

DISSERTATION: “FEMALE LEADERS’ LIVED
EXPERIENCE OF TRANSITIONING TO LEADERS OF
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS IN A HYBRID WORKPLACE
MODEL”

OVERVIEW OF STUDY FINDINGS &
RECOMMENDATIONS

MARCH 2024

Dr. Jennifer Ladouceur, MBA, EcD, PhD

Copyright © Jennifer Ladouceur (2024)

Research Question One – Summary of Study Findings

RQ1: What are female leaders’ lived experiences with identifying new barriers and opportunities they must navigate when transitioning from leading knowledge workers in a traditional in-office environment in Toronto, Canada, to adapting to a hybrid workplace model?

Data that emerged through a thematic analysis in response to RQ1 included 14 themes: one hybrid workplace model-related theme, seven barriers-related themes, and six opportunities-related themes female leaders experienced transitioning to leading knowledge workers in a hybrid workplace model (as shown in Figure 8). The following provides a high-level description of the nine themes associated with RQ1:

Hybrid Workplace Model:

- **Theme 3 – Advancing Gender Equality in Hybrid:** Recognition by female leaders of the impact the new flexible operating structure may have on gender equality in the workplace and the need for intentional strategies, programs, and initiatives for advancing gender equality in the workplace is a strategic imperative and requires intentional actions that align with the hybrid workplace model.

Barriers:

- **Theme 4 – Leak in the Pipeline of Female Leaders in Hybrid:** The gender gap is widening post-COVID-19 in many industries, with female leaders making the difficult decision to resign from existing positions in search of roles that better align with their sense of purpose or desire for flexibility, deciding to remove themselves from promotional tracks, such as partnership ambitions or no longer pursuing senior leadership promotional opportunities, or deciding to leave the workforce entirely.

- **Theme 5 – Heightened Strain for Working Mothers Balancing Work–Life in Hybrid:** Female leaders and aspiring leaders face obstacles they must navigate because of them taking on the lion’s share of childcare responsibilities and non-paid domestic duties, a barrier magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Theme 6 – Personal Brand Equity Obstacles for Female Leaders in Hybrid:** Female leaders in a hybrid workplace model face new barriers described in this study as the “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” dilemma, relating to a reduction in opportunities to participate in in-person networking opportunities for establishing and nurturing personal brand equity.
- **Theme 7 – Career Advancement Obstacles and Decreased Serendipitous Opportunities for Aspiring Female Leaders in Hybrid:** Female leaders, particularly those in entry-level and mid-level positions, are experiencing obstacles to their career growth, given reduced serendipitous opportunities for networking, building connections, and gaining experiential knowledge typically accomplished within in-person environments where synergies naturally occur. Creating what I call “**The Hybrid Workplace Serendipity Gap**®.”
- **Theme 8 – Risk of Emerging Exclusive Sub-Cultures and Team Disunity in Hybrid:** When leading in a hybrid workplace model, female leaders face the risk of the formation of exclusive sub-cultures within teams, silos across departments, and team cohesion obstacles.
- **Theme 9 – Rise in Female Leaders Experiencing Mental Health Struggles in Hybrid:** The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a significant increase in mental health issues, such as increased levels of stress, anxiety, burnout, and feelings of disconnection, isolation, loneliness, and social phobia. Female leaders face mental health and well-being struggles themselves while also being required to support hybrid knowledge workers who may also be facing mental health struggles.

- **Theme 10 – Need for Female Leaders to Modify Their Approach to Establishing Trust in Hybrid:** Working with distributed teams in a hybrid workplace model requires female leaders to foster contextual understanding, creating an environment that supports collaboration and engagement in-person and remotely, and a performance and productivity measurement approach that aligns with the hybrid workplace model and builds trust.

