

WOMEN AS LEADERS

Ellen Frantz interviews leadership coach Annette Corbett to mark International Women's Day 2023



Excerpts:

What made you start a women in leadership business?

What I was seeing is that women didn't want to call themselves leaders, and I wanted to help them think about “Why is that?” and “What does leadership look like for them?” and “How can they express it in a way that feels more aligned with who they are?”

How do you think that women can be empowered to see themselves as leaders?

What I see a lot with women who I consider to be leaders, even if they don't necessarily consider themselves to be leaders yet, is that they're very collaborative. And I think because that's not necessarily a value that we've valued literally in leadership, that's part of why they don't think of themselves as leaders. So, I always say that my definition of leadership is really broad in that if you see that there's a change that you want to make, and you are taking responsibility for making that change, that means you're a leader.

How are women using their skills to overcome issues they face in the workplace?

I really love doing group coaching programmes because of that, because I think we often isolate ourselves because part of it – I'm probably speaking for myself quite a lot here as well, but also for a lot of women I work with – they tend to be kind of perfectionists and people pleasers is how I describe them. So, we don't want to get stuff wrong. We don't really necessarily want to ask lots of questions because we feel like we should know the stuff. But when we come together as a group, then it feels easier to ask what might feel like stupid questions because we recognise that there are lots of other people in the room who feel the same. And I think that skill of communication and kindness that so many women have is really valuable in supporting each other to face that more challenging environment in the workplace.

Can you suggest some inspirational women role models?

I was particularly thinking of Bessie Boothroyd actually at the moment because of her passing away, was it 93? I was really stunned by her history when I was watching the news last night, and they did a bit of a breakdown of her life story. I didn't realise she used to be a tiller girl. There's this picture of her doing this kind of back bend with her leg in the air, and I was like, wow, how did we not know this story before? This amazing woman. And there's so many different facets of her and her good humour but her power as well, and that combination of being able to hold such a male dominated environment like the House of Commons and make sure everyone was behaving themselves.

And Nicola Sturgeon ... there was a quote of her talking right near the end of her career; she's saying something like, *I went, I know, at the right time*. And again, it was that sense of recognising there was a mission that was wider than her that she was serving. So, she was leading from this – I talk about leading from a place of service – she was leading from a place of service rather than wanting to hold onto power, and she recognised when it was time to let go and pass it onto someone else.

There are the ones in the background ...who could be inspiring if we knew more about them. ...that made me think of one of Pascal Theatre Company's projects [Women for Women]...all these untold stories that we know so little about. The idea that anonymous is often the woman in these stories. And it's these women who are really leading the way and at the forefront of developing amazing things that we don't even know unless we do the research because it's just not a story that's told.

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Ellen Frantz interviews leadership coach Annette Corbett February 2023

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak with Annette Corbett, leadership coach, to mark International Women's Day. Annette, it is so nice to meet you.

It's a delight to meet you, Ellen.

What made you start a women in leadership business?

This is really interesting. I think it's been an evolution really. I have worked in the arts for about 15 years. Before that I actually worked as a legal PA, so I had a big career shift where I realised I just didn't really care about what I was doing. In the arts, I've worked with so many amazing women, and I was just seeing so many of them getting really burned out and overwhelmed and doing all this amazing work but not really feeling like they were stepping into what they could be doing, as if they're all kind of holding themselves back. And a lot of them don't think of themselves as women as leaders, so when I qualified as a coach in 2019, I knew I wanted to work with women in some way. And then of course everything just

kind of went crazy. In 2020, everything imploded. I was made redundant, and I thought, well, if this isn't the time to take the leap, then I don't know when is. So, that's when I decided to focus on coaching and facilitation and really helping women to think about what leadership means because part of what I was seeing is that women didn't want to call themselves leaders, and I wanted to help them think about "Why is that?" and "what does leadership look like for them?" and "How can they express it in a way that feels more aligned with who they are?"

Do you feel that there has been a change in representation of women in leadership over the past 10 years?

When I think about this question, specifically, what comes to mind for me is Jacinda Ardern and Nicola Sturgeon retiring recently and stepping back from leadership. Because I was thinking about how different female leadership has been, especially actually through the pandemic, I think there's been quite a notable difference in how the women have led and how the men have led. And I was thinking about how powerful it is that they decided when they were ready to step down, and they recognised that maybe they weren't the people to lead anymore. Also, there was something about them wanting to think about their own wellbeing, which is really important to me because that's something that I see that women aren't great at because we're so used to being socialised to look after other people all the time. And I think that for me is what kind of more female 'leadership' looks like. And I was thinking about how that is starting to become more of the way leadership is seen more generally. I think there is a creep towards that. But in terms of representation of women in leadership, I think obviously there still isn't enough.

I think we've moved, but we've not maybe moved as far as we could have moved. There's progress. It's always slow. And I think of powerful women in this country who've led – obviously people like Margaret Thatcher who are incredibly divisive. Very strong female leader, but maybe not what we would describe as a 'feminine' leader, perhaps. There's a big difference, I think.

How do you think that women can be empowered to see themselves as leaders?

