

# Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace

## Final Project Report

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This project was made possible through the dedication of contributors, advocates, and partners who believe in advancing equality and inclusion for women with disability in the workplace. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone involved for their support and commitment to creating meaningful change.

## Acknowledgement of Country

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People with Disability Australia (PWDA) acknowledges and pays respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters on which we live, work and play. We pay respects to Elders past and present and acknowledge their ongoing care and custodianship of the land, skies and waters.

We thank the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have contributed to this project and acknowledge their valuable contribution to continuing to shape better outcomes for women and non-binary people with disability.

## Acknowledgement of Lived Experience

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PWDA acknowledges the lives and experiences of women with disability, and we recognise the individual stories of resilience that form the basis of this project. We thank the women with lived experience who contributed to this project and who we will continue to work with to drive awareness of and break down the unique barriers to workplace participation and leadership experienced by women with disability.

## Language

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This document uses terms such as 'women' and 'men' in places. We recognise that gender is socially constructed and does not exist in binary categories. We also acknowledge that some people's experiences are not captured by binary language, and that many of the experiences outlined in this document may be experienced by others in the Australian community.

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# About PWDA

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People with Disability Australia (PWDA) is a leading disability rights, advocacy, and representative organisation of and for all people with disability. PWDA is the only national, cross-disability organisation representing the interests of people with all kinds of disability. PWDA is a non-profit, non-government organisation.

PWDA's primary membership comprises people with disability and organisations primarily constituted by people with disability. PWDA also has a large network of individuals and organisations committed to the disability rights movement.

We have a vision of a socially just, accessible, and inclusive community, in which the human rights, belonging, contribution, potential and diversity of all people with disability are recognised, respected, and celebrated with pride. PWDA was founded in 1981, the International Year of Disabled Persons, to provide people with disability with a voice of our own.

PWDA is a NSW and national peak organisation and founding member of Disabled People's Organisations Australia (DPO Australia) along with Women with Disabilities Australia, First Peoples Disability Network Australia, and National Ethnic

Disability Alliance. Disabled Peoples Organisations (DPOs) are organisations that are led by, and constituted of, people with disability. The key purpose of DPO Australia is to promote, protect and advance the human rights and freedoms of people with disability in Australia by working collaboratively on areas of shared interests, purposes, strategic priorities and opportunities.

# Definitions

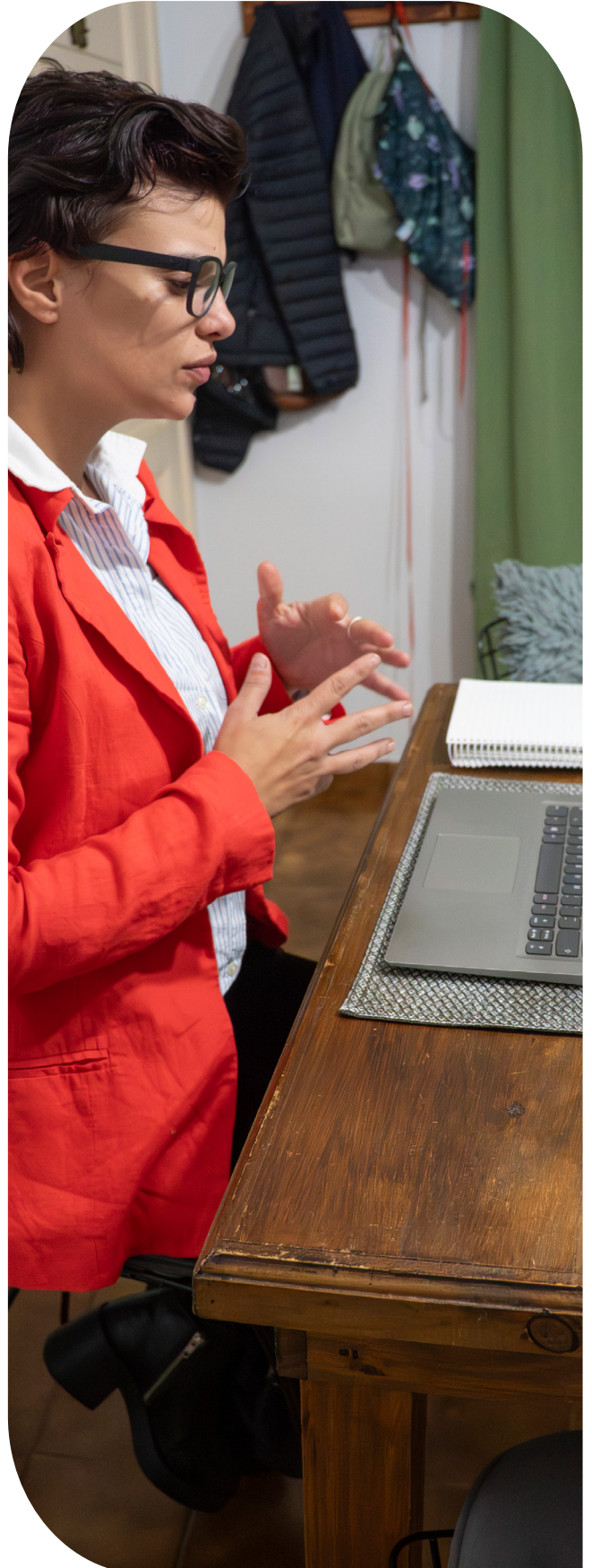
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Within the scope of this project, PWDA uses the term 'women with disability' to refer to all women, feminine identifying and non-binary people with disability in Australia.

One of the key aims of the Advancing Women project is to improve the representation of women with disability in leadership and decision-making roles in the workplace. As outlined in the Activity Work Plan, the term 'leadership and decision-making roles' is a broad term which refers to a range of positions which have authority or decision-making capacity.

Such roles might include but are not limited to:

- Team leader
- Manager
- Supervisor
- Senior manager
- Committee or advisory group member
- Board Director
- Non-Executive Director
- Deputy manager
- Deputy CEO.



# People with Disability Australia, Advancing Women Team Background

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The Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace project was managed by People with Disability Australia's Strategic Projects and Training team. This team included a Project Manager and Project Coordinator (both women with disability) who drew on their personal experiences of navigating leadership and career advancement. The course facilitators were also women with disability in leadership positions.

Supported by their Advisory and Co-design network, the team developed an education and mentorship program that addressed the unique barriers women with disability face in the workplace and in moving into leadership roles.

The program created safe, structured opportunities for participants to access resources, build skills, and engage in peer-to-peer learning and networking.

Key team members included:

- Summah McKinnon (People with Disability Australia, Dharawal Country NSW)
- Shannon Welch (People with Disability Australia, Gadigal Country NSW)
- Simone Tunbridge (People with Disability Australia, Dharawal Country NSW)
- Dr Michelle Hyde (HD Writing and Educational Services, Ngunnawal Country ACT)
- Heidi La Paglia (Heidi La Paglia Consulting)
- Natalie Elliot (Empowering Pathways).

# Executive Summary

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The Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace project aimed to increase workforce participation for women with disability and strengthen pathways into leadership and decision-making roles. Delivered by People with Disability Australia between January 2023 and July 2026, the project combined co-designed education, mentoring, peer learning and workplace engagement.

The evaluation finds that Advancing Women made a meaningful contribution to individual confidence, leadership identity, peer connection and early career pathway development. It also confirms that the barriers facing women with disability are structural and cannot be solved through individual capability-building alone.

Consistent with the project Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework, this report treats participant reflection, relational feedback and qualitative evidence as central evidence of change.

Overall, the evaluation shows that the Advancing Women project model is valuable and should be continued, refined and scaled. Evidence of success includes:

- Strong reach across organisations, sectors and locations, demonstrating clear need and relevance.
- High levels of participant goodwill, trust and engagement, particularly where relational and accessible approaches were used.
- Consistent feedback that the program supported confidence, connection, leadership identity and practical workplace learning.



