The Accelerate Action Toolkit

Tania

DESA

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Introduction

I'm so excited to introduce you to the Accelerate Action Toolkit – a resource I've created to help you take meaningful steps toward fostering connection, allyship, and impact in your workplace and beyond.

Whether you're a leader, ally, or changemaker, this toolkit is packed with practical tools, powerful insights, and inspiration to spark action and create positive change.

Let's take the journey together to build workplaces where everyone feels seen, valued, and empowered to thrive. I can't wait to hear how you put these ideas into action!

Warmly,

Tania DeSa

What Does It Mean to Accelerate Action?

Accelerating action means going beyond conversations to take tangible, impactful steps that drive progress for women in workplaces and communities. It's about reimagining the roles we play, fostering meaningful connections, and creating equitable spaces where women can thrive. Central to this is the importance of self-advocacy – empowering women to confidently voice their needs, aspirations, and ideas – and building connections that amplify those voices and turn them into actionable change.

Why International Women's Day Matters

International Women's Day (IWD) is a global celebration of the achievements of women and a powerful reminder of the work still needed to achieve gender equity. This year's theme, #AccelerateAction, challenges us to think bigger and move faster in breaking barriers, fostering self-advocacy, and strengthening connection. Together, we can create a ripple effect of empowerment that transforms teams, workplaces and communities.

Purpose of This Toolkit

This toolkit is your guide to turning intention into action. It's filled with practical resources, strategies, and exercises to help you:
- Empower women to advocate for themselves.
- Foster connections that drive cross team collaboration and innovation.
- Build momentum toward equity in the workplace.

Whether you're a leader, colleague or ally, these tools will inspire you to make a measurable and meaningful impact.

Meet Our Expert: Tania DeSa

At the helm of this initiative is our CEO, Tania DeSa, a globally recognized expert in leadership, self-advocacy, and connection. With years of experience empowering Fortune 500 companies to build inclusive and thriving cultures, Tania combines actionable strategies with inspiring insights to create lasting change. Her expertise will guide you through this toolkit, helping you harness the collective power of women and allies to drive innovation and results in any team environment on earth.

12 Ways to be an Actionable Ally

Allyship is more than just a buzzword—it's about showing up, speaking out, and taking meaningful action to support others.

Whether you're new to allyship or looking to deepen your efforts, this list offers practical ways to make a real difference.

Think of these tips as small steps that can create big ripples. It's not about being perfect; it's about being intentional. Allyship is a journey, and every action you take helps create a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone.

If you're interested in learning more, or considering allyship training for your team, get in touch at tania@taniadesa.com. Our allyship workshop has a 95% approval rating from participants and 93% of them committed to take action on their learnings.

Ready to roll up your sleeves and make an impact? Here are 12 actionable ways to be an ally in your workplace and beyond!

1 Elevate the Message, Not the Delivery

In many workplaces, a woman's communication style often becomes the focus of critique, overshadowing the value and content of her ideas. Comments about a woman's tone, laugh or speaking style can unintentionally and unfairly diminish her contributions.

Research from Stanford University by Shelley J. Correll, PhD, and Caroline Simard, PhD, highlights that women are more likely than men to be critiqued for communication style and receive vague feedback like: "Her style can be a bit off-putting." These comments often miss the substance of what's being said, steering attention away from the bigger picture.

The next time you hear someone focusing on how a woman communicates rather than what she's saying, consider gently redirecting with: "I think her points are really worth exploring further. Let's dig into her ideas."

By shifting the conversation, you help create an environment where contributions are valued for their content, less critiqued for their style.

2 Lift Each Other Up

When was the last time you felt the joy of celebrating someone else's success? It's a powerful reminder of how much kindness and encouragement can mean. A simple act of recognizing someone's achievement – whether through a genuine smile, a kind word, or an uplifting gesture – can go a long way.

Think about how we can bring that same spirit of support into our everyday lives, especially in the workplace. While competition is natural, celebrating each other's accomplishments fosters a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect.

How can you cheer someone on for their work achievements? It could be as small as sending a thoughtful thank-you message, reacting with a positive emoji during a meeting, or offering public recognition in a team huddle, newsletter, or forum. You might even nominate someone for a bonus, award, or leadership opportunity.

Take a moment to reflect: Who are you celebrating? Which colleagues have been putting in more effort and deserve to be acknowledged? How will you offer your support and make sure you're lifting up those who need it most?

3 Make Feedback Specific & Meaningful

We've all heard feedback filled with vague phrases like "She's a team player" or "He always gives 110%." While these might sound positive, they often lack real meaning and fail to provide useful insights.

Generic feedback like this can be especially unhelpful because it's not actionable and an opportunity to give meaningful recognition and constructive guidance is missed. Instead of relying on overused phrases, take the time to be detailed and precise. Highlight specific achievements, behaviors or improvements. Share examples of how someone's work made a difference and suggest clear steps for further growth.

For example, instead of saying "She's a team player," you might say, "She consistently ensures everyone's input is considered during meetings and helps keep the team aligned toward shared goals." Rather than "He gives 110%," try something like, "He worked extra hours last week to ensure the project met the deadline, which showed his dedication and problem-solving skills."

By being thoughtful and intentional with your words, you can help create a more supportive and empowering environment – one that celebrates everyone's unique contributions and value.

4 Stop Interruptions and Amplify Voices

Interruptions happen all too often, and they can disproportionately silence women in the workplace. In fact, a study by Dr. Kieran Snyder showed that:

- Men interrupted at twice the rate that women did
- Men are almost three times as likely to interrupt women as they are to interrupt other men
- When women do interrupt, they interrupt other women 87% of the time

When you notice someone being cut off in a meeting, step in kindly but firmly to redirect the conversation back to them. You could say something like:

- "Let's pause for a moment – I'd like to hear [Name] finish their thought."
- "I'm really interested in hearing the rest of [Name]'s ideas before we move on."
- "Let's circle back to [Name]. I think they were about to make a great point."