Opportunities:

- **Theme 11 – Prioritization of Mental Health Through Individualized Self-Care and Work–Life Balance in Hybrid:** Female leaders have benefitted from the adoption of flexible operating structures, making it possible to re-think where, when, and how work is performed while also normalizing and making space for female leaders to design the workplace model that best supports the needs of them as individuals and their teams, normalizing the prioritization of well-being.
- **Theme 12 – Purpose-Driven Career Growth and Intentional Cultivation of Serendipitous Opportunities in Hybrid:** During the paradigm shift toward a hybrid workplace model, female leaders have the opportunity to self-reflect on their sense of purpose, reconfirm or set new career goals, and create a career road map to help them navigate potentially new barriers or opportunities found in a hybrid workplace model, while also embracing self-efficacy by intentionally creating serendipitous opportunities for growth and advancement. Overcoming what I call “**The Hybrid Workplace Serendipity Gap**®.”
- **Theme 13 – Technology Empowerment in Hybrid:** Technological advances have made the hybrid workplace model possible. Technology allows female leaders to work from anywhere to lead distributed teams while maintaining optimal engagement, collaboration, performance, and productivity levels.

- **Theme 14 – Purposeful Creation of Unified Teams in Hybrid:** During the transition and evolution of creating the optimal flexible operating structure, female leaders have an opportunity to intentionally and purposefully re-thinking and re-design the workplace operating structure to create a culture of belonging, inclusivity, cohesion, shared understanding, and sense of community creating a unified hybrid workplace where all employees can thrive.
- **Theme 15 – Embracing Feminine Leadership Traits, Soft Skills, and Authenticity in Hybrid:** Given the growing importance of being an authentic leader during times of change and uncertainty, such as the pandemic and transition to a flexible operating model, female leaders have the opportunity to leverage leaders skills such as empathy, resilience, adaptability, intuition, emotional intelligence, caring, encouragement, and inspiration while leading in a hybrid workplace model. Committing to embracing self-awareness and personal growth.
- **Theme 16 – Increased Access to Mentors and Support Networks in Hybrid:** Given the normalization of connecting and collaborating remotely, the hybrid workplace model has unlocked opportunities for female leaders to establish new mentorship and support network connections without the restriction of significant time commitments or geographic barriers.

Figure 8

Thematic Map for Research Question 1



Research Question Two – Summary of Study Findings

RQ2: What are the benefits of female leaders adopting a Situational Leadership® style when transitioning from leading knowledge workers in a traditional in-office environment in Toronto, Canada, while adapting to a hybrid workplace model?

Data that emerged through a thematic analysis in response to RQ2 included a total of nine themes, with two themes related to the hybrid workplace model and seven related to the benefits of the Situational Leadership® style in a hybrid workplace model (as shown in Figure 9). The following provides a high-level description of the nine themes associated with RQ2:

Hybrid Workplace:

- **Theme 1 – The Future of Work is Hybrid for Many Knowledge Workers:** A paradigm shift is taking place that is revolutionizing the future of work, with female leaders having to navigate leading during the transition to a new normal, the permanent adoption of the Hybrid Workplace Model, a flexible operating structure.
- **Theme 2 – Adapting to a Transformative and Dynamic Individualized Hybrid Workplace Model:** Female leaders are faced with the reality that leading the transition to a hybrid workplace model is a journey they must navigate, given that this new flexible operating structure is unique to each organization, department, and individual teams creating an environment that requires female leaders to be catalysts for change and innovation.