# Program Reach and Participation

## Key Project Statistics 2023 - 2026

The Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace project reached the following:

**28** organisations nationwide took part in the initial recruitment discovery sessions.

**9** organisations participated in the education and mentoring program Australia wide.

**107** women participated in the project.

**9** industries and sectors participated in the project.

**46** mentees participated in the project.

**46** mentors participated in the project.

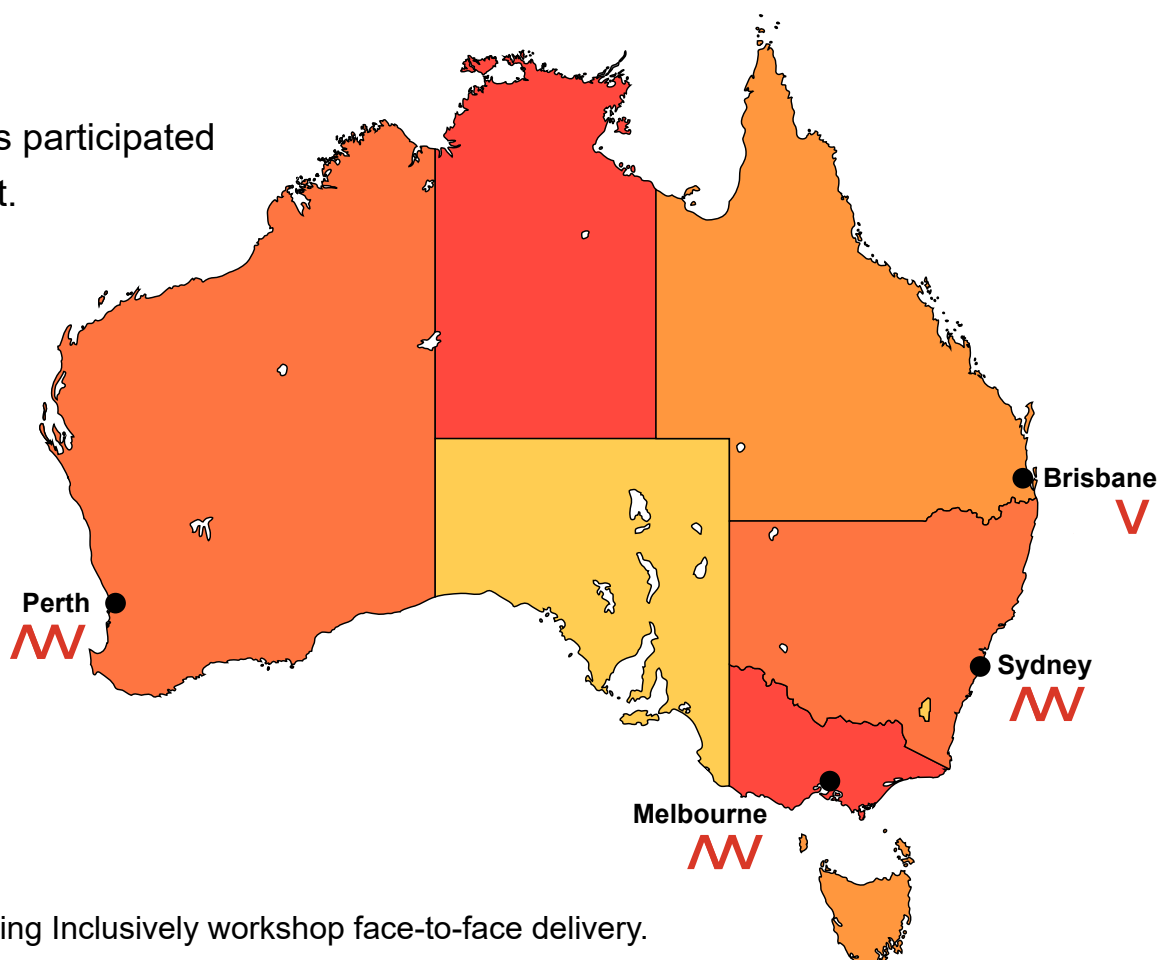


Figure 1: Leading Inclusively workshop face-to-face delivery.

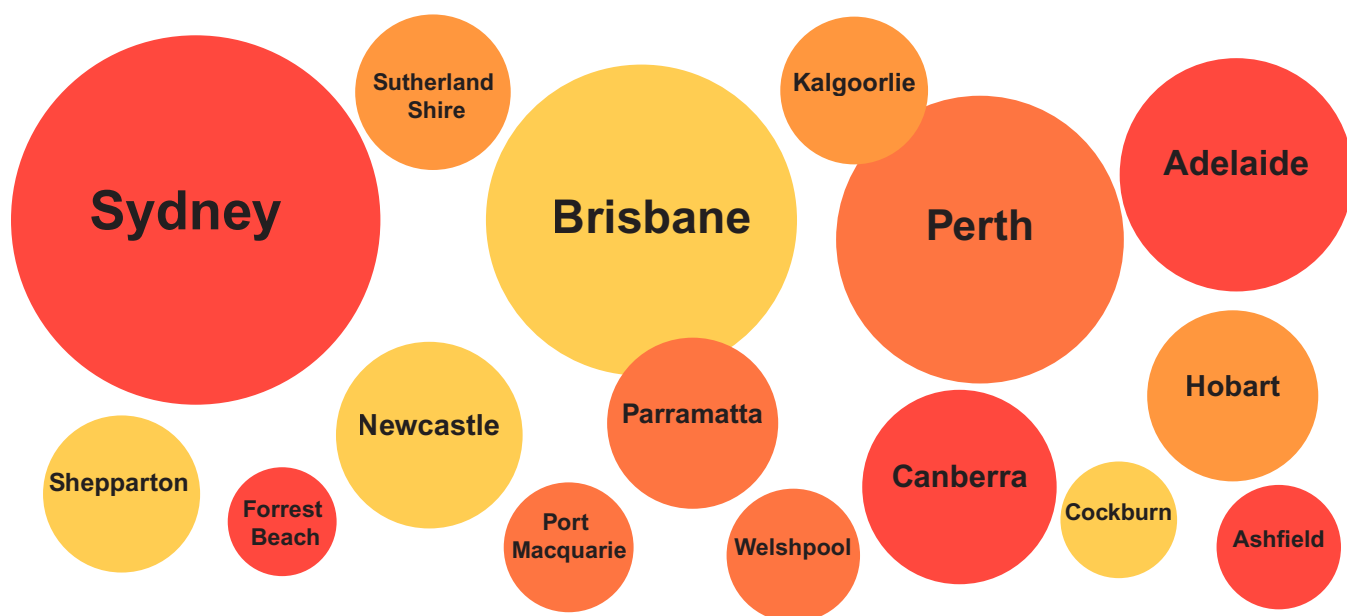


Figure 2: Advancing Women engaged with organisations in metropolitan and regional areas of Australia.



Figure 3: Brisbane, Queensland Workshop



Figure 5: Melbourne, Victoria Workshop



Figure 4: Brisbane, Hannah Carpenter (Attendee) and Summah McKinnon (Project Manager)



Figure 6: Perth, Western Australia Workshop

## Industries and Sectors



Figure 7: Advancing Women engaged and partnered with 9 industries and sectors.

## Project Overview

With support from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Office for Women, People with Disability Australia delivered the Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace project.

The project aims to:

- Support women with disability to find stable, ongoing work
- Create pathways to leadership opportunities
- Build safer and more inclusive workplaces
- Work with organisations to create long-term, meaningful change.

The project ran from January 2023 to July 2026 and was delivered in phased stages. A mid-project report, delivered in June 2025, focused on Phases 2 and 3 and the pilot program delivered in partnership with one national organisation. This final report draws together project reach, learning, outcomes, limitations and recommendations across the full project period.

## Introduction and Background

The Advancing Women project was funded in 2023 by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet as part of the Women's Leadership and Development: Lead and Succeed grants program. The grant funding covered five broad phases:

- **Phase 1:** Research and establishment of project governance
- **Phase 2:** Development of educational materials and framework for mentoring program and recruitment of organisations
- **Phase 3:** Roll out of pilot program
- **Phase 4:** Expansion and continuation of program within pilot organisation alongside rollout of program across all other recruited organisations
- **Phase 5:** Packaging and branding of content for delivery across other organisations and locations post project end date.

## Purpose of the Project

The project developed and delivered a structured education and mentoring program for women with disability, employers and workplace stakeholders. The program included online and face-to-face workshops, e-learning modules and mentoring activities designed to promote leadership, workforce participation, workplace safety and inclusion.

## Target Group

The target group for this project was women with disability, including women, feminine-identifying and non-binary people with disability.

## Project Activities

Activities in the program were divided into two streams delivered in parallel:

- Training and Education
- Mentorship.

Co-design was central to the program.

The employer-focused training resources and mentoring program were co-designed with women with disability to build understanding of disability rights and support practical application of disability rights in Australian workplaces, including through Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031 and Employ My Ability: Disability Employment Strategy.

## Project Context

The project was delivered in a context where women with disability face high rates of unemployment and economic insecurity, greater exposure to workplace violence and discrimination, and limited representation in leadership.

The project starts from the position that women with disability are ready and willing to work and lead. The barrier is not capability or aspiration, but workplace systems, cultures and practices.

- Inaccessible recruitment processes
- A lack of understanding from employers
- Limited access to reasonable adjustments
- Underrepresentation of women with disability in the workplace
- A lack of opportunities in mainstream employment.

Findings from PWDA's Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace: Needs Assessment and Gaps Analysis reinforced these barriers, identifying:

- A lack of disability awareness by employers and employees
- Negative and discriminatory attitudes towards women with disability
- Difficulties negotiating reasonable adjustments and accommodations.

# Methodology

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The evaluation used a participatory, mixed-methods approach aligned with the project Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework.

## Participatory Approach

Mentees and mentors were engaged as active contributors to the learning process, rather than solely as respondents. This was facilitated through reflective activities, structured discussions, workshops and ongoing feedback mechanisms.

## Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using a combination of qualitative and quantitative tools across the life of the program, including:

- Pre-program and post-program surveys (mentees and mentors)
- Learning journals capturing ongoing reflections and growth
- Workshop feedback and observations
- One-to-one discussions and informal feedback
- Facilitator reflections and program records.

Together, these methods provide a rich, multi-dimensional understanding of participant experience, learning outcomes and program contribution. Detailed tools and survey questions are retained in the appendices to keep the main report focused on key findings and recommendations.