Having simple phrases at your fingertips can help you respond confidently in the moment. By intervening, you're not just addressing the interruption – you're interrupting bias and role modeling allyship in action.

5 Listen To Those Who Speak Up

When someone shares a difficult or uncomfortable experience with you, how you respond matters. Dismissing their concerns – whether intentionally or not – can invalidate their feelings and discourage them from speaking up in the future.

When a colleague comes to you with a concern, start by believing them, even if their experience differs from yours. Listen without judgment, and ask thoughtful questions to better understand their perspective.

For example, if someone shares that they felt excluded during a team event, resist the urge to brush it off with, "I'm sure they didn't mean it that way." Instead, try, "I'm sorry that happened – can you tell me more about what made you feel that way?" This approach validates their feelings and shows that you're genuinely interested in understanding and supporting them.

If they face skepticism or pushback from others, be courageous in your support. Stand by them and help amplify their voice if needed. Ask how you can help – whether it's addressing the issue directly, finding resources, or simply being a sounding board.

By creating a safe and supportive space, we empower others to speak up and help foster a more respectful workplace for everyone. Let's all be allies who listen, believe and take action.

6 Lend Your Time & Enthusiasm to ERGs

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) play a vital role in creating inclusive workplaces, offering support and advocacy for underrepresented groups. But sometimes, these groups face challenges in filling leadership roles or finding volunteers to help with their initiatives.

Here's where allies can make a real difference. You don't need to belong to a specific demographic to contribute meaningfully to an ERG. For example, if your company has a Women's Network, you could volunteer to help organize events, manage communications, or advocate for its initiatives – even if you're not a woman yourself.

Allies are needed to lend their time and skills to ERGs at your workplace. Your involvement not only eases their workload but also demonstrates your commitment to fostering inclusion and equity.

Supporting ERGs isn't just about helping – it's an opportunity to learn, build connections, and champion meaningful change in your workplace.

7 Be a Career Changemaker

A real-time acknowledgement goes a long way to help someone see their full potential. Many people, especially women and underrepresented employees, may not realize they're ready for a bigger opportunity – or may hesitate to pursue it without encouragement.

If you witness a colleague's brilliance in a presentation, team meeting or project – pause and publicly acknowledge them for it. Privately, you may even want to suggest that they are ready to take on more and cheerlead them towards bigger opportunities or visibility.

A comment like, "You'd be great at leading this project – have you thought about putting your name forward?" or "I think you'd shine in that role; I'm happy to help you prepare if you're interested," can boost their confidence and open doors they might not have considered.

Your belief in their abilities could be the spark they need to take the next step in their career. Let's empower others to dream bigger, aim higher, and grow into the opportunities they deserve.

8 Take on the Broken Ladder

Despite some progress for women in the workplace over the years, many still face barriers, particularly when it comes to advancing into leadership roles. This issue is especially pronounced for women of color, who often encounter a "broken rung" on the ladder to management.

One common bias is the tendency to judge women based on their past experience, while men are often promoted based on their potential. For example, a young woman might be told, "She's not quite ready to take on a leadership role yet," even though she's been excelling in her current responsibilities. On the other hand, her male counterparts may be given more opportunities to step into leadership, with the expectation that they'll learn as they go.

If you're in a leadership position, take a closer look at how you're evaluating employees for promotion. Are you consistently applying clear criteria? Are you considering each person's potential, not just their past experience? Be mindful of biases that could prevent women from advancing and challenge them when you spot them.

9 High-Profile Opportunities for All

Not all work is created equal – some tasks can boost your career, while others are necessary but go unnoticed. High-profile assignments, in particular, can propel someone's growth, offering visibility and new opportunities. Unfortunately, not everyone has equal access to these opportunities.

Research shows that women, especially women of color, often have less access to these career-boosting assignments than their male colleagues. This disparity contributes to turnover and missed potential in the workplace.

As an ally, think about your decision-making when assigning high-profile projects. Are you unintentionally giving these assignments to the same people or types of people over and over? They might be people who currently look and sound like you, so expanding your selection pool can make a big difference in broadening diversity of thought and innovation. Look beyond your usual go-to list and consider others who may have the skills or potential to shine in these roles.

You might also think about how you can help more people develop the skills needed for such opportunities, so they're ready when the next high-profile assignment comes around.

10 Have a Go-To Response

When we hear offensive or inappropriate jokes, it can be easy to stay silent, especially if we're not sure how to react in the moment. But staying silent can imply that we're complicit with the behavior, even if we're not. As allies, it's important to speak up, disrupt bias and show that we won't tolerate comments that put others down or make them feel uncomfortable.

A great way to feel more confident when responding is to have a few phrases prepared ahead of time. If you have a few go-to responses in mind, you'll be ready to address the situation without second-guessing yourself.

Here are some suggestions for what you can say:

- "I don't get the joke, can you explain it to me?"
- "I'm not sure that's appropriate for this setting."
- "I don't think that joke is funny. Let's keep things positive."
- "Hey, let's be mindful of how that could affect others."
- "I'd prefer not to hear jokes like that."

Having these responses on hand can make it easier to step in and address the situation right away. Don't be afraid to use your voice – sometimes, that's all it takes to make a difference.

11 Recognize and Share the Load

Office housework – like taking notes, scheduling meetings, or cleaning up after events – often falls on women, especially women of color. While essential, these tasks don't typically advance careers and disproportionately fall to women. The result? Burnout, missed opportunities for growth, and unequal workplace dynamics.

Richard Branson's Take

At a dinner with executives, Branson not only brought up the issue – he took the meeting notes himself. His point? Sharing these "invisible tasks" benefits everyone. It's not just about fairness; it's about leadership. When everyone pitches in, we create a more inclusive and effective workplace.

How You Can Help Today

- Notice and Act: In your next meeting, observe who's consistently handling office housework. Offer to take on one of these tasks yourself or acknowledge the efforts of those who do.