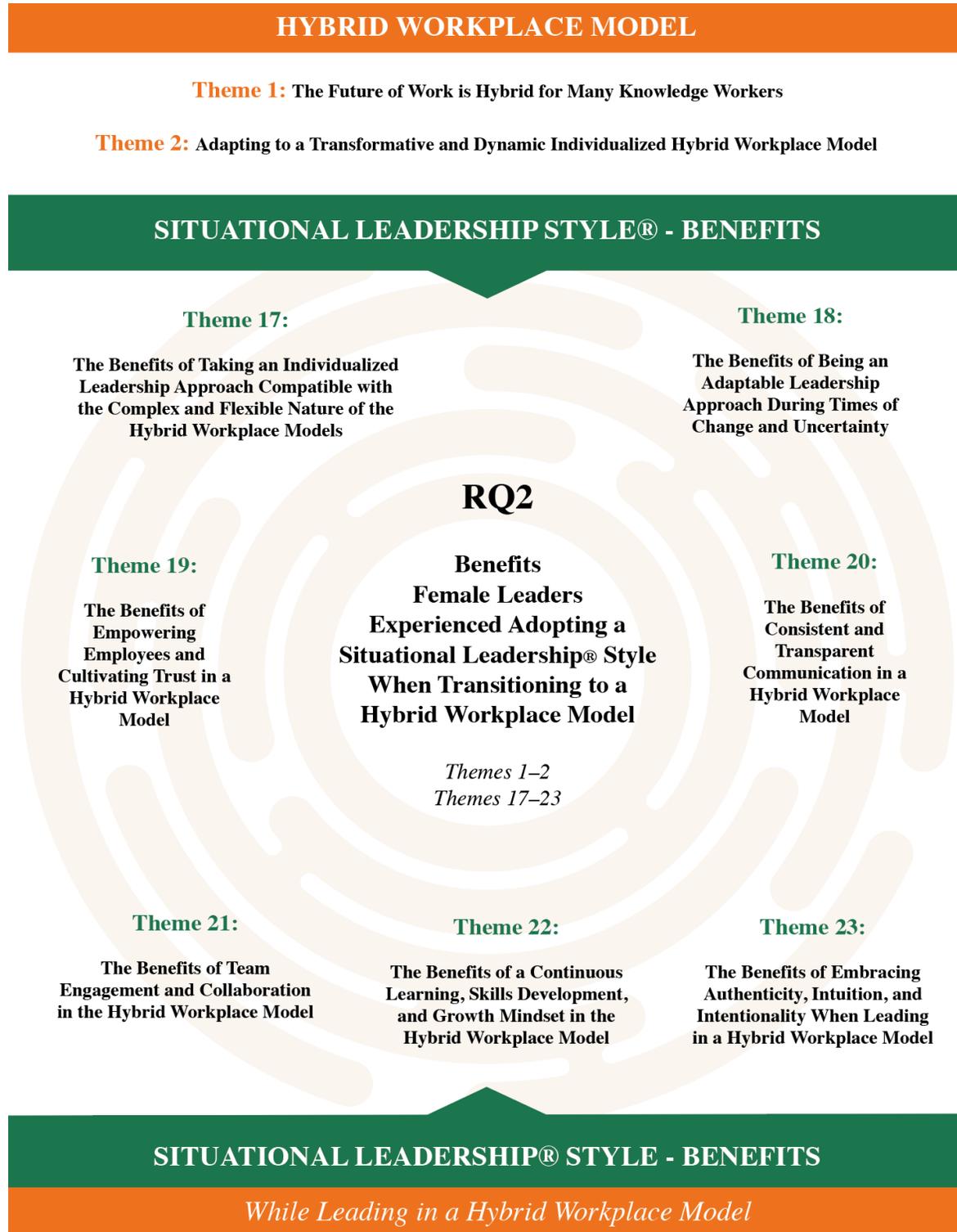
Situational Leadership® Style:

- **Theme 17 – The Benefits of Taking an Individualized Leadership Approach Compatible with the Complex and Flexible Nature of the Hybrid Workplace Models:** The Situational Leadership® style provides female leaders the benefit of intentionally tailoring their leadership approach to accommodate each employee’s specific needs, including their skills, capabilities, experiences, work environment, ideal communication style, personal circumstances, and professional aspirations.
- **Theme 18 – The Benefits of Being an Adaptable Leadership Approach During Times of Change and Uncertainty:** The Situational Leadership® style provides female leaders with a leadership style that is highly adaptable and resilient to dynamic, evolving, and changing operating structures.
- **Theme 19 – The Benefits of Empowering Employees and Cultivating Trust in a Hybrid Workplace Model:** The Situational Leadership® style provides female leaders with the benefit of being focused on supporting employees’ success through empowerment and creating a culture of trust.
- **Theme 20 – The Benefits of Consistent and Transparent Communication in a Hybrid Workplace Model:** The Situational Leadership® style provides female leaders with a focus on establishing regular two-way communication channels between individual employees and the entire distributed team, ensuring a high level of transparency and message clarity while always being accessible to support employees.
- **Theme 21 – The Benefits of Team Engagement and Collaboration in the Hybrid Workplace Model:** The Situational Leadership® style provides female leaders the benefits of creating optimal conditions to nurture employee engagement and collaboration in person or by leveraging technology to collaborate remotely.