## Analytical Approach

Analysis prioritised thematic identification of patterns, insights and outcomes across participant experiences. Quantitative data was used where available to support and contextualise these themes, rather than being treated as the only measure of success.

## Limitations

Survey response rates were lower than anticipated, limiting statistical analysis. However, relational feedback, reflective activities and one-to-one engagement provided detailed qualitative evidence of participant experience and contribution.

## Evaluation Framework

The evaluation was guided by the project logic model, theory of change and MEL approach. These provided a clear line of sight between activities, outputs and intended outcomes, while recognising that a single program contributes to, rather than wholly causes, long-term structural change.

The framework was supported by assumptions about participant engagement, organisational readiness and the enabling conditions required for change. Further detail about the evaluation design, tools and underlying frameworks is provided in the appendices.



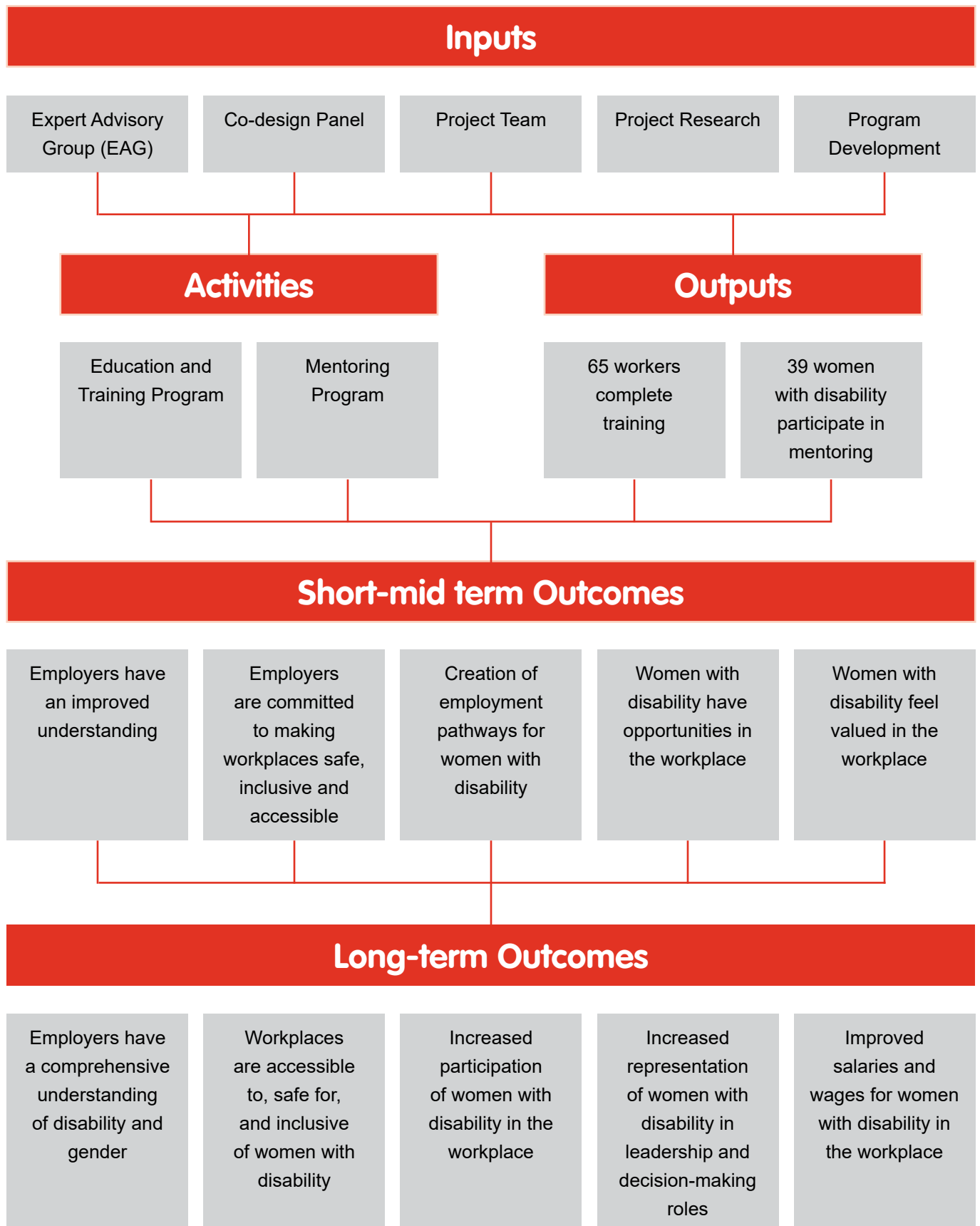


Figure 8: Program logic diagram

# Summary of Results

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- **Theme 1.** Relational and personalised engagement worked best. Lower survey response rates showed that participants often preferred one-to-one, conversational and reflective forms of feedback. This reinforces the importance of flexible, accessible and participant-led evaluation methods.
- **Theme 2.** Networking was one of the most valued components. Participants consistently identified connection, peer support and professional relationship-building as central to leadership development and confidence.
- **Theme 3.** Skilled facilitation and strong content supported a high-quality learning experience. Participants valued the expertise, enthusiasm and adaptability of facilitators, as well as the practical relevance of the learning materials.
- **Theme 4.** Goodwill and enthusiasm reflected strong program relevance. Mentees and mentors expressed appreciation, commitment and trust throughout the program, indicating that the model aligned with participant needs and expectations.
- **Theme 5.** Organisational readiness remains a key barrier to systemic change. While the program supported individual and relational outcomes, some participants were uncertain whether their organisations had the capacity or commitment to translate learning into lasting workplace change.

## What we Heard

Mentors and mentees were enthusiastic to participate in the project and expressed their goodwill to learn from and support each other.

Participants expressed some reservations about the ability and desire of their organisations to enable real change.

Participants wanted organisations to take stronger action to address systemic ableism.

Mentees were more reserved than mentors about the scope of change that might be achieved through the project.

‘I feel a stronger connection to my new-ish team and more confidence in dealing with them’ (mentee)

‘This program has provided me with education, practical tips and insights ...’ (mentee)

‘It has opened up different career pathway for me and I feel excited to take on this next chapter of my career’ (mentee)

‘I would like to thank you for providing such an insightful and engaging training. Your guidance on supporting women with disabilities in advancing to leadership roles has been invaluable’ (mentor)

Figure 9: What we Heard

# What we Learned

## Mentee Insights

Mentees highly valued the creation of a safe and supportive space where they could share experiences, reflect on barriers and build confidence through mentorship. The program supported participants to reimagine leadership beyond formal management roles, including influence, decision-making, advocacy and cultural change.

Mentees also developed a more nuanced understanding of the barriers attached to leadership progression, including access, support, workplace culture and organisational backing. This reinforces the need for ongoing career development support, sponsorship, networks and meaningful organisational commitment.

## Mentor Insights

Mentors emphasised the value of relationship-building and connection. They saw mentorship as mutually beneficial: supporting mentees while also creating opportunities for their own peer learning, reflection and deeper understanding of inclusive leadership.

Mentors gained stronger awareness of structural and attitudinal barriers faced by employees with disability. Their reflections highlight the need for broader organisational change, including changes to workplace policies, practices, cultures and assumptions about leadership.

## What Worked Well

A critical success of the program was the intentional creation of safe, inclusive spaces where participants could connect authentically, share openly and feel seen and heard. This enabled trust, deeper engagement and exploration of leadership identity, reinforcing psychological safety as a foundation for learning and growth.

## Supportive Environments

Women told us they are supported by:

**'Agreed on ways of working, ground rules'**

**'Disability informed culture and people'**

**'Knowing where I have a space and belong'**

**'Accessible environments'**

**'Seeing disabled people or support for invisible disability such as sunflower lanyards'**

**'Encouragement'**

**'Understanding'**

**'Family supports and childcare'**

**'Acknowledgement'**

**'Open communication and honesty'**

**'Skill development'**

**'Training and professional development'**

**'Flexible work options'**

**'Stronger successional progression'**

**'Increased awareness and understanding of disability leadership'**

**'Acting secondment activities'**

**'More women with disability in leadership roles.'**

Figure 10: What Creates a Supportive Workplace?

## A Note on 'Safe Space'

Psychologically safe spaces were central to participant experience. In practice, this meant clear expectations, trust, non-judgement, accessible participation and enough structure for people to contribute in ways that felt safe.

Advancing Women created this through structured but flexible learning, explicit attention to marginalised voices, and space for storytelling, vulnerability and peer connection.



# Outcomes and Impact

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Drawing on qualitative findings, survey responses, learning journals and participant feedback, the program demonstrates meaningful outcomes at individual, relational and early systemic levels. Some longer-term impacts will continue to emerge beyond the evaluation period.

## Strengthening Confidence and Leadership Identity

Participants reported increased confidence in their leadership capabilities and a stronger sense of professional identity. Through structured learning, reflection and mentorship, mentees described feeling more prepared to navigate leadership environments, advocate for themselves and articulate their skills and aspirations.

