives group members something to look forward to attending each year or designated time period. Spending a longer period of intentional time together adds bonding experiences that are often not possible during shorter gatherings.

Leadership Structure

Dreams of developing this cohort probably began among one or two women. Part of that dream may have involved visions of leading this group of women. If that is you, be very honest with yourself about the role you expect to play in leading this cohort.

Choosing a particular style of leadership is neutral in and of itself, with pros and cons being attached to every option. The most important decision in determining the leadership style of your cohort is to be honest and transparent from the beginning. Doing this will minimize the amount of conflict that could arise down the road.

You may choose to have a single person direct the group as a whole or you might end up sharing the responsibilities among all group members. Sharing the leadership capacity creates a sense of ownership for each person, which increases commitment and connection. Depending on who you have invited to your group you can choose to assign particular roles to individuals based on their strengths or roles. Another option is to rotate leaders, shifting the primary gathering agenda from one person to the next, which can be a great way to experience different leadership styles and learn from each other.

“Trust starts with truth
and ends with truth.”
Santosh Kalwar

Group Expectations

Participation

Three quarters every year I facilitate some type of group.

After ten years of doing this with women-only groups, mixed gender groups, and groups of college students I have learned to set the expectations early and remind often. The cohort you are designing is most likely going to expect a high level of participation from each person. Explaining your vision of the interaction within the group will set everyone up for success.

Basic ground rules are helpful to keep everyone on the same page. You may prefer that no one makes any hard pitches about their own business, or that instead of telling people in the group what they should do you might choose to instruct members to simply share their own best practices. The fine line in a case like that can change the overall flavor of a group.

Attendance

How important is it that group members attend a certain number of meetings during a particular time period such as a calendar year?

Do you mind if people don't tell you they won't be able to attend a gathering?

How high do you prioritize punctuality?

Prevent frustration and misunderstanding by talking about these areas up front. Rather than assuming everyone has the same standards you live by, lay out the expectations so that everyone is running in the same lane.

Determine Meeting Content

Choosing Topics

Platforms such as Google Docs and Slack have been mentioned previously. Decide where you will keep track of topic requests, agenda items, and any side notes. Create a system to determine how topic requests are scheduled, ensuring that each member has a voice in contributing to the discussions.

Team/Trust Building

This is where you should begin as you meet with any new group. Allow the cohort members time to learn about each other, personalities, job roles, passions, and anything else relevant to the group and facilitating relationships.

Ice breaker questions don't always have the greatest connotation, but well designed questions can take a group really far in getting to know each other. Begin with more surface level questions and throughout each subsequent gathering allow the questions to become more personal and challenging.

Building a safe environment is a worthwhile endeavor. Especially for someone like me who is action-oriented, slowing down can seem counterintuitive, but time and time again I have seen the beautiful result of laying a foundation of trust. Women tend to both share and respond from a place of health when trust has been established.

Agendas

I mentioned this earlier, so I'll simply reiterate that it's helpful to determine how the agenda is made, who is responsible for leading, and how priority is assigned to each agenda item.

Stealing from Brene Brown, I suggest spending five minutes at the beginning of each gathering to confirm which agenda items should be at the top of the list. Visiting this ensures you are covering topics most relevant to those attending.

Individual vs. Group

Balancing the development of individuals and the group as a whole may surface organically for your cohort. Pay attention to this balance by monitoring the agenda yourself or posing the question to the group. Check in with group members to assess if there is a greater need on one side or the other.

Evaluate

Once you get started on a project and pick up momentum it's easy to forget about assessments. As your cohort begins meeting and develops identity and success, pause occasionally to reflect on how well you are meeting the criteria you originally laid out as your vision.

As the group evolves one important question to ask yourself and the cohort members is if the group should stay open to new members or if everyone is best served by limiting it to current members. While new perspectives can be great to introduce to the group, there is something sacred about continuing life with the same women for an extended period of time.

If you personally were the founder of the cohort, be sure the direction is still aligned with your own values and path. You may find that you started something wonderful, but that it morphed into a different shape than you planned. It is always okay to hand over the baton, step away and start a new adventure. Staying aligned with who you are is vital to your health and long term success.

Encouragement

Regardless of how confident you are in starting a cohort or how wide your current network is, the world needs more women willing to stand up and work their zone. When you sense a need in yourself or others around you there is a good possibility there are even more people with that same need who simply aren't being vocal.

You have much to offer the world around you. Just the fact that you are reading this and working to bring women together to support and challenge each other speaks volumes about your determination and passion. One of my favorite quotes is from Andy Stanley, a great leader and speaker I've had the privilege of seeing in person several times. He says, "Do for one what you wish you could do for everyone." Don't worry about changing the whole world, change the people and situations you touch and you will have found great success.

Networking Benefits

1. New opportunities

Broaden your horizons and open yourself up to things you may have never considered.

2. New markets

Increase your exposure to new perspectives and approaches to your usual niche.

3. New information

You never know what you don't know. Broaden your access to new paradigms.

4. Helping others succeed

Use your knowledge and experience to pay it forward.

5. Raise your profile

Be seen and heard in greater ways.

Adapted from <https://www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/benefits-networking/>

Copyright © 2019 by Rachel Stewart

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review.

piecesofgrit.com