- **Theme 22 – The Benefits of a Continuous Learning, Skills Development, and Growth Mindset in the Hybrid Workplace Model:** The Situational Leadership® style benefits female leaders by embracing continuous growth and skills improvement for themselves and their followers. It includes developing the soft and technical skills necessary to succeed in an evolving hybrid workplace model, intentionally sharing knowledge, and nurturing a growth mindset.
- **Theme 23 – The Benefits of Embracing Authenticity, Intuition, and Intentionality When Leading in a Hybrid Workplace Model:** The Situational Leadership® style provides female leaders the benefit of leading authentically, trusting their intuition, allowing it to help inform decision-making and strategically intentional actions, and creating a safe environment where all employees can thrive in a culture of support, encouragement, and understanding.

Figure 9

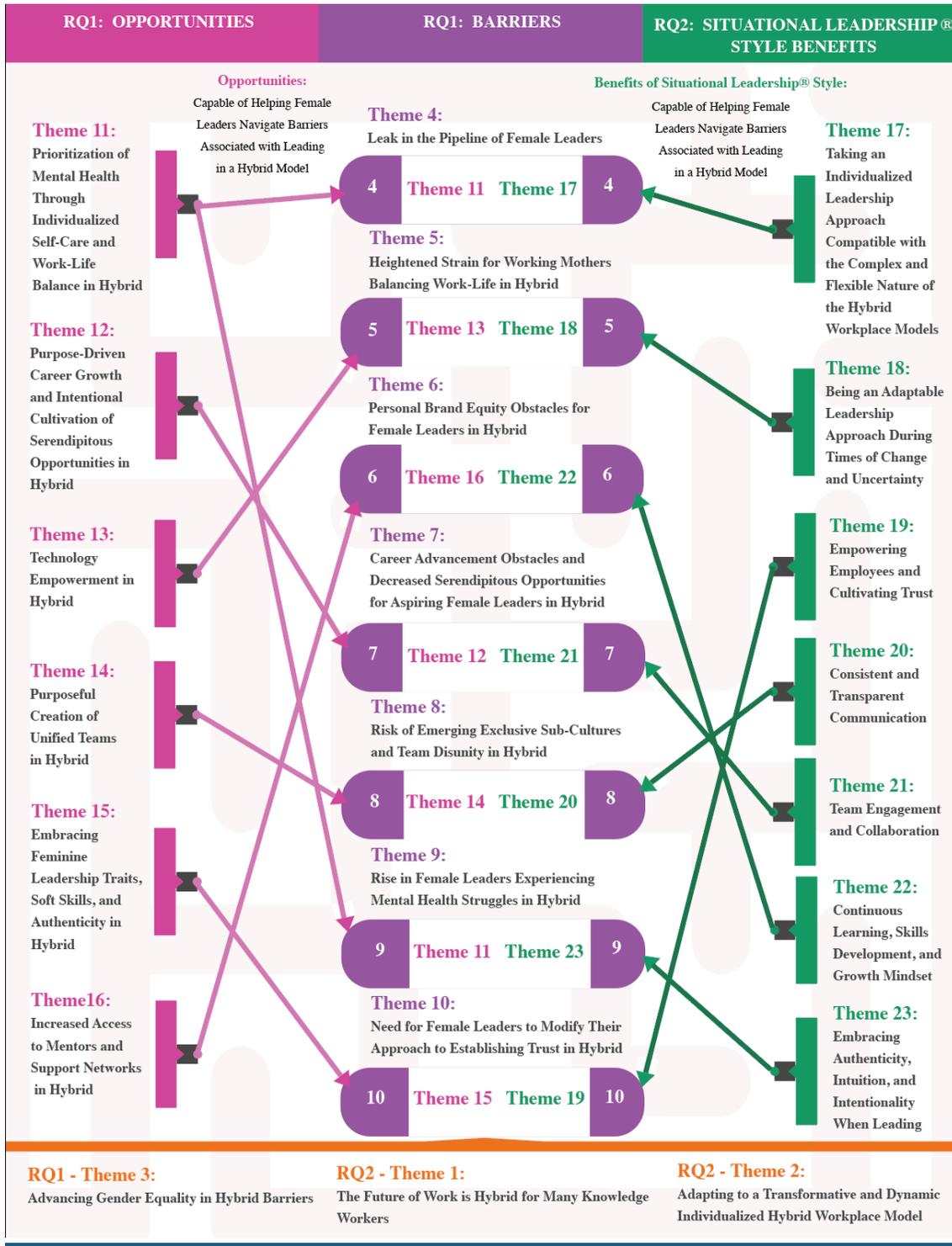
Thematic Map for Research Question 2



Research Questions One & Two – Interconnections Discovered

Figure 10

Thematic Map for Research Questions 1 and 2



Research Questions One and Two – Study Recommendations for Practice

Research Question One – Recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** Leverage new opportunities to navigate new barriers female leaders experience leading knowledge workers in a hybrid workplace model. When navigating new barriers female leaders experience when transitioning to leading knowledge workers in a hybrid workplace model, leaders may have the ability, given the situation, to leverage new opportunities that emerge in this flexible and continuously evolving operating structure identified in RQ1 of this study to overcome barriers, namely leveraging Themes 11 to 16, as shown in Figure 10.
- **Recommendation 2:** Prioritize and encourage the use of soft skills and the adoption of feminine leadership traits. Provide all leaders with access to training tailored to understanding how to develop and apply soft skills as a leader in a hybrid workplace model. Commit to providing continuous training and development grounded in an experiential learning approach to help female leaders and their team members practice the development and application of feminine leadership traits such as being self-aware, authentic, intuitive, empathetic, caring, intrinsically motivated, an active listener, resilient, capable of trust-building and inspiring others while leading in a hybrid workplace model. Purposefully connect the ability to lead using soft skills as part of the annual performance metric.