## Positive Shifts in Workplace Experience

Participants reported early changes in workplace engagement, including greater willingness to contribute ideas, participate in leadership opportunities and pursue career development. While systemic

organisational change remains ongoing, participants described applying new skills and approaches in professional contexts.

## Meaningful Impact on Mentors

Mentors also experienced benefits, including increased awareness of inclusive leadership practices, deeper understanding of lived experience perspectives and strengthened mentoring capability. Many mentors described the program as a reciprocal learning experience that contributed to their own professional growth.

## Expanded Networks and Sense of Community

Networking emerged as a key outcome. Participants built professional connections and peer support networks that reduced isolation and supported ongoing confidence, visibility and engagement beyond the program.

## Early Signals of Employment and Career Progression

The project timeframe limits the ability to fully assess long-term employment outcomes. However, early indicators suggest positive movement toward career progression, including increased clarity around career goals, improved readiness for leadership roles and greater confidence in pursuing opportunities.

Across the program, participants were already leading in adaptive, relational and lived-experience-informed ways. Advancing Women helped strengthen that identity, while also showing that readiness must be matched by organisational opportunity and systemic change.

Overall, Advancing Women demonstrates that supportive, affirming and flexible spaces can strengthen leadership identity while also highlighting the need for sustained systemic change so that readiness can translate into opportunity.



# Implementation Insights and Lessons Learned

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Delivery across the three-year period generated practical insights into what contributed to success, where challenges emerged and how future delivery could be strengthened. These reflections draw on participant feedback, facilitator observations and evaluation findings.

## What Worked

The program demonstrated strong engagement and relevance for both mentees and mentors. The most important success factors were:

- Relationship-based learning and mentorship, which enabled trust, confidence-building and meaningful personal and professional growth.
- High-quality facilitation and learning materials, with participants valuing facilitator expertise, adaptability and enthusiasm.
- Networking opportunities, which created community, reduced isolation and supported peer learning and collaboration.

- Participant-centred design, which created space for reflection, discussion and lived experience.
- Strong goodwill and commitment from mentees and mentors, which contributed to a positive program culture and sustained participation.

## Project Limitations and Research Constraints

The Advancing Women project was large and ambitious from the outset. During delivery, some adaptations to methodology and evaluation were required. Key factors included:

- The great diversity of participants' disability and lived experiences meant that highly individualised approaches worked best, often involving one-on-one experiences.
- Small numbers of participants made meaningful quantitative analysis difficult.
- Participants demonstrated a preference for relational and one-to-one engagement, which, while valuable, reduced engagement with formal evaluation tools such as surveys.

- Time constraints within the program period limited the ability to fully capture longer-term outcomes, particularly in relation to employment progression and systemic organisational change.
- Variability in organisational readiness and capacity impacted the extent to which participants could apply learning within their workplace contexts.
- The complexity of addressing structural and systemic barriers to leadership and employment sits beyond the scope of a single program, influencing the pace and visibility of broader impacts.

## What Needs Improvement or Change?

Formal survey responses and written feedback were difficult to obtain. Participants appeared to prefer individual, relational and face-to-face forms of feedback. Future projects should scope this more explicitly and design evaluation activities around the ways participants are most likely to engage.

## Lessons for Future Delivery

Key lessons for future delivery include:

- Placing participant voice and experience at the centre is essential, as flexible, relational, and inclusive approaches strengthen engagement and enable deeper insight.
- Connection is a key driver of impact; intentional networking and mentorship opportunities should remain core features.
- Facilitation quality significantly shapes outcomes and requires skilled, responsive and values-aligned facilitators.
- Programs of this nature need longer timeframes or follow-up mechanisms to capture and support longer-term outcomes.
- Organisations need to be engaged as active partners in change, not passive participants.
- Evaluation methods should remain adaptive and participant-informed, recognising that meaningful data may be generated through qualitative and relational approaches rather than traditional quantitative tools alone.

# Leadership Journeys in Practice

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## Case Study One: Advancing Women Leading Inclusively, an Independent Participant's Experience

For this Advancing Women participant, leadership was never something they had questioned. It had long been part of who they were and how they worked.

Over more than two decades in the human services sector, they had led teams, shaped strategy, mentored others, and influenced change. Their leadership was grounded in values, relationships, and lived experience. It wasn't performative or hierarchical; it was practical, thoughtful, and deeply human.

Five years ago, they acquired a disability following a brain injury. While this changed how they worked, it did not change how they thought, contributed, or led. What shifted instead was the environment around them. Leadership, they noticed, was still too often measured through narrow assumptions such as availability, pace, and presence rather than capability.

'My capability hasn't changed,' they reflected, 'but many organisations still equate leadership with a very specific way of working.'

Rather than disengaging, they adapted. They continued to contribute in ways that aligned with their capacity, choosing roles that allowed them to think deeply, support others, and add value even when those contributions weren't always formally recognised.

They learned about the Advancing Women Leading Inclusively workshop through their professional networks and decided to participate independently. It wasn't about trying to fix the systemic barriers in their workplace; it was about reconnecting with leadership on their own terms.

'I wanted space to think about what leadership looks like now, not what it's supposed to look like.'

The online format immediately supported that intention. It allowed them to participate fully while managing energy and focus. Importantly, the accessible format also signalled that different ways of participating were expected and supported.

Just as important was the workshop's conversational tone. It created a space where people didn't need to explain or

defend their experiences. Contributions could be spoken, typed, or simply reflected upon, offering choice and agency throughout.

As the workshop unfolded, something became clear; leadership, for this group, was expansive.

Participants spoke about influencing policy, shaping culture, mentoring peers, advocating quietly and persistently, and leading by example. There was no single pathway, no hierarchy of roles, just a shared understanding that leadership shows up in many forms and moments.

‘It reminded me that leadership doesn’t disappear when titles change.’

For the Advancing Women participant the workshop was affirming rather than transformative. It validated what they already knew; that their perspective still mattered, that lived experience strengthens leadership, and that contribution doesn’t require permission.

They also appreciated how the conversation located responsibility where it belongs; not solely with individuals adapting themselves, but with systems evolving to recognise diverse leadership expressions.

“Structural change and courage are required to support the leadership journeys of women and gender-diverse people with disability. It takes those already in positions of leadership to help dismantle the barriers that continue to limit access and opportunity.”

They left the workshop energised rather than overwhelmed, clearer about how they want to contribute next. That might be through advocacy, advisory work, mentoring, or supporting others to take up space. It might also mean continuing to lead quietly, in ways that are sustainable and aligned with their values.

‘My leadership didn’t end; it’s just taken a different shape.’





## Case Study Two: Leadership Development Through Inclusive Mentorship – A Mentee Experience

Leadership had long been visible to the participant interviewed here; however, access to leadership roles did not always feel available to her.

This was not due to a lack of capability, motivation, or ambition. Rather, her professional journey had been shaped by cumulative and often subtle messages that encouraged self-doubt. These messages were influenced by intersecting factors including gender, age, educational background, and internalised beliefs related to perceived competence and credibility. Over time, these dynamics contributed to self-questioning.

As a neurodivergent woman with dyslexia who is hard of hearing, the participant had become accustomed to navigating professional environments that did not always recognise or accommodate her access needs. While these experiences did not diminish her aspirations for leadership, they did affect her confidence to actively pursue leadership opportunities.

Despite these barriers, her interest in leadership remained consistent.

She joined the Advancing Women program seeking more than affirmation of her abilities. She was motivated by a desire for meaningful opportunity; to move beyond

narrowly defined roles often available to women with disability, and to develop a leadership identity that was authentic and aligned with her values. A further motivation was the opportunity to connect with other women who shared similar lived experiences, without the need to explain or justify those experiences.

From the outset, the program experience differed from previous professional development initiatives.

Participation in the Leading Inclusively workshops facilitated opportunities for connection and shared reflection. Engaging with other participants' narratives enabled the mentee to contextualise her own experiences within broader systemic patterns. Experiences she had previously perceived as individual challenges were reframed as outcomes of organisational and social structures.

Reflecting on this shift, she noted, 'I always believed I was alone. Now I know that I'm not.'

This realisation marked a significant change in perspective. Challenges that had been internalised as personal deficits were increasingly understood as shaped by external expectations and systems. Within this environment, confidence developed

not through competition or comparison, but through collective recognition, validation, and shared understanding.

While the workshops supported peer connection, the mentor–mentee relationship played a central role in translating insight into action.

Through ongoing engagement with her mentor, the mentee developed greater clarity around her strengths, leadership capacity, and professional aspirations. Together, they worked to articulate short, medium, and long-term goals, transforming uncertainty into structured and achievable pathways. These goals were grounded in the mentee’s lived reality, personal values, and considerations of wellbeing.

The mentee described the mentoring relationship as pivotal. Without this support, she believed she would remain uncertain about her next steps. Through mentorship, she gained both direction and confidence, enabling her to envisage a leadership trajectory that balanced ambition with sustainability.

An additional outcome of the program was the emergence of what the mentee described as ‘permission’—permission to be imperfect, to seek support, to engage in professional networks, and to imagine herself not only participating in leadership spaces but contributing to their shape and culture. This shift also prompted reflection beyond

her own development, toward advocacy and support for other neurodivergent women navigating similar pathways.

