High performing women in business

a research report

Recently, we commissioned research into high performance, asking 1500 employees and 150 C-suite leaders for their opinions on the matter. We uncovered a lot of great insights, the details of which you can read in the full report, but we also noticed a lot of interesting data related to gender, specifically the different perspectives female leaders bring to the workplace. We've pulled that out into this mini-report, to start conversations about the unique traits and perspectives female leaders can bring to the team, and how the path to high performance isn't always set in traditional approaches.

Read on to see the six key facets we unpacked.
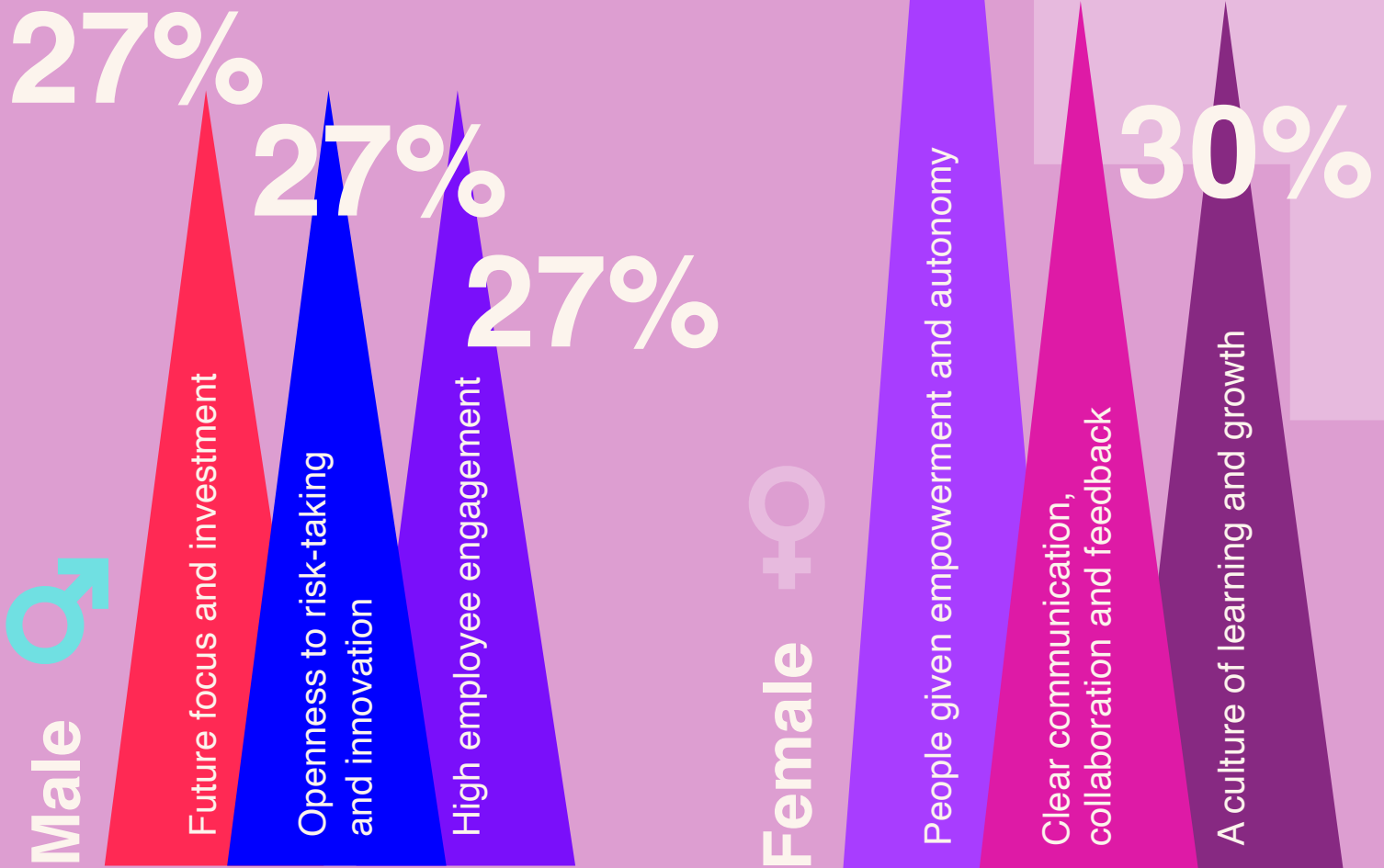
The science behind
a new world of work

1.
Defining high performance

From MHR, we define a high performing organisation as one that has a plan for sustainable long-term growth. The leaders we surveyed broadly agreed and had some insights into the specific shape this takes.

However, there is a small but noticeable misalignment between female leaders and male ones.