- Implement Rotations: Suggest a fair rotation system for tasks like taking notes or organizing events so everyone shares the load.

- Set the Example: If you're in a leadership role, model equitable behaviors by volunteering for support tasks and encouraging others to do the same.

Small, consistent efforts like these can create workplaces where contributions are valued equally, and career advancement isn't hindered by invisible labor.

12 Give Honest Feedback

It's natural to feel hesitant when giving constructive feedback, especially if the person receiving it is different from you in some way. You might worry about coming across as insensitive or fear they'll misinterpret your intentions. As a result, you might soften the feedback or avoid it altogether.

But here's the thing: honest, constructive feedback is essential for growth. Holding back to spare feelings or avoid discomfort doesn't help anyone – it can even unintentionally hold someone back in their career.

Feedback can be both kind and direct. Focus on the person's work, behaviors, and achievements, and be clear about what they're doing well and where they can improve. Remember, the goal isn't just to point out areas for growth – it's to empower the individual to succeed and thrive.

By being thoughtful, respectful, and straightforward, you can build trust and create opportunities for meaningful development.

Interactive Empathy Map

Empathy fuels connection, and connection accelerates action.

This Interactive Empathy Map is designed to help you step into the perspectives of women in your workplace, understand their challenges, and identify opportunities to create meaningful change. By exploring each quadrant – what women think, see, hear, and say or do – you'll hopefully gain deeper insights into their experiences.

Use this empathy map as your starting point to listen, learn, and lead with intention. Together, we can accelerate action and create workplaces where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued.

Fillable Empathy Map

Think & Feel

- What might women in your workplace be thinking or feeling about their roles, opportunities, or challenges?
- What concerns or frustrations might they be carrying?
- What motivates or inspires them in their day-to-day work?

See

- What do you notice about how women are represented in your workplace culture?
- What are visible obstacles for women in your workplace?
- What kinds of behaviors, attitudes, or dynamics do you see that impact women's experiences?

Empower Action

Hear

- What kinds of feedback or comments are women in your workplace hearing from colleagues, leaders, or clients?
- Are they being encouraged, supported, or dismissed in conversations and team meetings?
- What messages do they receive – directly or indirectly – about their contributions and potential?

Say and Do

- How do women in your workplace communicate their ideas or needs?
- What are they actively advocating for, and what might they feel hesitant to address?
- How might their actions reflect their goals, frustrations, or the culture they're navigating?

Actionable Solutions

- What steps can you or your organization take to address the challenges identified in each quadrant?
- How can you create an environment where women feel more connected, valued, and supported?
- What policies, practices, or habits could you implement to foster equity and inclusion?
- How can you amplify women's voices and advocate for their ideas?
- What immediate actions can you take to show allyship and support for women in your workplace?

Power of Connection Infographic

Accelerating action isn't just about speed – it's about making meaningful strides that create lasting impact.

Disconnection in workplaces isn't just a feeling; it's a challenge with real consequences for productivity, creativity, and retention. But by reimagining how we collaborate and support each other, women and allies can lead the way in rebuilding strong, inclusive cultures where everyone thrives.

At the forefront of this mission is Tania DeSa, CEO of Desa Global Leadership, who brings 20+ years of expertise in helping leaders create environments of empowerment, connection and massive growth. Let's rethink policies, amplify voices, and drive collective action to build workplaces where connection is the catalyst for progress.

The Power of Connection

Why workplace connection matters and how women and allies can lead the way.

$8.8 trillion

Employee disengagement is estimated to cost the global economy $8.8 trillion due to lost productivity.
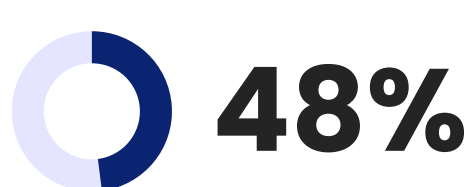
2.6x

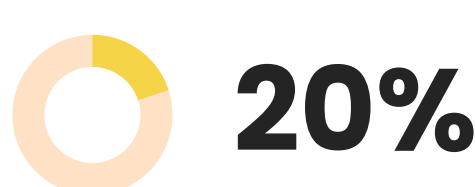Disconnected employees are 2.6 times more likely to leave their organization within the next year

43%

43% of employees report feeling disconnected from their colleagues

21%

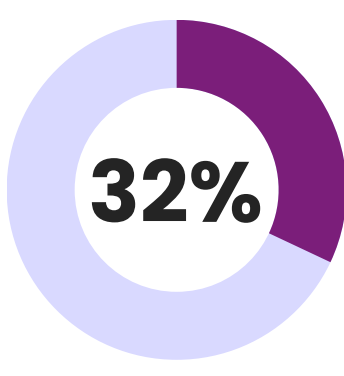Teams with low connection report a 21% decrease in productivity

48%

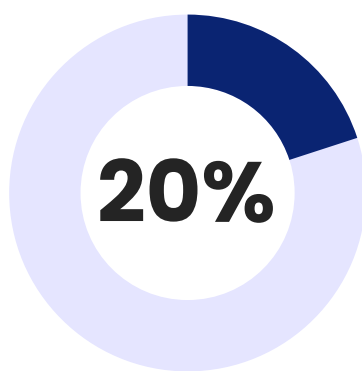48% of employees feel that workplace disconnection stifles creativity and innovation

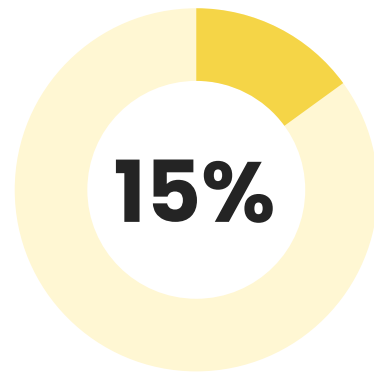### 20%

20% of employees globally experience daily loneliness

The Role Women Play

32%

Women leaders who model inclusive behaviors inspire a 32% increase in team trust and collaboration

20%

Teams led by women are 20% more likely to foster diverse and inclusive workplace cultures.