By the conclusion of the program, the mentee did not perceive herself as fundamentally changed. Rather, she reported increased certainty in her existing capabilities and a strengthened sense of self-belief.

She articulated an enduring understanding that leadership does not require perfection, that lived experience holds value, and that she is not alone in her journey. As she stated, ‘I am capable. I just needed a chance.’

The program altered her perception of leadership from something distant and individualised to something relational and collectively constructed through mentoring, encouragement, and community. She now envisages herself stepping forward into leadership while simultaneously supporting others to do the same.

She described the experience as life-changing, not because it transformed her identity, but because it expanded her understanding of what is possible.

## Reflective Narrative: A Message from the Project Manager

My name is Summah McKinnon, and I am the Project Manager for Advancing Women. During the evaluation phase of this project, I have taken time to reflect on my journey as Project Manager and the impact this project has had on my life, career, education and professional knowledge.

In considering whether to include my own experience in the final evaluation, I was mindful of not wanting to detract from the voices of participants, mentors, and other women with disability. However, as a woman with disability myself, I have come to understand that my journey is closely interwoven with the learning and outcomes of this project and offers a valuable perspective on its impact.

I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at the age of 19, and throughout my early career, I found working and creating sustainable employment to be deeply challenging. The fluctuations associated with my diagnosis often made it difficult to maintain consistent momentum, and I frequently felt that I was falling behind my peers in terms of career progression and professional milestones.

Traditional workplace environments were particularly difficult for me to navigate. Busy offices, long meetings, and constant

conversation required significant energy, and I often sought quiet spaces to complete my work. I regularly made informal adjustments to my work day, dimming lights, working in isolation, and adapting my routines simply to function effectively. By the end of each day, I felt both overstimulated and completely exhausted, while also managing emotional regulation, anxiety and workplace expectations.

Earlier in my career, I did not recognise that much of what I was experiencing stemmed from environments that were not designed to support people with disability. I experienced debilitating anxiety around presenting my work and 'showing up' as a professional. I masked heavily in order to appear capable, composed, and leadership ready, often modelling myself on other leaders whose working styles were unsustainable for me. While this approach enabled me to progress, it came at a significant personal cost.

In 2023, I joined People with Disability Australia (PWDA), ready for a new challenge. A former colleague brought the opportunity to my attention, and I was successful in securing a Project Officer role within Advancing Women. In reflecting on this transition, I now recognise the importance of sponsorship. The Director of the project at

the time recognised my skills and potential, advocated for me, and supported my progression into the role. I remain deeply grateful for that support.

Walking into PWDA, I could not have anticipated the opportunities that would follow both professionally and personally. Advancing Women became a pivotal turning point in my career. It was the first workplace where I disclosed my disability openly and identified proudly as a woman with disability. I was supported to articulate my access needs, request adjustments, and work flexibly. Importantly, my disclosure did not limit my future opportunities or leadership potential. Instead, I felt trusted, respected, and encouraged to do my best work.

Following a change in management in 2024, I was invited by the CEO of PWDA to step into the role of Project Manager. While I was apprehensive, I was also reassured that my skills, experience, and capability were recognised. Taking on this role was challenging, but it marked a significant moment of professional growth.

My journey as Project Manager mirrors many of the lessons learned through this project. Advancing Women has advanced me in knowledge, leadership, confidence and opportunity. Through this role, I have taken a seat at senior leadership tables, contributed as a subject matter expert, and built deep connections with an extraordinary national network of women with disability.

This community has been one of the most meaningful outcomes of the project for me personally.

The project has also shaped me as a leader. It has strengthened my commitment to creating inclusive, accessible, and supportive work environments where individuals can advocate for themselves, work in ways that suit them, and feel confident in their decision-making. It has reinforced my belief that leadership must be grounded in empathy, flexibility and genuine inclusion.

Advancing Women has been one of the most challenging experiences of my career. It has required me to confront self-doubt and question my capacity to create meaningful change. Yet it has also strengthened my resolve. I want to see women with disability advance into leadership, take seats at decision-making tables, and have their voices heard. I firmly believe that it is not a lack of capability that holds women with disability back, but the systemic barriers within which we are expected to operate.

Through this project, a powerful network of women has emerged as a collective with the potential to lead, support one another, share knowledge, and drive change. This community is a testament to what is possible when women with disability are resourced, trusted and connected.

I am deeply grateful to every woman who participated in and contributed to Advancing Women. Their generosity, passion, and courage have shaped this project and paved the way for others. Together, we are building pathways for future women with disability to recognise themselves as capable, confident leaders and to know that they belong at the leadership table.

**Summah McKinnon**

Advancing Women with Disability  
in the Workplace  
Project Manager



## Reflective Narrative: A Poem from a Mentee

“She moves through walls the world can’t see, with strength that flows so quietly.

Her voice, a spark, her will, a flame She rises proud, without shame.

Not bound by labels, nor by fear, she builds the path and draws us near.

A force of grace, of grit, of light She leads with power, bold and bright”.



## Reflective Narrative: A Message from Dr Michelle Hyde

My name is Michelle Hyde. I am a writer, educator, trainer, editor and mentor, of Aboriginal and European ancestry. I have long-term lived experience of disability, and I have also experienced significant family dysfunction. These intersectionality's are integral to the way I experience the world. They are also the reason that I was so very keen to be involved with the Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace project.

It has been my great pleasure and privilege to have been involved with the project as a content creator, educator, and now in this final evaluation phase. From the beginning, this was an ambitious project, in both scope and desired outcomes. What quickly became clear was the vital importance of providing safe spaces for women to share and to contribute. Women spoke of the relief, and joy, of finding community and companionship. The importance of the mentor/mentee relationship has also clearly been a highlight of this project.

It is also clear that sustained change takes time and investment, and that significant societal systemic barriers still exist. Advancing Women has been underpinned the whole way through by the highest standards of inclusion, equity and ethics. My experience has been deeply meaningful.

I have had the privilege of witnessing women with disability share their expertise, aspirations and lived experience, and of seeing those insights translated into practical learning and mentorship.

The most powerful moments were the honest conversations where participants felt safe to be heard, to question, and to imagine leadership on their own terms. Evaluating outcomes required care, humility and respect for stories as evidence. I am so very grateful to all the women who participated in this project and contributed in so many ways.

Together, we are doing good work.



# Key Recommendations

The Advancing Women project has demonstrated strong evidence of contribution across confidence, leadership identity, connection and early employment pathways. The recommendations below focus on strengthening the model for future delivery and supporting longer-term systems change.

A central evaluation insight is that individual capability is not the primary barrier. Structural, cultural and organisational conditions continue to limit opportunities for women with disability to gain, remain and advance in employment.

**Recommendation 1:** Strengthen organisational commitment and accountability.

Participants and mentors identified uncertainty about whether organisations were willing or equipped to translate learning into meaningful change.

Future delivery could prioritise:

- Clearer expectations for organisational participation
- Structured commitments to inclusive policy, practice and accountability
- Mechanisms for tracking and demonstrating organisational change.

There would be a strong opportunity to position organisations not only as participants, but as active partners in systems change.

**Recommendation 2:** Expand mentorship and relational learning models.

Mentorship was consistently identified as one of the most valuable components of the program. It supported confidence, clarity and career direction for mentees, while also strengthening mentor capability and awareness.

Building on this strength, future programs should:

- Expand access to structured mentorship opportunities
- Extend mentoring timeframes or introduce follow-on support
- Explore ongoing alumni or peer mentoring networks.

Sustained, relationship-based learning is a key lever for long-term impact.

**Recommendation 3:** Enhance networking and community pathways.

Networking emerged as both highly valued and an area where participants previously lacked confidence and access.

There is an opportunity to further embed:

- Structured, accessible networking opportunities
- Ongoing community-building mechanisms beyond the program
- Peer-led spaces that reduce isolation and support progression.

Strengthening networks will support not only individual outcomes, but collective leadership capability and visibility.

**Recommendation 4:** Refine learning content for relevance and depth.

Learning materials were widely valued. Some participants also indicated that elements of the e-learning content could be strengthened to better reflect the diversity of career stages, workplace contexts and lived experiences.

Future iterations could focus on:

- Tailoring content to different career stages
- Strengthening practical, workplace-focused application
- Ensuring content speaks directly to participants with lived experience.

This refinement would enhance both accessibility and impact.

**Recommendation 5:** Adopt more flexible and participant-centred evaluation methods.

The evaluation showed that participants preferred relational and conversational engagement over formal survey-based methods. Future evaluation should be designed around accessible, flexible and participant-led approaches while still meeting reporting requirements.

Future evaluation approaches should:

- Prioritise one-to-one and discussion-based feedback
- Embed reflection within mentoring relationships
- Use shorter, more accessible feedback tools.

This shift will improve both participation and the quality of insight captured.

**Recommendation 6:** Support longer-term pathways to employment and leadership.

Early indicators show positive movement in confidence, readiness and career direction. Longer-term employment and leadership outcomes will require sustained support, follow-up and organisational pathways beyond the funded program period.

Future investment should consider:

- Follow-up engagement or extended program models
- Partnerships that create clear employment and leadership pathways
- Mechanisms to track longer-term outcomes.