- **Recommendation 3:** Take steps to increase the transparency of the pipeline of female leaders at every step of the career journey. There is a need for increased transparency and measurable insight into better understanding the current situation of the female leader’s talent pipeline, identifying areas of strength and weakness, and creating practical strategies for preventing leaks and attracting female talent to the organization to strengthen the pipeline for today and the future.

- **Recommendation 4:** Gain a deeper level of understanding and insight into what I termed as the emerging “**Hybrid Workplace Serendipity Gap**®” and intentionally create strategies for purposefully influencing and establishing the right conditions for creating opportunities for serendipitous career growth and professional development for existing and aspiring female leaders. Inspiring the creation of serendipitous opportunities for career advancement for females holding positions at all levels, from the initial entry-level to mid-level to senior leadership and executive-level positions in companies that embrace a hybrid workplace model. One approach to influencing the creation of serendipitous opportunities in a hybrid workplace involves the following activities: niche employee resource groups for female leaders, internal and external networking events, social events, company-wide competitions, skill-sharing events, in-person conferences, cross-departmental events, stretch goal projects and initiatives, and town halls. Creating a collaborative online and physical space open to all employees that encourages interaction and idea exchange can also help create serendipitous opportunities and provide female leaders with the resources necessary to become members of critical professional and industry organizations that offer opportunities for networking and development.
- **Recommendation 5:** Implement a formal mentorship and sponsorship program for female leaders navigating career growth in a hybrid workplace model. Establishment of a mentorship and sponsorship program that matches female leaders with mentors within the organization and externally with industry experts worldwide, particularly for those companies that cannot meet all the needs for mentorship internally. There is a need for a program that allows for mentorship connections that are formal in nature and a program that creates mentorship moment opportunities that are less formal and require a low level of commitment to ongoing connections for those mentors who are too busy to commit to ongoing meetings with mentees.