When asked what defines a high performing organisation the best, 27% of women said it was the ability to attract and retain the best talent, while only 19% of men agreed.

Similarly, when asked which drivers of high performance their organisation was strongest in, female leaders said:

Male

27% Future focus and investment

27% Openness to risk-taking and innovation

27% High employee engagement

Female

46% People given empowerment and autonomy

30% Clear communication, collaboration and feedback

30% A culture of learning and growth

This can lead to long-term problems. While we may all broadly agree on a direction of travel, the nuances are important in high performance. If someone is pushing for more employee engagement, while someone else wants to focus on future investments, there's only so much resource to go around. The drivers that need to be prioritised should be adjusted based on the needs of the organisation in the short and long term.

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2. More optimism...

Generally speaking, our research shows that strong leadership is required to have a truly high performing organisation. This makes it interesting that 60% of women agreed that their organisation's overall leader knows what high performance looks like and helps them to achieve it, compared with 47% of men.
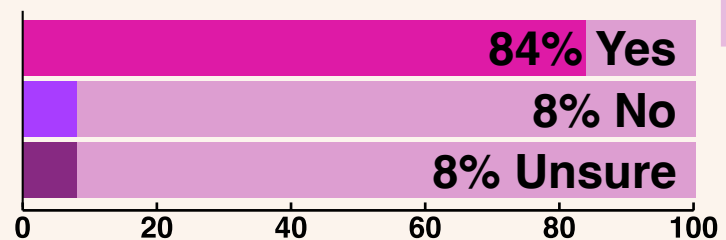
Likewise, while our research overall suggests a large disparity between employees and leaders, female leaders said they were personally clearer on their team's goals for the year ahead, with 51% of them feeling that employees and leaders were broadly aligned to these goals.

The suggestion here is that female leaders tend to have a more optimistic outlook for the future and have faith in those who lead them.
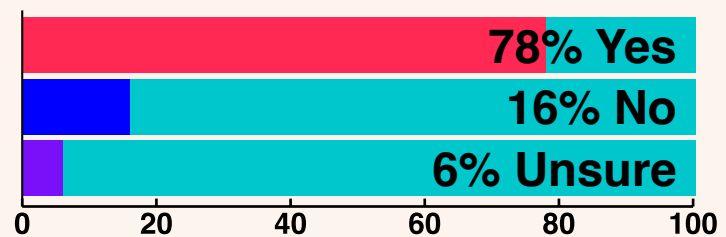
'81% of women are confident of delivering high performance to the benefit of employees and the organisation as a whole.'
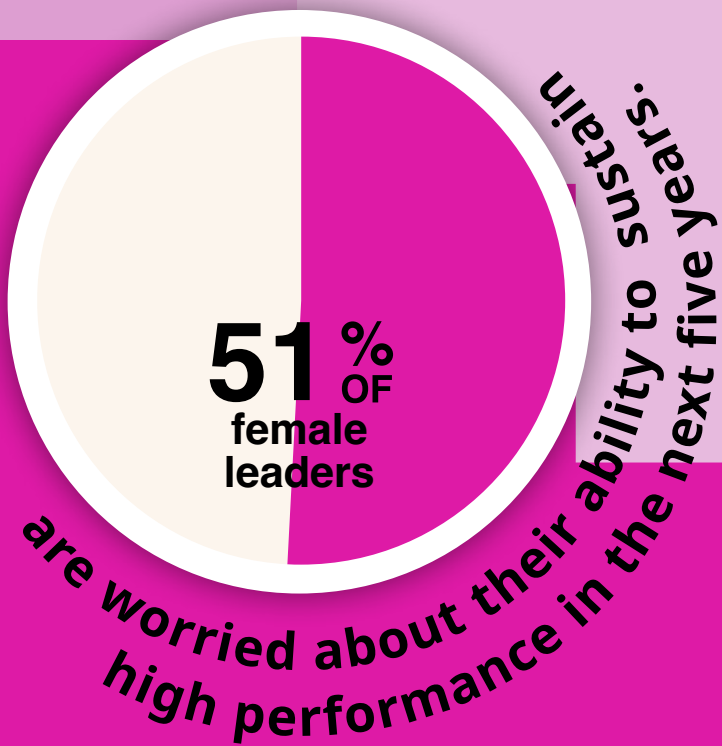
Is your organisation high performing?

Female

84% Yes	
8% No	
8% Unsure	

0   20   40   60   80   100

Male

78% Yes	
16% No	
6% Unsure	

0   20   40   60   80   100

3.

...But less self-confidence

experience imposter syndrome.

51%
OF
female leaders

are worried about their ability to sustain high performance in the next five years.