Supporting continuity will strengthen the translation of readiness into opportunity.



# Conclusion

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The Advancing Women project delivered meaningful outcomes across its three-year implementation, demonstrating the value of participant-centred, disability-led and relational approaches to leadership development.

The evaluation shows that the project's success was rooted in safe and inclusive environments, high-quality facilitation, strong mentorship relationships, peer connection and a willingness to recognise leadership in diverse forms.

The project generated strong early indicators of impact, including improved workplace engagement, increased visibility of leadership pathways and strengthened confidence among participants and mentors.

At the same time, the evaluation makes clear that individual-level change is not enough. Structural and systemic barriers, including organisational culture, inaccessible systems and limited leadership pathways, continue to shape the opportunities available to women with disability.

Overall, Advancing Women represents a strong and scalable model for leadership development grounded in lived experience, relational learning and inclusive practice. Continued investment should focus on sustaining the model, strengthening organisational accountability and supporting long-term pathways into employment and leadership for women with disability.



# Appendix

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## Appendix A: Program Design

### Project Timeline

Table 1: Advancing Women Project Timeline

| Date                       | Description of Activity                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| August 2023 – January 2024 | <b>Initiation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Needs Assessment and Gaps Analysis.</li><li>• Expert advisory panel recruitment.</li><li>• Co-design member recruitment.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                              |
| October 2023 – May 2024    | <b>Planning and Design</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Research learning frameworks</li><li>• Engagement plan</li><li>• Monitoring, evaluation and learning tool</li><li>• International Women’s Day Event (Online)</li><li>• Co-design</li><li>• E-learning development</li><li>• Education videography production</li></ul> |

| Date                          | Description of Activity                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| November 2023 – December 2024 | <b>Execution - Advancing Women Pilot</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor and Mentee recruitment</li> <li>• Education and Mentorship program September 2024 – December 2024</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| December 2024 – January 2025  | <b>Pilot Evaluation</b> <p>Post pilot project survey</p> <p>Post pilot focus groups for mentees and mentors</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| February 2025 – June 2025     | <b>Planning and Design 2</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embed changes discovered in the evaluation learnings into education and mentoring rollout 2.</li> <li>• Partner with influential leaders to facilitate and design new min workshops called “Learning Linkups”.</li> <li>• Refine and edit e-learning material based on pilot learnings.</li> <li>• Recruit organisations nationally for education and mentoring rollout 2.</li> </ul> |
| July 2025 – August 2025       | <b>Execution 2</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct Discovery Sessions with eligible organisations</li> <li>• Finalise mentee and mentor matching and onboarding onto Mentorloop mentoring platform.</li> <li>• Release and onboard participants onto version 2 of the Advancing Women e-learning package.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                       |

| Date                                  | Description of Activity                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>September 2025 – December 2025</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivery of the online opening Scoping Session to mentors and mentees.</li> <li>• Commencement of 16-week e-learning and mentoring package</li> <li>• Delivery of Learning Linkup 1: Working with confidence and clarity with PWDA and ACON</li> <li>• Delivery of Learning Linkup 2: Owning your story, personal brand with Lem Zakharia (Bedou)</li> <li>• Delivery of Learning Linkup 3: Networking and creating opportunities</li> <li>• Delivery of “Leading Inclusively” VIC, QLD, WA</li> </ul> |
| <b>January 2026 – June 2026</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivery of online version “Leading Inclusively” International Women’s Day 2026.</li> <li>• Commencement of Advancing Women evaluation.</li> <li>• Explore and finalise business model design</li> <li>• Finalise and publish final evaluation report</li> <li>• Distribute final evaluation to key stakeholders</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                            |

# Project Sessions

Table 2: Advancing Women Project Sessions

| Date       | Location       | Format       | Workshop Title      | Attendance |
|------------|----------------|--------------|---------------------|------------|
| 15.09.2025 | Teams          | Online       | Scoping Session     | 50         |
| 18.09.2025 | Teams          | Online       | Learning Linkup 1   | 19         |
| 17.10.2025 | Melbourne, VIC | Face-to-face | Leading Inclusively | 16         |
| 31.10.2025 | Brisbane, QLD  | Face-to-face | Leading Inclusively | 16         |
| 12.11.2025 | Teams          | Online       | Learning Linkup 2   | 13         |
| 27.11.2025 | Perth, WA      | Face-to-face | Leading Inclusively | 5          |
| 18.12.2025 | Teams          | Online       | Learning Linkup 3   | 14         |
| 9.03.2026  | Teams          | Online       | Leading Inclusively | 15         |

## **Project Materials**

The Advancing Women project materials were developed by members of People with Disability Australia's Strategic Projects and Training team, in partnership with HD Writing and Educational Services, Empowering Pathways, and Heidi La Paglia Consulting. The materials were informed by the findings and recommendations from the Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace: Needs Assessment and Gaps Analysis, and by input from the Advancing Women advisory panel and codesign members. The materials included e-learning modules, a mentoring program, and interactive workshops.

## **Discovery Session Workshop**

The Discovery Session workshop was an introduction to the Advancing Women project and was delivered to organisations who expressed interest in taking part. The workshop offered the opportunity to showcase the program background research and logic of the education and mentoring program materials.

## **Advancing Women Scoping Session Workshop**

The Advancing Women Scoping Session is an online, facilitated workshop led by Dr Michelle Hyde and delivered in the first week of the 20-week mentoring program. Using a yarning circle methodology, the session brings mentors and mentees together to establish shared understanding and set the foundations for the program. Participants collectively explore concepts of mentorship and leadership, with a specific focus on the intersectional barriers experienced by women with disability in the workplace. The session emphasises relationship-building and mutual connection, supporting the development of a strong, values-based community of emerging and established leaders.

## **E-learning and Mentoring Package**

The 20-week online e-learning and mentorship package explored the unique barriers women with disability face in the workplace. The mentors and mentees explored leadership skills, collaborated on activities and discussed how they might implement these into their daily workplace practice. This mentorship method is a dynamic learning exchange that provides mutual benefits for both the mentor and mentee.

## Learning Linkups

The Learning Linkups provided interactive, participant-led workshops focused on workplace inclusion, self-advocacy, and storytelling for leadership and professional identity. These sessions combined practical tools with lived experience discussion, supporting participants to build confidence, develop leadership capability, and apply learning in real-world contexts. A strong emphasis on connection and peer learning contributed to a sense of community and reinforced the value of accessible, flexible learning environments.

## Leading Inclusively Workshop

This engaging workshop was delivered face-to-face across NSW, QLD, VIC and WA. The workshop employs a yarning circle methodology and is facilitated by Dr Michelle Hyde a First Nations woman with disability. “Leading Inclusively” explores diverse leadership models, interpersonal skills, and leadership capabilities for both mentors and mentees. The workshop creates a platform for meaningful conversations on leadership, fostering collaboration and the development of more inclusive workplaces.



# Appendix B - Methodology Detail

## Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Framework

### Beyond Traditional Evaluation

Acknowledging that the Advancing Women project aims to improve the experiences and participation rates of women with disability in the workforce, it is important to consider how to measure these outcomes in a way that is most beneficial to the recipients of the intervention and does not reflect the existing power imbalances that the project aims to tackle.

While traditional approaches to MEL tend to rely on facts and figures, such as the percentage of women with disability in the workforce, these indicators do not give insight into the structural or cultural factors that impact on these statistics.

In the case of the Advancing Women project, statistics alone cannot represent the array of structural and cultural disadvantages that prevent women with disabilities' workforce participation.

As evidenced by the research outlined in PWDA's Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace: Needs Assessment and Gaps Analysis Findings Report, the workforce barriers for women with disability are structural and underpinned by prejudiced attitudes about gender and disability, which are not easily changeable.

For this reason, it is essential that the project evaluation incorporates measures that show cultural shifts, not just changes in statistics, in order to assess its ability to make change that is meaningful and will last into the future.

### Participatory Approach

For the purpose of the Advancing Women project, taking a participatory approach to MEL means centering the perspectives of the women with disability and organisations who are framed as beneficiaries of the project. Rather than taking a top-down approach to evaluation, which extracts information from participants, taking a participatory approach means that participants are positioned as knowledge holders in her own right and are given the power to control the use and interpretation of their experience.

## Guidance Principles

Drawing on existing literature on feminist and disability approaches to MEL, the following principles have been drafted to inform the evaluation of the Advancing Women project.

### Incorporate all Perspectives

Reflecting the principles of a feminist participatory approach to MEL, the evaluation will incorporate the perspectives of all participants and stakeholders involved in the project, including EAG members, co-design panel members, participating organisations, mentees and mentors. Participant perspectives will be collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods and every perspective will be valued equally. Evaluation will be conducted through an iterative approach, with perspectives of stakeholders being collected throughout the project, not just at the culmination.

### Acknowledge and Shift Power

The project team and evaluator will approach the evaluation with an understanding that there are multiple, overlapping power relations that exist within the project (for example, between PWDA and the participating organisations; and between the mentoring organisations and the mentees) and that these may impact the evaluation. In approaching the MEL, the team will make efforts to mitigate power imbalances

by making it clear that participation in the evaluation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. Participants will also be advised that anything they say in or contribute to the evaluation will not impact on their experiences as part of the project. Additionally, rather than collecting data from participants as an extractive exercise, PWDA will be empowered to lead the collection as well as the analysis of their own data and will be given opportunities to take part in peer-to-peer evaluations.

