Elena Zafirova describes the challenges women must overcome to assume leadership roles.

Program for Leadership Development alum Elena Zafirova is passionate about empowering the next generation of leaders to fulfill their potential. She is also excited about having recently accepted an offer to join Palantir, one of the world’s leading tech companies focusing on solving the world’s most critical problems using data analysis and technology. A dual-qualified US and UK lawyer by background, Elena previously practiced wealth management and tax law at Baker McKenzie for over six years before taking on a business development role as Senior Wealth Management Consultant at Lombard International Assurance, a company owned by Blackstone. Today, Elena uses lessons from our Program for Leadership Development to help other women find and achieve their professional goals.

**LESSONS LEARNED ON FEMALE LEADERSHIP**

1. **Perfectionism is the opposite of leadership.** Women often strive for perfection—whether, being the perfect partner, mother, cook, friend, or yogi. But strong female leadership is not the unrealistic pursuit of perfection. An authentic female leader is a woman who embraces all her facets. Only when we are a true version of ourselves can we empower others.

2. **We judge a woman’s leadership style more harshly.** Accomplished women face pervasive bias. Research shows that when a man becomes more successful, both men and women like him more; when a woman becomes more successful, she’s perceived as less likable. Even with identical leadership styles and identical actions, we tend to judge the woman more harshly.

3. **Warmth and strength are both paramount.** At HBS we were taught to connect first and then lead. Great leaders have warmth—characterized by trust, empathy, compassion, and fairness—and strength, which includes technical know-how and professional competence. Women often have a leadership advantage because they are biologically wired to connect with others.

4. **We must know our worth.** A large percentage of women are paid less for doing the same job as men. While steps must be taken to ensure equal pay for equal work, women must also know and communicate their worth, whether asking for a better financial package, or standing up when facing a discriminatory situation at work.

5. **Flexibility is one key to cultivating women leaders.** Women outperform men academically and early in their careers, but few make it to the highest ranks. What happens? Women often face the dilemma of being the main family caregiver, while working in an environment that requires eight or more hours of physical presence each day. Doing both is difficult. Today, thanks to technology, we can connect 24/7 with global clients and colleagues. To increase the percentage of women at the top, we need to allow for more flexibility, particularly when it comes to physical presence.

6. **Be authentic.** Being an authentic leader doesn’t mean being transparent. It means knowing yourself—your strengths and your weaknesses—so well that you become unshakable.

7. **Follow your own path.** I’ve learned that if you tune in to your inner self, it will lead you in the right direction. Acting out of fear won’t make you happy, but acting out of love will set you on the right path. Follow that path, even if you are walking alone. Eventually, even your critics may become your followers.