

Boldly Strategic: How Women Drive Career Growth in 2026

by Tonya Tiggett and Amy Lahmers

“Together, we believe boldness is not a personality trait. It’s a leadership practice that can be learned.” -Amy Lahmers

Why We’re Talking About Boldness Now

Boldness¹ is often praised as a leadership imperative, until women practice it.

For women, bold leadership is frequently misunderstood, inconsistently rewarded, and sometimes penalized. Yet boldness remains one of the most powerful accelerators of visibility, influence, and career growth, especially as organizations navigate complexity, change, and pressure in 2026 and beyond.

Boldness in leadership is sometimes misunderstood. It’s not about being loud, aggressive, or domineering.

Boldness is:

- the courage to speak when it would be easier to stay silent.
- to step forward when doubt whispers *“Who do you think you are?”*
- to act in alignment with our calling and purpose, even when there’s risk involved.

As Amy points out, “For women, boldness matters because many of us were taught to be agreeable, accommodating, and grateful just to have a seat at the table. Women leaders often carry an added weight: the fear of being labeled too much, too assertive, too emotional, too ambitious. But shrinking back doesn’t protect us from criticism; it only limits our impact.”

Amy continues, “Boldness, when grounded in humility, wisdom, and purpose, is not self-serving. It’s living into our calling, using the gifts, experiences, and insights we’ve been given.”

In December 2025, we co-hosted ***Leading with Boldness***, a webinar designed to reclaim boldness as a strategic leadership capability women can use without sacrificing authenticity, credibility, or [emotional intelligence](#).

¹ Boldness in Tonya’s workshops has a Webster’s dictionary definition of lacking fear, having confidence in a way that may seem foolish, not afraid of danger.

Tonya’s definition is the act of exploring unfamiliar or uncomfortable contexts where there are also increased unknowns as a result, which equals more likely risk.

Tonya examines a three-prong framework to encourage boldness through the lens of: 1. Breaking a status quo 2. Pushing past criticism or judgement 3. Taking action to not live in regret.

Why This Topic?

Tonya has interviewed more than 40 leaders across industries since 2018 on unapologetic boldness, which she calls her “passion project.”

Her global research on boldness and facilitation work consistently shows that bold, values-driven leadership behaviors increase women’s likelihood of:

- raising their hand for growth opportunities
- negotiating pay and responsibilities
- experiencing greater fulfillment at work
- securing sponsorship that leads to senior leadership roles, where women remain critically under-represented

Amy works with mission-driven leaders who carry responsibility for people, purpose, and performance. She believes the most impactful leaders are those who can hold humility and unapologetic boldness at the same time, leaders who create trust, shift culture, and drive accountability without fear.

Our Perspective

This white paper distills the most resonant insights from that conversation, and offers a practical, repeatable framework women can use to lead boldly in the year ahead.

Together, we believe boldness is not a personality trait. It’s a leadership-practice that can be learned.

The Boldness Paradox for Women

Many women learn early in their careers that there is a narrow band of “acceptable” leadership behavior, and stepping outside of it comes with consequences.

Research from [McKinsey](#) and [LeanIn.org](#) confirms what women already know: when women display the same assertive behaviors that advance men’s careers, they are more likely to be labeled as “too aggressive” or “not likable.”

Over time, this pressure teaches women to self-edit, hesitate, or soften their impact at the exact moments when bold leadership is needed most. Tonya emphasizes, “If I had a dollar for every time a woman in my program shared that her bold idea was ignored in a meeting, only to be praised when repeated by a male colleague, I could pay half a year’s mortgage.”

The cost of this dynamic is real: stalled careers, lost influence, and organizations missing out on better thinking.

Redefining Boldness

Boldness is often misunderstood as fearlessness, recklessness, or being intentionally provocative. That version of boldness turns people off, and it's not what we advocate.

We define boldness as **values-driven action despite potential risk**.

Bold leadership is the ability to speak, decide, and act with conviction while remaining emotionally intelligent, grounded, and credible.

When women lead from their values, rather than fear of disapproval (i.e., risk of not being liked), they are more willing to take risks, challenge assumptions, and move past risk aversion, even in environments where backlash is possible.

Importantly, boldness is different from courage. **Courage is often situational. Boldness is repeatable.** It is a leadership muscle that strengthens with use. Boldness is action, and courage is the willpower to maintain or sustain the bold action.