15%

Companies with women in 30% of leadership roles are 15% more likely to financially outperform their competitors.

How Allies Can Leverage Privilege

Amplify Women's Voices

Ensure women's ideas are heard in meetings. Research reveals that 41% of women feel their contributions are overlooked compared to 27% of men.

Challenge Exclusion

Call out biased comments or behaviors. For example, interrupt microaggressions by redirecting focus to inclusive language and actions. For ways to do so, click here.

Champion Policies

Advocate for flexible work policies, inclusive leadership training, and initiatives that build psychological safety. Teams with high psychological safety report a 47% increase in collaboration.

Reimaging the Workplace

Make Connection A Top Priority

Maintain Flexible Work Arrangements

Keep options like remote work, compressed workweeks or hybrid schedules. For example, Patagonia provides flexible hours to support work-life balance, leading to high retention rates among working parents.

Calendar your Check-Ins

Schedule bi-weekly one-on-one meetings to discuss goals, challenges and well-being. Managers at Microsoft use structured check-ins to keep remote and hybrid teams connected and motivated.

Promote Regular Open Dialogue

Create safe spaces like anonymous surveys or town halls. For instance, Airbnb hosts regular all-hands meetings where employees can openly discuss ideas and concerns.
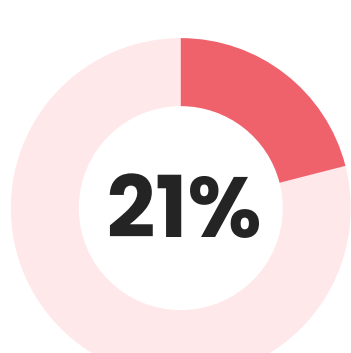
The Benefits

Increased Engagement and Retention

30%
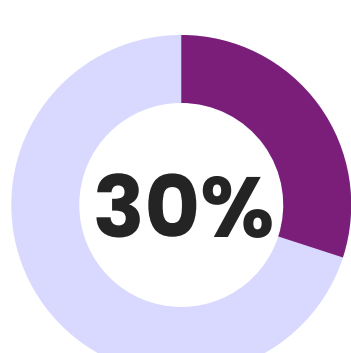
Companies that prioritize flexibility see 30% higher retention rates

Higher Productivity and Innovation

21%

Teams that feel connected are 21% more productive and generate 13% more innovative ideas

Thriving Workplace Culture

Organizations like HubSpot, known for their employee-first culture, consistently rank as top places to work due to policies that value connection and equity.

12 Connection Exercises to Boost Happiness & Productivity

Connection is at the heart of a successful and fulfilling workplace. When colleagues build strong bonds, it fosters collaboration, enhances trust, and creates an environment where everyone feels valued.

These exercises are designed to help teams engage meaningfully, develop communication skills, and deepen their understanding of one another.

Incorporating these activities into the office doesn't require a major time investment – they can be part of team-building offsites, weekly meetings, or even casual lunchtime sessions. If you are looking to build a more innovative and aligned team this year, try out these exercises.

1 Back-to-Back Drawing

Communication is more than just words – it's about how well we can share and understand ideas. According to research, poor communication contributes to [72% of all workplace failures](#) and employees who feel included in more detailed workplace communication are almost [5x more likely](#) to report increased productivity.

HOW IT WORKS:

Divide everyone into pairs and have them sit back-to-back. No peeking allowed! One person becomes the Speaker and the other the Listener. Give the Speaker a simple image or design (think shapes, patterns, or symbols) and provide the Listener with a blank sheet of paper and a pen. The Speaker describes the image in detail without naming the specific objects (e.g., instead of "circle," say "a round shape in the center of the page"). The Listener draws based on the Speaker's instructions. Once the drawing is complete, let the pairs compare the original image with the Listener's drawing. Laughs and insights are guaranteed!

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

For the Speaker:
- What strategies did you use to ensure your instructions were clear?
- Were there moments you felt your instructions might have been misunderstood? How did you adapt?
- How can this experience help you communicate more effectively in work scenarios?

For the Listener:
- How did it feel to rely solely on verbal instructions without visual guidance?
- Were there moments of confusion, and how did you handle them?
- What can you do in the future to clarify questions and reduce misunderstandings during conversations?

2 What's on My Desk?

Sharing personal stories is a powerful way to foster connection and build trust within a team. Research shows that employees who feel connected to their colleagues are 7x times more likely to be engaged in their work. Additionally, it was found that storytelling in teams increases trust by 25% and encourages stronger interpersonal relationships.

HOW IT WORKS:

Ask each participant to pick an item from their desk or nearby that holds special meaning to them. It could be anything – a photo, a keepsake, a piece of art, or even something quirky with a fun backstory. Give everyone a minute to reflect on why they chose their item. What's the story behind it? Why is it meaningful to them?

In a virtual or in-person setting, take turns sharing. Each person has 2-3 minutes to show their item and explain its significance. They might talk about where it came from, a memorable experience it's tied to, or why it holds a special place in their heart.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What's one word to describe how you felt hearing your colleagues share the stories behind their items?
- How did sharing your own item feel, and what did you notice in the reactions of your colleagues?
- What's something you learned about a teammate that surprised you or deepened your understanding of them?

3 The Blindfold Lego Challenge

Teamwork thrives on trust, communication, and creativity – and this fun, hands-on activity brings all three to life. Research shows that teams who communicate effectively are [25% more likely](#) to meet project deadlines and perform well in high-stakes situations. This exercise builds on those findings by strengthening verbal communication and trust between team members.

HOW IT WORKS:

Gather Lego pieces (or similar building blocks) and create a simple structure as the goal. Keep this design hidden from the participants and divide the group into teams of 3–5 people. Within each team, assign one person as the Builder who will wear a blindfold, while the others take on the role of Guides.