That's a great question. I always say in my coaching business that everything starts with self-awareness. I think when we understand ourselves, when we understand our values, what is important to us, how we want to kind of behave in the world, how we want to treat other people, how we want to treat ourselves, everything kind of starts there because, once you have an understanding of that and what your broader mission for the world is, it becomes so much easier to share that because what I see a lot with women who I consider to be leaders, even if they don't necessarily consider themselves to be leaders yet, is that they're very collaborative. And I think because that's not necessarily a value that we've valued literally in leadership, that's part of why they don't think of themselves as leaders. So, I always say that my definition of leadership is really broad in that if you see that there's a change that you want to make, and you are taking responsibility for making that change, that means you're a leader. And that can also be a change in yourself as well. There's this whole element of sort self-leadership. What do you want to change about yourself and what responsibility are you taking for that? How are you going to make that change? That, for me, is what leadership means.

How are women using their skills to overcome issues they face in the workplace?

I'm not sure that issues are going away anytime soon, are they? We seem to kind of go around in cycles, or things get better, then we slip back a bit. I think I've sort of talked about this, that our sense of what leadership is *is* shifting. I think over the last few years, particularly, it's become so clear how many—especially people who work in the arts actually—how many people are under so much pressure, how much people are overwhelmed and burning out, and the importance of mental health, where suddenly, because we've all been through a very similar experience – although, you know, our lived experience means we've been through it in different ways – we are all recognising how stressed, how tiring... The mental health load of the last three years has suddenly made everyone

realise: yes, this is a thing. It's something we do need to address. I think that there's something in that more compassionate leadership that women can bring to the workplace. So, there is a recognition that things need to change, and in terms of the way women are actually using their skills, maybe it's about bringing that to help them to change the culture, which I think is obviously a big change, but it does feel more possible than it used to. In terms of overcoming issues they're facing as individuals, or that we face as a gender more generally, I'm a big believer in coming together and supporting each other. I really love doing group coaching programmes because of that, because I think we often isolate ourselves because part of it – I'm probably speaking for myself quite a lot here as well, but also for a lot of women I work with – they tend to be kind of perfectionists and people pleasers is how I describe them. So, we don't want to get stuff wrong. We don't really necessarily want to ask lots of questions because we feel like we should know the stuff. But when we come together as a group, then it feels easier to ask what might feel like stupid questions because we recognise that there are lots of other people in the room who feel the same. And I think that skill of communication and kindness that so many women have is really valuable in supporting each other to face that more challenging environment in the workplace.

Can you suggest some inspirational women role models?

Well, I was particularly thinking of Bessie Boothroyd actually at the moment because of her passing away, was it 93? I was really stunned by her history when I was watching the news last night, and they did a bit of a breakdown of her life story. I didn't realise she used to be a tiller girl. There's this picture of her doing this kind of back bend with her leg in the air, and I was like, wow, how did we not know this story before? This amazing woman. And there's so many different facets of her and her good humour but her power as well, and that combination of being able to hold such a male dominated environment like the House of Commons and make sure everyone was behaving themselves. I think there was actually a piece of footage of her going like, "Behave yourselves!" actually like a schoolteacher. And I was really impressed by that, and I think similarly to Jacinda

Arden and Nicola Sturgeon that I mentioned earlier. Actually, there was a quote of her talking right near the end of her career; she's saying something like, *I went, I know, at the right time*. And again, it was that sense of recognising there was a mission that was wider than her that she was serving. So, she was leading from this – I talk about leading from a place of service – she was leading from a place of service rather than wanting to hold onto power, and she recognised when it was time to let go and pass it onto someone else. I thought that was really inspiring. I think there are so many obvious ones. We think of people like Michelle Obama and these amazing strong women. But then there are the ones that are kind of in the background, which are the ones I tend to work with, who could be inspiring if we knew more about them. I suppose actually that made me think of one of Julia's, Pascal Theatre Company's, projects at the moment. These ideas of all these untold stories that we know so little about. The idea that anonymous is often the woman in these stories. And it's these women who are really leading the way and at the forefront of developing amazing things that we don't even know unless we do the research because it's just not a story that's told.

Would you like to share a little bit about the work that you're doing currently to empower women?

That'd be great. I think I've been going through an interesting shift myself recently, where the work I do and how I serve the women I work with is changing in interesting ways. One of the things I talk about is unleashing your awesome, which is this idea – actually, it kind of comes back to what I was saying earlier – this idea that the women who are doing amazing things are maybe not really showing it, because they feel a little bit like they're not supposed to. So, I am developing a group programme I'm going to do later in the year, which is really about supporting women to do that and think about what is the awesome thing about themselves and how can they make the most of it? How can they show it without feeling sort of icky, basically? My work for the rest of this week is putting the finishing touches to a programme called The Catalyst, which is a one-to-one three-month programme. I came up with a name actually because it's a chemistry term. It's this idea that all the ingredients are there to do something amazing, but

it just needs an outside object, an outside agent to make it all fizz up and happen. So, the idea of the programme is helping them to get that outside agent that helps them to transform into something different in an area of their life where they want to change. So, I thought that was quite a cool name. And I used to be quite into physics and chemistry, so it seemed appropriate. That's what I'm working on at the moment and just seeing what the future looks like.

I liked the idea where you talked about the physics and the catalyst.

I really struggled with a name, and then I just came across it and thought, ah, that's the word. Yeah, it's that thing. It's accelerating something. It's activating something that feels quite exciting.

Annette Corbett [Annette Corbett • Coaching](#)