While Tonya believes that unapologetic boldness is most critical for female leaders to advance in their career faster, and to realize more confidence in their abilities and more satisfaction in the workplace, while Amy is a champion for humble boldness for both male and female leaders to balance bold action and remove one's ego in leadership decisions, actions, and interactions.

Two Expressions of Bold Leadership

Tonya and Amy agree that the most effective leaders don't have to choose between humility and boldness. They choose to master both and know when to deploy each.

Unapologetic Boldness

- Advocating for oneself
- Stating expectations clearly and not apologizing if others disagree
- Negotiating compensation or promotions and not apologizing for asking or seeking
- Naming misalignment when values or vision are compromised

Humble Boldness

- Leading with confidence, courage, and kindness, while inviting dialogue
- Stepping forward to lead while giving credit and sharing ownership

- Influencing with respect, without ego
- Standing firm in values while remaining curious at the same time

Career acceleration happens at the intersection of the two. As Amy explains, “Growth happens when leaders can hold humility and unapologetic boldness at the same time.”

Boldness in Action

Across professional contexts, negotiating pay, setting boundaries, challenging decisions, and maintaining standards under pressure are common themes that consistently emerge from Tonya’s interviews, research, and programs on “unapologetic boldness” which has been the foundation of her leadership programs since 2018.

“Authentic leadership is rooted in clarity of values, not conforming and maintaining a status quo for the comfort of others.” – Tonya Tiggett

The above quote calls to mind an example from Amy of an executive director with whom she worked. This leader recognized that their own leadership team was stuck. Instead of forcing a decision or pretending to have all the answers, the leader paused and invited feedback.

That moment of humility unlocked candor. Team members surfaced concerns and ideas that shifted the strategy entirely. The result? Stronger engagement. Better thinking. More trust.

Humility didn’t weaken the leader’s authority; it strengthened it.

Now contrast that with a story of a former junior-level statehouse employee who shared with Tonya the aftermath of a group meeting years ago with fellow employees and public policy officials.

The employee’s manager told her she asked too many questions during the meeting and instructed her to “sit, listen, and keep her mouth shut” in all future meetings. This is the antithesis of humble leadership.

The employee boldly and unapologetically chose not to comply, by contributing *even more actively* in the next meeting despite the risk in angering her manager.

She chose noncompliance, not out of defiance, but out of conviction. She knew curiosity and critical thinking were essential to performing her role well and adding value to the organization. That decision to refuse silence became a defining leadership behavior for the employee.

Years later, after transitioning into the banking world, and without applying for an open Regional Market President role, this same person was asked by her senior leadership to apply. She landed the role and a title of Senior Vice President, without having had it on her radar as a career possibility.

This unapologetically and repeatably bold behavior begun years ago, and echoed throughout her career, was one of the characteristics that led to her securing a senior leader role where women are less represented.

The Role of Emotional Intelligence

[Emotional Intelligence](#) allows leaders to hold firm to standards while navigating complexity, power dynamics, and perception, especially in environments where women are more heavily scrutinized.

Bold leadership does not require sacrificing professionalism or relationships, though that risk is real.

In the statehouse example, the employee's intent was not to be rude nor rebellious. Her boldness was rooted in values, not ego. She did not verbally push back on her manager. Instead, she chose action and engagement, curiosity and knowledge-building in the next meeting. She also maintained professional interactions with her colleagues and meeting attendees through her engagement and curiosity, including with her boss in public.

Tonya points out, "Sitting in silence during the meetings would have signaled disengagement and diminished her capability. Speaking up strategically demonstrated organizational savvy and leadership presence."

Emotional intelligence is what differentiates **boldness** from **polarizing behaviors**. Even with the risk of a further difficult relationship with her boss, the employee still demonstrated greater emotional intelligence than her manager.

As Amy notes, "Humble leaders create a space for trust, collaboration, and shared ownership. Humble leaders build teams where people feel seen, valued, and safe to contribute.

"Humility keeps leaders grounded. Listening is not weakness, it's leadership strength. Unapologetic boldness is what moves vision into action. It says: *This matters and I'm willing to lead us forward.*"

The employee in the above example demonstrated both humble and bold leadership where risk was present with her boss, and it paid off.