The Builder, wearing a blindfold, attempts to recreate the hidden design using the blocks. The Guides give verbal instructions to help, but here's the catch:
The Guides can't touch the blocks and the Builder can't ask questions – they must rely entirely on what they hear. Once the structure is built (or the time runs out), remove the blindfold and compare the team's creation to the original design.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

For the Builder:
- What was the clearest guidance you received, and why did it stand out?
- How did it feel to rely entirely on verbal instructions?
- What strategies helped you interpret and act on the directions you were given

For the Guides:
- What challenges did you face in giving instructions without visual feedback?
- How did you adjust your communication to be more effective?
- Was there anything you could have done differently to ensure clarity?

Pro Tip: Add Variations: Introduce obstacles, like limiting the number of words Guides can use or having one person act as a "decoy" with conflicting instructions to simulate workplace challenges.

4 The Appreciation Circle

Expressing genuine appreciation creates stronger bonds and boosts team morale. According to research, employees who feel appreciated are 17% more productive and 20% more likely to stay with their current employer. Moreover, research found that teams that engage in regular expressions of gratitude report higher levels of collaboration, trust, and job satisfaction.

HOW IT WORKS:

Gather the team in a circle – this could be in-person or virtually. Set a friendly and encouraging tone, emphasizing that the goal is to focus on sincerity and celebrate each other's unique contributions. Start with one person. They'll turn to the person next to them and share something they genuinely appreciate about them. For example:
"I really admire how you always bring creative solutions to our meetings." Instead of general compliments, encourage everyone to be specific. For instance: "Your ability to stay calm under pressure during last week's project deadline really inspired me."

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- How did it feel to receive appreciation from a colleague?
- Was it easier or harder to give appreciation? Why?
- What impact do you think this kind of acknowledgment could have on our team culture?
- What small steps can we take as a team to integrate more appreciation into our daily interactions?

SUGGESTIONS FOR CONTINUED PRACTICE:

- **Start Meetings with Gratitude:** Begin team check-ins by having one or two people share quick appreciations.
- **Set Up a "Gratitude Wall":** Create a space (physical or digital) where team members can leave notes of thanks or acknowledgment for one another.
- **Integrate into Reviews:** Include a time for peer-to-peer recognition in regular performance or project reviews.

5 Office Scavenger Hunt

Workplaces are full of hidden treasures and quirky moments waiting to be uncovered. According to research, employees who are engaged in team-building activities are 21% more productive, and companies that prioritize employee engagement report 4.5x higher employee retention.

HOW IT WORKS:

Create a list of fun items to find or tasks to complete specific to your office or virtual workspace. These might include:

- "Find a mug with a funny quote."
- "Take a team selfie in front of the break room whiteboard."
- "Discover someone who has been at the company for more than five years and learn one fun fact about them."

Add clues or riddles to make the tasks more engaging, such as, "Find the spot where ideas flow and markers go dry." Divide participants into small groups of 3-5 people. Smaller teams ensure that everyone gets involved and has a role in the adventure. Teams should focus on effective communication, sharing ideas, and making sure everyone participates. Set a time limit to maintain energy and momentum – 30-60 minutes is ideal.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What 3 factors contributed most to your team's success during the scavenger hunt? (e.g., clear communication, creativity, or delegating tasks effectively).
- How did teamwork influence the way your group approached challenges?
- What did you learn about your colleagues that you didn't know before?

PRO TIPS:

- **Mix Physical and Digital Tasks:** Incorporate a mix of physical challenges and digital tasks, such as sending a thank-you email to a colleague or finding a specific file on the shared drive.
- **Involve Leadership:** If possible, have a senior leader participate or play a role, such as handing out a clue or serving as a "mystery item" to find. This helps bridge gaps between leadership and staff.

6 Group Storytelling

Stories have a way of bringing people together, sparking creativity, and encouraging teamwork. Research shows that storytelling in teams enhances communication and emotional connection, which directly boosts engagement and productivity. Storytelling also creates a 34% increase in team cohesion, making it a powerful tool for strengthening workplace bonds.

HOW IT WORKS:

Gather everyone in a circle, whether in-person or virtually, so each participant feels included and can see or hear others. Kick off the activity with a fun and neutral opening line to set the tone, such as:

- "It was a rainy Monday when the office goldfish went missing…"
- "In the middle of a team meeting, the lights flickered, and suddenly…"

Going around the circle, each participant adds a sentence to build on the story. Encourage creativity and humor while reminding everyone to keep the story inclusive and respectful.

VARIATIONS:

Themes: Give the group a specific theme to center the story around, such as teamwork, overcoming challenges, or a workplace mystery.

Constraints: Add twists like "Each sentence must include a color" or "Every contribution must be a question."

IDEAS FOR CONTINUED PRACTICE:

- **Department Themes:** Tailor the story themes to align with specific team or departmental goals, such as "our next product launch" or "a day in the life of our customers."
- **Virtual Adaptations:** For remote teams, use collaboration tools like Google Docs or Slack threads to create the story asynchronously, with each person contributing over a set period.

7 Find the Common Ground

Finding shared experiences and interests is a powerful way to foster relationships and build a sense of camaraderie. Research shows that finding common ground creates an environment where employees feel they belong, and belonging was linked to a [56% increase in job performance](#), a [50% drop in turnover](#), and a [75% reduction in sick days](#).

HOW IT WORKS:

Partner participants with someone they haven't worked closely with before. For larger groups, use random methods like drawing names or assigning numbers to form pairs.
Give each pair three minutes to discover as many things as they have in common. After time's up, invite pairs to share a few of their discoveries with the group. This can help spark new connections and insights across the team.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What did you learn about your colleague that you didn't expect?
- Were there any interests or experiences that deepened your understanding of who they are?
- How can finding common ground contribute to building stronger team relationships?
- What steps can you take to foster these connections in daily work interactions?