### Make the Process Accessible

In order to ensure that all participants have the opportunity to contribute, PWDA will make efforts to ensure that the evaluation process is inclusive and accessible. The evaluation will be designed in a way that recognises that different individuals communicate in different ways, including by offering written, verbal and visual methods for participation. All participatory tools, such as surveys and interview questions will be written in Plain English and will be made accessible for people with different disabilities and communication needs and preferences.

## **Renumerate Time and Contribution**

Recognising that participation in evaluation process takes time, energy and resources, PWDA will remunerate all participants for the contributions they make.

## **Do No Harm**

Throughout the evaluation process, PWDA will conduct itself in an ethical and trauma informed manner and make every effort to ensure that no harm is experienced by participants. Prior to participating, all individuals will be required to sign a consent form and it will be made clear that participation and consent can be withdrawn at any time throughout the process. Prior to participation, the benefits and risks of participating will be explained, and the purpose of the data collection will be made clear.

## **MEL as a Continuous Process**

Acknowledging that effective approaches to MEL are continuous, PWDA will ensure that MEL is incorporated throughout the Advancing Women project and not just tacked onto the end. In order to make the most of the MEL Framework, the project team will commit to learning from the iterative implementation of the project activities and using the learnings to improve the outcomes.

## **Assume Contribution not Attribution**

As acknowledged in PWDA's Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace: Needs Assessment and Gaps Analysis Findings Report, the barriers that face women with disability in the workplace are wide reaching and cannot be addressed by a single project. However, through the planned interventions, it can be presumed that the project will contribute to reducing barriers to workforce participation and promotion for the participating women with disability and within the participating organisations. The key here is that the project must be seen as a contributor to the desired outcomes. It cannot be attributed to them.

## **Theory of Change/Logic Model**

Women with disability face systemic barriers to leadership, including discrimination, inaccessible environments, limited networks, and underrepresentation. By providing accessible leadership development, mentoring, peer support, and opportunities for visibility, the project strengthens confidence, skills, and networks. These changes enable women with disability to take on leadership roles, influence decision-making, and advocate for systemic change. Over time, this contributes to more inclusive leadership ecosystems and greater representation of women with disability in leadership positions.

Heidi La Paglia Consulting was contracted in March 2024 to develop a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework for the Advancing Women project with a focus on evaluating the education and mentoring components. A framework and tools for monitoring, evaluating and learning from the development of the Advancing Women project were developed and are summarised briefly below.

This report also presented a Project Logic model and desired outcomes as well as a framework for action and suggested points of evaluation timetable. The report also detailed the tools required for monitoring and evaluation, again summarised below.

## **Inputs**

- Expert Advisory Group (EAG)
- Co-design panel
- Project team
- Project research
- Curriculum development
- Development of mentoring program.

## **Activities**

- Education and training program for employer organisations
- A mutual mentoring program.

## **Outputs**

- 65 workers complete PWDA's education and training program
- 39 women with disability and mentors participate in a mutual mentoring program.

## **Short and Mid-Term Outcomes**

- Employers have an improved understanding of their role and responsibilities in creating safe, accessible and inclusive environments.
- Employers are actively creating processes and policies to ensure the employment experiences of women with disability are safe, inclusive and accessible.
- Employers create employment pathways for women with disability.
- Women with disability feel like they have opportunities for employment and promotion.
- Women with disability feel valued in the workforce.

## Long-Term Outcomes

- Employers and workers have a comprehensive understanding of disability, gender and the rights of women with disability in the workplace.
- Workplaces are accessible to, safe for and inclusive of women with disability.
- Increased representation of women with disability in leadership and decision-making roles.
- Increased participation of women with disability in the workplace.
- Improved salaries and wages for women with disability in the workplace.

## Assumptions

- That a lack of disability awareness among employers and workers directly correlates to a lack of access
- That increasing disability awareness among employers and workers will increase access, for example, through the provision of reasonable adjustments and accommodations
- That increasing disability awareness among employers will increase the likelihood that those employers will hire women with disability in their workplaces
- That providing women with disability with support through mentoring will create employment and promotion opportunities for those individuals
- That increasing the visibility of women with disability in the workplace through mutual mentoring will decrease bias and discriminatory attitudes towards and about women with disability.

# Appendix C:

## Tools for Monitoring and Evaluation

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To collect multiple types of data and maximise involvement among participants with varying access needs and preferred modes of expression, PWDA used five data collection tools developed specifically for the project.

### Demographic Data

In order to compare data sets and ensure that intersectional factors can be considered in the analysis, the following demographic questions will be asked, where possible, as part of each data collection tool.

#### 1. Age group:

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+
- Prefer not to say

#### 2. Which one (s) best describe your gender or gender identity?

- Man
- Woman
- Non-Binary
- Gender non-conforming
- Transgender
- Cisgender
- Intersex
- Other

#### 3. Which one (s) best describes your sexual identity or sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Asexual
- Prefer not to say
- Other

#### **4. Do you identify as being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?**

- Yes Aboriginal
- Yes, Torres Strait Islander
- No
- Prefer not to say

#### **5. Do you identify as coming from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) background?**

- Yes
- No

#### **6. Disability type**

- Physical (for example, mobility issue, amputee, muscular dystrophy, spinal cord injury etc)
- Neurological (for example, Autism, ADHD Tourette's etc)
- Sensory (for example blind, deaf, deafblind etc)
- Cognitive or intellectual disability (for example ABI, Down syndrome, etc)
- Psychosocial (for example, permanent psychiatric disability or mental health condition)
- Prefer not to say
- Other

## **Mentor Surveys**

Mentors were surveyed at the beginning of the program (baseline or pre survey) and then again at completion (end of program or post survey).

### **Mentor Pre-Program Survey**

1. Thinking about the prospect of employing or working with women with disability in your current organisation, please share any concerns you have or difficulties you might experience?
2. What are you hoping to gain from participation in the Advancing Women program?
3. Using the scale, please circle the answer that best represents how much you agree with each of the following statements (Likert Scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable):
  - a. I understand the barriers that women with disability may face in accessing and maintaining employment.
  - b. I understand how experiences and support needs can be different for women with disability who face intersectional discrimination. For example, because they are First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) or LGBTIQ+

- c. I understand what I am legally required to do to ensure my organisation/workplace is inclusive of women with disability.
  - d. I have a comprehensive understanding of how to ensure workplaces are inclusive of women with disability
  - e. I feel confident to employ or work with woman with disability in my workplace / employment.
  - f. I understand what it means to be a good ally.
4. Is there anything else you would like to share?

## Mentor Post-Program Survey

- 1. Thinking about the prospect of employing or working with women with disability in your current organisation, please share any concerns you have or difficulties you might experience?
- 2. Reflecting on the Advancing Women project, how do you think this has changed your understanding of women with disability in the workplace? How do you think this will benefit you or your workplace?
- 3. Using the scale, please circle the answer that best represents how much you agree with each of the following statements (Likert Scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable):
  - a. I understand the barriers that women with disability may face in accessing and maintaining employment.
  - b. I understand how experiences and support needs can be different for women with disability who face intersectional discrimination. For example, because they are First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) or LGBTIQ+
  - c. I understand what I am legally required to do to ensure my organisation/workplace is inclusive of women with disability.
  - d. I have a comprehensive understanding of how to ensure workplaces are inclusive of women with disability
  - e. I feel confident to employ or work with woman with disability in my workplace / employment.
  - f. I understand what it means to be a good ally.
- 4. Is there anything else you would like to share?

# Mentee Surveys

Mentees were surveyed at the beginning of the program (baseline or pre survey) and then again at completion (end of program or post survey).

## Mentee Pre-Program Survey

1. Which of the following best describes your involvement in the Advancing Women project? (Please select all that apply)

- Co-Design Panel member
- Expert Advisory Group Member
- Mentee
- Education program facilitator
- Other (please describe)

2. How would you describe your current employment status?

- Employed
- Unemployed (looking for work)
- Underemployed
- Self-Employed
- Student
- Other

3. If yes, what type of employment are you in? (please select all that apply)

- Full-Time
- Part-Time

- Permanent
- Contract
- Casual
- Self-Employed
- Other

4. If you feel comfortable, can you share your annual income before tax?

5. In your employment or otherwise, do you hold any of the following roles (please select all that apply):

- Board Director
- Committee or Advisory Group member
- Team leader
- Member of an executive team
- In a management role
- Deputy CEO
- Chief Executive Officer or Executive Director
- In another formal leadership role (please describe)
- In another formal decision-making role (please describe)

6. At this point in time, do you feel that you have employment opportunities available to you?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Other

7. At this point in time, do you feel like you have opportunities for promotion or career advancement, now or that you will in the future?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Other

8. Is there anything else you would like to share? (Open-Ended)

## **Mentee Post-Program Survey**

1. Which of the following best describes your involvement in the Advancing Women project? (Please select all that apply)

- Co-Design Panel member
- Expert Advisory Group Member
- Mentee
- Education program facilitator
- Other (please describe)

2. How would you describe your current employment status?

- Employed
- Unemployed
- Underemployed
- Self-Employed
- Student
- Other

3. If yes, what type of employment are you in? (please select all that apply)

- Full-Time
- Part-Time
- Permanent
- Contract
- Casual
- Self-Employed
- Other

4. If you feel comfortable, can you share your annual income before tax?

5. Do you hold any of the following roles (please select all that apply):

- Board or Management Committee member
- Committee or Advisory Group member
- Team leader
- Member of an executive team
- In a management role
- Deputy CEO
- Chief Executive Officer or Executive Director
- In another formal leadership role (please describe)

6. At this point in time, do you feel that you have employment opportunities available to you?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Other

7. At this point in time, do you feel like you have opportunities for promotion or career advancement, now or that you will in the future?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Other

8. Do you think your involvement in the Advancing Women program has improved your employment experiences or opportunities?