Looking Ahead: Leading Boldly in 2026

As our session concluded, women reflected on how they want to lead in the year ahead:

- more decisively
- more visibly

- more aligned with their values

Participants expressed strong interest in continuing the conversation, particularly around curiosity and boldness as catalysts for innovation, influence, and growth. Because of this, we felt it would be helpful to pose some additional questions to you to help launch your own version of boldness this year.

Your 4-Step BOLD Leadership Reset for 2026

Boldness is not a career risk. Importantly, it is a leadership asset.

To begin, consider the following four steps below.

NOTE: We recommend you find a trusted colleague and discuss these steps together to see what you uncover and then meet quarterly to measure your progress.

1. Name the Goal

Identify one career goal that stretches you and clarify **why** it matters to either pursue this or achieve it, or both.

Hint: If the goal is not exciting to you, intriguing, or leads to something else that excites you- ditch it and find one that does. Why? You will be more likely to commit to boldly achieving it if it's "heart-centered" or "energy-raising" as Tonya calls it.

- Goal:
- Why it matters:

2. Assess the Risk and Focus on the Possibilities

- Identify the risks involved (discomfort, visibility, financial, relational).

For example: examine your own discomfort during a learning curve, a transition to a new role, a financial risk, a sacrifice of time with family or friends, or interacting with people more senior to you that can be intimidating, a fear of public speaking, the level of disapproval of others in something you're doing, maybe having that tough conversation with a co-worker, or starting your own business, etc.

- Rate each risk 1–5. (1 being low risk and 5 being high risk)
- Ask yourself: *What do I have to lose? And what might I gain?*

3. Create Momentum

- Identify up to three milestones that move you forward. Small, intentional actions build boldness quickly.

For example: if you wish to be perceived as a more influential leader and this requires you delivering tough feedback which has risk associated with it of the conversation not going well, and perhaps you fear confrontation, then one milestone can be simply scheduling that talk.

A second milestone could be doing role play with a trusted source or getting coached on your planned delivery well in advance of the scheduled conversation.

Third milestone is _____ (more practice or it's having the talk).

These micro-steps and activities will keep you boldly moving forward regardless of the level of risk you've identified in Step 2.

- Milestone 1
- Milestone 2
- Milestone 3

4. Lead with Curiosity

- If you don't have an answer or know the answer, say "I don't know, yet" and ask your team for feedback.

For example, be vulnerable to ask when you don't know something. We aren't always expected to have all the answers.

- Ask brave questions. You may not always like the answers, but you will like the data it gives you!

Instead of asking how people are, be specific and ask WHAT people are feeling and WHY, or WHAT they need from you, and WHAT difference it would make to have that need satisfied. This gives you real data to work with on what your team needs from you as a leader.

You will be shocked in the different response to the more boldly revealing "What are you feeling and why?" When we ask, "How are you?" 99% of people will say "fine," and this does not help you to lead from a place of really having a pulse on issues or problems to solve, or relationship to repair and foster.

- Give and receive feedback regularly. Not only act upon it, let the feedback-giver know what you've done, what you've learned, and the impact.

This shows that their feedback matters and that you can learn from them.

When appropriate, you may want to share with the larger group since often times change enacted is not always known or overtly visible.

Bold leadership grows through action, not perfection.

Join Us

Bold leadership isn't about becoming someone else. It's about fully becoming who you are.

Join us as we continue this conversation through future webinars, leadership programs, and research-driven tools designed to help women lead boldly. Sign up to be notified of our program series by [clicking here](#).

Tonya Tiggett is a leadership curriculum author, keynote speaker, and high-energy workshop facilitator who helps corporate women lead boldly and advance faster. Through her signature topics—***unapologetic boldness*** and ***leading with confidence***—Tonya equips professionals with practical strategies to elevate their visibility, influence, pay, and fulfillment. Tonya is on a mission to equip 100,000 corporate women by 2030 with the tools and strategy to elevate their careers, sense of fulfillment, and to even the corporate playing field by leading boldly. Learn more at TonyaTiggett.com.

Amy Lahmers believes organizations do best when people understand and leverage their unique gifts and skills, living fully into their calling. She is Founder & President of *FlourishesConsulting*, a boutique consulting company providing ***HR guidance and people strategy to help you build an equipped and aligned team***. Amy is on a mission to partner with clients, especially during seasons of growth and change, to ***move your mission forward with confidence***. Learn more at FlourishesConsulting.com.