8 Office Bingo

Building stronger connections doesn't have to be all business - it can be a game! Office Bingo is a lively and engaging activity that helps teams bond, share fun facts, and learn more about each other and the workplace. Building relationships and understanding among team members leads to improved collaboration. Research found that when employees have friends at work, they are [7x more likely to be engaged](#) and [3x more likely to be productive](#).

HOW IT WORKS:

Create a grid filled with prompts that reflect your team's unique culture, interests, and experiences. Examples might include:

- "Has worked here for more than five years"
- "Can name three people's favorite hobbies"
- "Loves spicy food"
- "Has met the CEO in person"

Include a mix of work-related and personal prompts to keep the activity engaging. Encourage participants to move around, chat with their teammates, and get someone to sign the relevant square when a match is found. Allow 10-15 minutes for the activity. This keeps the energy high and ensures conversations stay focused.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What was the most surprising or fun fact you learned about your colleagues?
- How did this activity help you connect with someone new or deepen an existing relationship?

IDEAS FOR CONTINUED PRACTICE:

- **Team-Specific Boards:** Create Bingo sheets tailored to specific departments or functions to deepen understanding within smaller groups.
- **Icebreaker Version:** Use Office Bingo as a warm-up activity for new team members or during onboarding to help them integrate quickly.

9 Random Acts of Kindness

Kindness has the power to bring teams closer and foster a culture of positivity. Research shows that 78% of employees who experience workplace kindness report feeling more connected to their team and their organization. Additionally, organizations fostering a culture of kindness and appreciation report 60% higher employee retention rates and 50% higher performance levels.

HOW IT WORKS:

Share the concept of a Kindness Challenge and explain its purpose: to build stronger relationships, boost morale, and create a supportive team environment. Ask each participant to commit to performing at least two acts of kindness for their colleagues during the week. Share examples to inspire creativity, such as:

- Writing a note of encouragement.
- Bringing someone their favorite coffee or snack.
- Offering extra help to meet a deadline.
- Giving a sincere compliment on someone's recent work

Add a Creative Twist:

- Set up a Kindness Board or Kindness Jar in a shared space. Participants can leave anonymous notes of appreciation, small tokens, or shoutouts for colleagues to discover throughout the week.
- For remote teams, create a virtual space – such as a dedicated Slack channel or email thread – for sharing acts of kindness and expressing gratitude.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- How did performing random acts of kindness impact your own mood and outlook at work?
- Did you notice any changes in the way you interacted with or perceived your colleagues?
- How did it feel to receive an unexpected kind gesture?

IDEAS FOR CONTINUED PRACTICE:

- **Kindness Calendar:** Create a monthly calendar with suggested acts of kindness for employees to try out regularly.
- **Peer Nomination:** Implement a system where employees can nominate colleagues for a "Kindness Spotlight," sharing their thoughtful actions with the team.

10 Fail Fest

Mistakes are inevitable, but how we approach them shapes our growth. Research shows that teams that embrace failure as a learning tool see a [25% increase in overall team performance](). Furthermore, [72% of employees]() report feeling more engaged and motivated when they feel that their workplace is supportive of mistakes and learning from them.

HOW IT WORKS:

Fail Fest is an opportunity to normalize mistakes as part of the learning process. Ask each team member to think about a mistake or failure they experienced over the past year. On a post-it note (or digital equivalent for remote teams), they'll write down the mistake and one sentence describing the lesson they learned from it.

Set up a Fail Fest board or wall, either in person or virtually, where participants can post their notes. For virtual teams, a shared document, whiteboard, or Slack channel can serve as the platform. Once everyone has posted their notes, take time to celebrate the courage it took for each person to share their failure and the valuable lessons they gained.

Highlight that failure isn't the end – it's part of the journey toward innovation and success.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- How did sharing your mistake and reflecting on it feel?
- What's one takeaway from another colleague's experience that resonated with you?
- How can we create an environment where it feels safe to fail and learn?
- What processes or habits could we implement to turn failures into opportunities for growth?

PRO TIPS:

- **Lead with Vulnerability:** Encourage leaders and managers to share their own failures first to set the tone and build trust.
- **Emphasize Psychological Safety:** Reinforce that this exercise is a judgment-free zone focused on learning and growth, not assigning blame.
- **Normalize Reflection:** Suggest making reflection on mistakes a regular part of team culture, such as incorporating it into retrospectives or debriefs.

11 Coffee Roulette

We all know how easy it is to stick to familiar faces at work. But what if we had a way to spark spontaneous, meaningful conversations across the team? By randomly pairing people for coffee chats (in-person or virtual), this activity helps break down silos and creates opportunities for new relationships to blossom, all while making the workplace feel a little more connected and friendly.

Statistics show that workplace friendships can increase employee satisfaction by up to 50%, and employees with close friends at work are 7x more likely to be engaged in their jobs.

HOW IT WORKS:

Randomly pair team members for a coffee chat – in-person or virtually. If virtual, set up a video call for each pair. Use a tool or app to make the pairings easy and fair. Each chat should last about 20-30 minutes. There's no pressure to follow a script, but you can suggest light, engaging topics like hobbies, weekend plans, or ongoing projects.

Make it a regular ritual. Whether weekly or monthly, keep the pairings fresh to ensure everyone has the chance to connect with different colleagues. Over time, these small, casual conversations can build bridges, foster collaboration, and make the workplace feel a little more connected.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What did you learn about your colleague that you didn't know before?
- How did the conversation change your perspective or understanding of your teammate?
- How can we continue to build relationships outside of formal work settings?
- What impact do informal connections like these have on our workplace culture?

PRO TIPS:

- **Mix It Up:** Pair different people each time to ensure a variety of connections.
- **Keep It Light and Fun:** Emphasize that this is a relaxed activity, and the goal is to connect, not to discuss work.
- **Encourage Participation:** Make it voluntary but encourage everyone to join in to get the most out of the experience.