Our survey indicated that women are slightly more confident that they know what high performance at work looks like (51% of women, compared with 50% of men). Yet this is flipped when they were asked if they felt their team were also confident about what high performance looks like, with only 43% of women agreeing compared with 50% of men.

This might seem confusing compared with the optimistic data already shared, but it makes more sense when you see research from Forbes indicates that 75% of female executives experience imposter syndrome. It could be that female leaders have a strong understanding of where they want to go but doubt their ability to lead their team there.

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4. Valuing flexibility

One particularly interesting stat came up when leaders were asked about which types of technology were vital in driving high performance. The top result was AI, with 38% of female leaders citing this result compared to 25% of men, which we'll dig into later, but it was closely followed by another angle.

The only other answer where women were more positively skewed compared to men was in 'the ability to access systems from anywhere, at any time'. 27% of women agreed this was most important compared to 20% of men. Could this be because, as a demographic, women across generations have a greater need for flexible work, as the burden of caring for dependents still tends to fall on their shoulders?

If my organisation invested more in people, we would perform better.

65%
of women agree

40%
of men agree
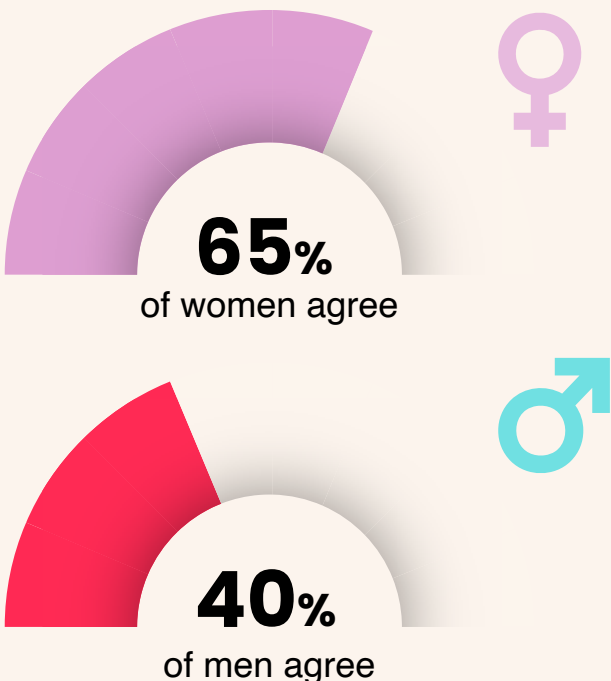
5. Investing in people

The starkest contrast between genders comes from a very simple statement: 'If my organisation invested more in people, we would perform better.' 65% of women agree with this, while only 40% of men agree. That's a huge difference of 25 percentage points!

This theme bears out across the data. For example:

- 57% of women agree that their organisation would perform better if it was more focused on collaboration, compared to 44% of men

- 51% of women agree that a greater focus on wellbeing and mental health leads to higher performance, compared to 42% of men

- 27% of women said the ability to attract and retain the best talent defines high performance the most, compared to 19% of men

Female leaders also had some unique perspectives on the power of multigenerational workforces, often acknowledging that they can add additional challenges with the potential for great benefits

- There are differing expectations about what high performance looks like, depending on your age (59%F, 44%M)

- Generational gaps exist across generations in the workforce which impacts performance (57%F, 49%M)

- Multiple generations in the workforce make high performance easier (57%F, 47%M)

6.
The power of technology

100% of leaders agreed that technology is a vital factor in helping achieve high performance. The exact nuance of what tech should be prioritised differed. Interestingly, when asked what types of technology drive high performance, the highest selected answer from the female leaders here was AI (38%). Only 25% of the male leadership audience agreed. Likewise, 62% of female leaders agreed that 'AI would change the face of how their organisation operates', compared with 45% of men.

Similarly, 68% of female leaders strongly agree that data and insights are crucial for enhancing performance, versus 50% of male leaders.

There is a clear advantage of a data-driven yet people centric approach, as championed by female leaders. Creating seamless communication and using strong insights can bridge internal performance gaps - there is a need for blending data with a collaborative ethos to create an environment where every employee's contribution is maximised.

It's clear that taking the time to figure out how investing in people and investing in technology intersects is a crucial step, that anyone aiming to shape their team into high performers should prioritise. People First comes with a lot of solutions to these challenges baked into its DNA.

100% OF leaders
agreed that technology is a vital factor in helping achieve high performance

AI
38% OF female
25% OF male

Data & insights
68% OF female
50% OF male

See how our integrated HR, people and finance platform can ensure your people are given more autonomy to perform, enables lines of clear communication and lets you unleash real-time data for more confident decision-making.

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About MHR

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