- **Recommendation 6:** Embrace technology to support team unity, collaboration, and productivity. Utilize and continue to improve upon technologies used and how technology is used to support working productively and collaboratively. Study participants also discovered new approaches for leveraging technology to improve knowledge-sharing across the organization and utilizing existing technological tools to help female leaders generate more robust performance and support career growth ambitions. Female leaders are encouraged to take the opportunity to innovate and search for ways technology can help female leaders better navigate career growth and overall performance in a hybrid workplace model.
- **Recommendation 7:** Conduct internal research to monitor the impact transitioning to a hybrid workplace model has on female leaders and gender equality. Dedicated time and resources to understanding how female leaders and all employees within the organization are doing during times of change and uncertainty, such as the transition to a hybrid workplace model. The transition to a new normal is continuing to evolve, hence the need for companies to commit to conducting internal research in employee engagement surveys focusing on identifying potential barriers and opportunities female leaders encounter when leading in a hybrid workplace model. As well as leveraging the internal research to create solutions to help female leaders successfully navigate their career journey, strengthening the pipeline of female leaders.
- **Recommendation 8:** Prioritize mental health and well-being support and initiatives. There is a need to allocate resources necessary to support female leaders with the prevention of mental health issues, along with support dealing with existing mental health and well-being concerns and taking steps necessary to normalize speaking openly about mental health and creating a safe environment and supportive workplace environment for female leaders and all employees across the organization.

Research Question Two – Recommendations:

- **Recommendation 9:** Leverage the benefits of adopting a Situational Leadership® style to navigate new barriers female leaders experience leading knowledge workers in a hybrid workplace model. When navigating new barriers female leaders experience when transitioning to leading knowledge workers in a hybrid workplace model, leaders may have the ability, given the situation, to leverage benefits associated with adopting a Situational Leadership® style when leading in a hybrid workplace model identified in RQ2 of this study namely leveraging Themes 17 to 23, as shown in Figure 10.
- **Recommendation 10:** Commit to permanently adopting a flexible operating structure. Publicly committing to adopting a hybrid workplace model that allows for the flexibility necessary to allow female leaders to prioritize work–life balance and positions the organization as competitive, adaptive, and agile, committed to creating the right environment where female leaders can thrive, along with being empathic of the increased demands motherhood places on female leaders and allowing for flexible work arrangements that meet the needs of female leaders and the organizational needs for results and performance. An opportunity exists to re-think and re-design the workplaces’ future operating structure from a gender equality perspective while also considering the various stakeholders’ needs, such as the organization’s need for results, customer or consumer’s needs, and the team's collective needs for collaboration.

- **Recommendation 11:** Prioritize obtaining employee buy-in and engagement while transitioning to a new normal, hybrid workplace model. Allowing female leaders and all employees to have a say in how the hybrid workplace model of the future evolves, beginning with an internal employee experience study that looks at the employee experience from a holistic perspective concerning operating in a hybrid workplace model, conducting an assessment of the employee’s experience throughout their career journey within the organization, from onboarding, daily operations, and career development and advancement to succession planning and retirement, while keeping in mind the perspective of female leaders and gender equality in the workplace. Paying particular attention to any potential generational difference in their perceived ideal operating structure that could potentially impact the female leader’s pipeline related to the attraction and retention of aspiring and existing female leaders.
- **Recommendation 12:** Establish anchor days, encouraging in-office engagement. Embrace the concept of introducing anchor days where the entire team meets in the office to collaborate, connect in person, and build connections. Anchor days help to ensure that employees are not returning to an office only to feel isolated should other team members remain working remotely and only to find themselves in the office on Zoom meetings, which could act as a further deterrent to wanting to return to the office and creating opportunities for female leaders to collaborate and interact in person.
- **Recommendation 13:** Commit to adopting the Situational Leadership® style. Commit to formally adopting the corporate-level Situational Leadership® style for female leaders leading a team of knowledge workers in a hybrid workplace model and providing leaders with training and support resources to enhance their ability to tailor the leadership approach to each employee’s specific needs, strengths, and experiences, learning style, career goals and aspirations, and life circumstances.

- **Recommendation 14:** Adopt personality trait testing. Given that a Situational Leadership® style requires personalizing the leadership style at an individualized approach to leadership based upon employee needs and readiness, it is beneficial for leaders to conduct personality trait tests and assessments to gain a greater understanding of how best to lead each employee, along with offering insights at a team level for how better cohesion and collaboration can take place among the team members themselves. Personality trait testing and assessments can also offer insights into how best to communicate among teams, particularly given the increased need for more robust communication channels when employees work in a hybrid workplace. Examples of popular personality trait tests and assessments include Myer-Briggs Type Indicator® and StrengthFinder®.