12 Team-Building Retreat

Taking time away from the office can do wonders for team connection and creativity. By immersing the team in fun, collaborative activities, you'll foster stronger relationships and develop key skills that enhance teamwork. Research shows that employees who feel connected to their teams are 25% more likely to perform at their highest potential. Organizing a team-building retreat can help your organization tap into these proven benefits.

HOW IT WORKS:

Start by setting the tone: Let everyone know this is a chance to step back, have fun, and strengthen trust within the team. Plan a mix of activities, from team-building exercises to skill building workshops and informal discussions, focusing on collaboration and communication without the pressure of daily work tasks.

Incorporate activities that push boundaries and build teamwork in unexpected ways - outdoor problem-solving challenges or creative group projects. These shared experiences can help colleagues bond in ways that traditional settings don't allow.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What was your favorite activity and why?
- How did this retreat help you see your coworkers in a new light?
- What did you learn about collaboration and communication during the retreat?
- How can we bring the energy and insights from the retreat back to the office?

PRO TIPS:

- **Encourage Open Communication:** Be sure to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences, fostering openness and trust.
- **Make It Ongoing:** Consider using the retreat as a jumping-off point for ongoing team-building efforts, whether through regular follow-up activities or team check-ins.
- **Book an Interactive Keynote or Workshop:** Tania is a regular at team-building and leadership retreats and has a 98% approval rating from participants. If you're looking to take your event from good to great, learn more here.

The Fatal Performance Review: A Lesson in Self-Advocacy

As the CEO of Desa Global Leadership, I've had the privilege of helping leaders step into their power and build connected, thriving workplaces - but it wasn't always smooth sailing for me.

We often hold back because we worry how we'll be perceived or wrestle with imposter syndrome. But here's the truth: self-advocacy isn't about bragging - it's about owning your impact, sharing your stories, and showing others what's possible.

I hope this story inspires you to reframe self-advocacy as an act of leadership. By stepping up and owning our contributions, we're not just advancing our own careers - we're paving the way for others to do the same.

Early in my career, I had an experience that changed how I approached self-advocacy forever. Five months into my role as a sales representative for a large pharmaceutical company, I walked into my performance review feeling confident that my hard work would speak for itself.

I had been putting in long hours, learning new products, connecting with colleagues, and giving my all. I assumed my boss had noticed my efforts and that the meeting would be straightforward – maybe a few questions, some feedback, and we'd be done.

But just a few minutes into the conversation, my boss began asking pointed questions: "How do your contributions tie into the bigger strategies of our business unit? How are you demonstrating our leadership core principles?" I froze.

I realized I hadn't prepared – not from a self-advocacy standpoint, and not with specific stories or examples that clearly demonstrated my impact. My mind raced, and I excused myself to the bathroom just to buy time to think.

That moment was terrifying, but it was also a wake-up call. I vowed never to let it happen again.

By my next performance review, I approached things differently. I came prepared with concrete examples and case studies that showed how I embodied our leadership principles and contributed to the organization and team's goals. I highlighted the accomplishments I was most proud of and the progress I'd made.

This process of reflecting and curating my stories didn't just prepare me for the review – it reconnected me with my purpose. I felt more aligned with my work, more inspired by my contributions, and more connected to my colleagues.

Through this journey, I learned a powerful truth: **Your work doesn't speak for itself. You have to speak for yourself.** Self-advocacy isn't about arrogance or self-interest – it's about owning our lived experiences, framing our contributions, and sharing our stories at the right time and in the right way. When we do, we reclaim our power, own our contributions, and inspire others to do the same.

This is especially important for women. Unsurprisingly, studies show that men are often more confident and willing to self-advocate than women.

In a study by Harvard, men rated themselves 33% higher than women did. In another study, 73% of women reported fearing how they are viewed when self-promoting, causing them to do so less.

mposter syndrome also disproportionately impacts women, with one study finding that it's been experienced by 75% of female executives throughout their career. It's not even limited to early career – high achievers in senior positions are actually more likely than average to experience it.

Practicing self advocacy is one important way we accelerate action to close the gender gap and unleash the true potential of career advancement. When we practice self-advocacy, we become role models, demonstrating what it means to take pride in our work and our value.

Let's help move past the fear and reframe self-advocacy as an act of leadership - not just for ourselves, but for those watching and learning from us every day.

Enthusiastically,

Tania DeSa

Books for Inspiration

As we celebrate International Women's Day and take steps to accelerate action, it's essential to equip ourselves with insights and tools that inspire meaningful change.

Curated for women and allies alike, this list highlights works from authors who challenge norms, address systemic barriers, and offer actionable strategies for growth. Whether you're looking to build confidence, drive equity, or lead with purpose, these books are packed with stories, research, and practical takeaways to spark new ideas and bold action.
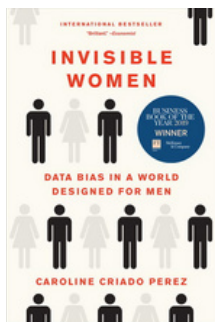
Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men by Caroline Criado Perez

An examination of how systemic gender data gaps disadvantage women in every aspect of life, from healthcare to infrastructure design.

Key Takeaways:
- Gender bias in data collection perpetuates inequality in healthcare, workplaces, and public spaces.
- A one-size-fits-all approach often defaults to male standards, leaving women's needs unaddressed.
- Advocating for inclusive data collection and representation is crucial for systemic change.
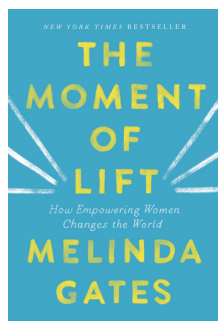
The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Change the World by Melinda Gates

Gates shares stories of how investing in women leads to transformative changes in communities and economies.

Key Takeaways:
- Access to education and healthcare for women directly correlates with societal progress.
- Women's empowerment requires dismantling cultural and systemic barriers.
- Small, consistent acts of advocacy can create large-scale impact over time.

No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference
by Greta Thunberg

A collection of speeches by Greta Thunberg that demonstrates the power of individual voices in driving global action.

Key Takeaways:

- Anyone, regardless of age or position, can inspire meaningful change.
- Courage and persistence are essential for advocating for justice and sustainability.
- Collective action amplifies the impact of individual efforts.

Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead
by Sheryl Sandberg

Sandberg provides practical advice for women to take charge of their careers and challenge gender barriers in leadership.

Key Takeaways:

- Self-advocacy and mentorship are critical tools for advancing in the workplace.
- Women should "lean in" to opportunities, even when self-doubt arises.
- Workplace equity requires addressing systemic biases and creating supportive environments.

Own It: The Power of Women at Work
by Sallie Krawcheck

A guide to embracing the strengths women bring to the workplace and using them to thrive professionally.

Key Takeaways:

- Leveraging traditionally feminine qualities like empathy can drive workplace success.
- Financial independence is a key pillar of empowerment.
- Building inclusive networks accelerates opportunities for women.
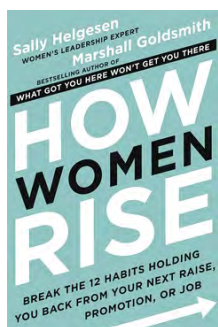
How Women Rise
by Sally Helgesen and Marshall Goldsmith

Lean In identifies habits that hold women back and offers strategies to break through those barriers.

Key Takeaways:
- Overvaluing expertise over visibility can hinder career growth.
- Building networks and learning to delegate are essential for advancement.
- Confidence and self-promotion are skills women can actively cultivate.

Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office
by Lois P. Frankel

A practical guide that highlights common workplace mistakes women make and how to correct them.

Key Takeaways:
- Assertiveness and strategic communication are critical for career progression.
- Seeking mentorship and advocating for oneself are essential career skills.
- Overcoming perfectionism helps women take risks and seize opportunities.

Playing Big
by Tara Mohr

Mohr provides strategies to help women overcome fear and self-doubt to achieve their goals.

Key Takeaways:
- Trusting your inner voice and intuition leads to authentic leadership.
- Unlearning perfectionism is vital to taking bold steps in life and work.
- Defining success on your terms fosters fulfillment and resilience.
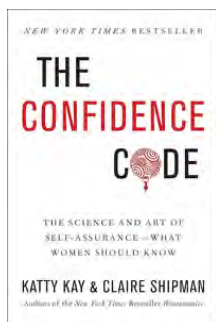
The Confidence Code
by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman

Explores the science behind confidence and how women can cultivate it for personal and professional success.

Key Takeaways:
- Confidence is developed through action, not perfection.
- Failing and learning from mistakes build resilience and self-assurance.
- Societal norms often inhibit women's confidence, but these can be challenged.
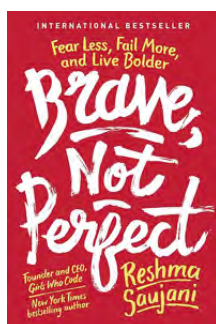
Brave, Not Perfect
by Reshma Saujani

Encourages women to embrace imperfection and take bold risks for personal growth.

Key Takeaways:
- Fear of failure often prevents women from reaching their full potential.
- Embracing bravery over perfection fosters innovation and confidence.
- Reframing failure as growth is a powerful mindset shift.

Girl, Stop Apologizing
by Rachel Hollis

A guide to overcoming societal expectations and unapologetically pursuing personal and professional goals.

Key Takeaways:
- Stop seeking external validation to achieve personal fulfillment.
- Setting clear goals and boundaries is key to success.
- Owning your ambitions unapologetically inspires others to do the same.
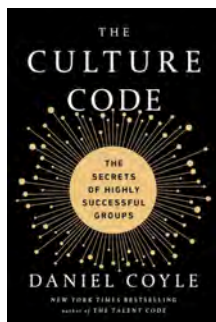
The Culture Code
by Daniel Coyle

Analyzes how successful teams build trust, connection, and shared purpose.

Key Takeaways:
- Psychological safety is essential for team cohesion and innovation.
- Vulnerability fosters deeper trust and collaboration among team members.
- Clear communication of purpose aligns individual efforts with collective goals.
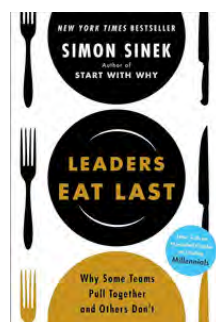
Radical Candor
by Kim Scott

Provides tools for building workplace relationships through honest, compassionate feedback.

Key Takeaways:
- Radical candor combines caring personally with challenging directly.
- Honest feedback strengthens trust and performance within teams.
- Avoiding feedback harms both individual growth and team dynamics.

Leaders Eat Last
by Simon Sinek

Explores the importance of servant leadership and building trust within organizations.

Key Takeaways:
- Leaders must prioritize the well-being of their teams to foster loyalty.
- Trust and empathy are foundational to long-term organizational success.
- A sense of purpose motivates individuals to perform their best.

About the Author

When companies are going through transformation or struggling with low retention and engagement, they call Tania DeSa.

Tania is an expert in helping leaders own their differences and equips them with actionable strategies to build inclusive and thriving teams. She shares her insights, stories and proven tools at organizations like Google, Intel, American Express, Cigna, Samsung, Capital One and Yale.

Armed with an MBA, TEDx talk and experience across 87+ countries, Tania has delivered inspired and activated leaders across 5 continents.

Ready to Transform Your Next Event?

Let's make your audience feel inspired, empowered, and ready to take action. By booking Tania, you're bringing a dynamic voice to the stage who will inspire your audience to own their difference.

Whether it's a keynote, workshop, or panel, Tania will customize an unforgettable experience that connects with your audience on a deeper level. To learn more, visit **taniadesa.com** or connect with Tania at **tania@taniadesa.com**.

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