- Yes
- No
- unsure
- Other

9. If yes, can you describe how?  
(Open-Ended)

10. Is there anything else you would like to share? (Open-Ended)

## Creative Journals

Mentors and mentees were invited to create an art piece that reflects their views at the beginning and end of the project. Creative works could be a poem, drawing, painting, collage, series of photos, reflection, or anything else relevant to participants.

## Community Conversations

Participants were given the opportunity to discuss their experiences as part of the project with their peers. A facilitator guided each session. The community conversations included a maximum of ten participants and ran for between one and two hours.

## Questions (Mentors)

- Please introduce yourself to the group, including your name, pronouns, and role in the project.
- How has participating in the Advancing Women project changed or improved your understanding of disability in the workplace?
- Reflecting on your participation in the project, have you noticed any changes in your perception of women with disability? If so, how?
- Since the beginning of the program, what changes have you noticed in your workplace environment?

## Questions (Mentees)

- Please introduce yourself to the group, including your name, pronouns and role in the project.
- How has participating in the Advancing Women project changed your experience in employment or in your career?
- Have you gained any opportunities because of participating in the Advancing Women project?
- Do you think that taking part alongside other women with disability has impacted your experience? If so, how?



# Appendix D – Detailed Findings

## Survey: Quantitative Results

Mentors and mentees were invited to complete surveys before and after participating in learning and mentoring activities. These surveys were designed to capture starting points and early signs of change. While pre-program surveys received strong engagement, fewer participants completed post-program surveys. As a result, the post-program data is best understood as providing indicative insights rather than direct before-and-after comparisons.

Importantly, this response pattern revealed a meaningful insight into how participants preferred to engage with the program. Across both mentors and mentees, participants consistently valued individual, relationship-based engagement over standardised or oneway approaches such as surveys. Participants engaged with the program primarily as individuals rather than as members of a broader cohort, a preference that emerged consistently throughout the evaluation.

This finding aligns with broader evidence showing that survey participation is influenced by perceived relevance, emotional effort, and the level of personal connection participants feel to the process (Ahlmarm,

2015; Saraç, 2025). Mentoring was repeatedly identified as the most valuable aspect of participation, and personalised contact generated stronger engagement than general or broadcast communications. In this context, lower participation in post-program surveys was not unexpected.

Survey engagement is also known to be affected by the mode of delivery, with online surveys producing lower response rates than more interactive approaches (Daikeler et al., 2020). Health status can further influence participation, with people managing ongoing health conditions or disability less likely to engage in survey-based feedback, particularly where time, energy, or accessibility constraints are present (Berete, 2019). These factors are compounded by widespread survey fatigue across populations, which continues to reduce engagement across mail, phone, online, and face-to-face methods alike (Williams, 2018).

Taken together, the response patterns observed in this evaluation are consistent with wider trends and provide clear guidance for future program design and evaluation. They suggest that more personalised, conversational, and relationship-based feedback mechanisms are likely to be both more inclusive and more effective. Opportunities for future evaluation include onetoone conversations, short reflective

discussions embedded within mentoring relationships, or brief, targeted feedback gathered through trusted individual interactions.

Overall, the evaluation confirms that the program is working with a cohort facing genuine and persistent structural barriers, and that depth of connection matters more than volume of data. The findings affirm the program's core design, reinforce the central role of mentoring in driving engagement and impact, and highlight practical opportunities to strengthen both impact measurement and participant experience through continued refinement and investment.

## Survey Quantitative Pre-Program Analysis

### Limited Access to Opportunity and Confidence

- Nearly two-thirds of participants did not agree they had leadership opportunities available in the near future.
- Over **60%** reported low confidence in moving into leadership positions.
- **82%** agreed or strongly agreed that they had faced barriers in accessing leadership opportunities during their careers.

These findings highlight entrenched systemic barriers rather than individual capability gaps, reinforcing the importance of targeted interventions such as mentoring, networks, and skill development.

### Networking: Importance High, Confidence Low

Baseline data revealed a notable disparity between the recognised importance of networking and participants' confidence and access.

- **95%** agreed or strongly agreed it is important for women and gender diverse people with disability to network together to support career advancement.
- Yet only **23%** felt confident in networking.
- Just **59%** agreed or strongly agreed they had access to networking opportunities in their workplace, with **22%** actively disagreeing.

This gap underscores a critical rationale for the program's mentoring and peer-connection components.

## Quantative Post-Program Analysis

Post-program survey findings should be interpreted cautiously due to:

- A smaller response cohort (n=7)
- Differences in question wording between Baseline and Post surveys.

Accordingly, post data is presented as indicative early signals rather than definitive outcome measures.

## Employment Experience and Opportunity Perceptions

- **43%** of respondents strongly agreed they have opportunities for promotion or advancement now or in the future.
- **43%** agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the program improved their employment experiences or opportunities.
- No respondents selected 'strongly disagree' across post-program measures, suggesting an absence of negative program impacts.

While perceptions of immediate employment opportunities remained mixed, this reflects continued external constraints rather than program ineffectiveness.

## What Worked Best: Mentorship at the Core

When asked to identify the best part of their participation, the following responses were obtained:

- **71%** cited working with a mentor as the most valuable element.
- Smaller proportions identified workshops (14%) and peer connections (14%).

This finding strongly supports the importance of one-to-one mentoring in addressing confidence, validation and career clarity.

## Survey Qualitative Free-Form Analysis

### Participant Experience and Program Value

Qualitative data was collected through free text survey questions administered to mentees and mentors prior to and following participation in the Advancing Women project. Although response numbers were modest, the qualitative feedback provided rich insight into participant motivations, lived experience, and the perceived value of the program, offering depth and nuance that complements the quantitative findings.

Research shows that free text often reveals nuance missing from yes/no or Likert scales and that commentors can differ from non-

commentors. When people are given a free-form space, many use it to raise issues they care about, add nuance and point out missing topics. Free-form commentors may be those that feel strongly about an issue (Jane Louise Rich, 2013), or may be those more likely to have strong (often negative) views (Jane Louise Rich, 2013). With respect to the Advancing Women cohort, this could mean that ‘networking’ represents an area that participants felt strongly about. This backs up the anecdotal evidence discovered in the Leading Inclusively workshops.

## **Mentee Pre-Program Analysis**

Seven mentees provided qualitative responses prior to program commencement. These responses highlighted a cohort that was highly reflective, motivated, and already actively engaging with questions of leadership, confidence, and systemic constraints.

A strong theme to emerge was the complex relationship between leadership aspiration, disability, and networking. Several participants expressed interest in building professional connections, while also identifying the practical and emotional labour involved in ‘traditional’ networking models particularly for those with nonapparent disability, neurodivergence, fluctuating health, or limited capacity to mask.

Importantly, participants did not reject networking itself; rather, they called for more

inclusive, disability aware approaches and for attention to broader systems change alongside individual skill building. This perspective reinforced the relevance of the program’s focus and directly informed later workshop design, with networking identified independently by participants and facilitators as an area requiring deeper exploration.

Beyond networking, mentees described:

- Strong intrinsic motivation to lead and influence others
- Long-standing experiences of self-doubt and imposter syndrome
- A desire to strengthen decision-making confidence
- Recognition of leadership potential by managers or peers
- Readiness to step into the “next chapter” of their careers.

These responses demonstrate that participants entered the program with existing capability, high motivation, and a deliberate intention to develop as leaders alongside structural and psychological barriers that mentoring and peer connection are well positioned to address.

## **Mentee Post-Program Analysis**

Post-program qualitative responses from mentees consistently reflected positive experiences and perceived impact, despite a small respondent group.

Participants described:

- Increased confidence in workplace interactions and decision-making
- Stronger connection to teams and colleagues
- Greater awareness of how disability intersects with workplace dynamics
- Increased openness and self-advocacy regarding access needs
- Enhanced knowledge and practical strategies drawn from lived experience sharing.

Notably, one participant reported successfully securing accommodations at work, an outcome that had not previously been achieved in that context highlighting a tangible employment-related impact. Another described the program as opening up a newly visible career pathway, accompanied by optimism and motivation.

When invited to share additional reflections, mentees spoke positively about:

- Reaching personal goals
- Greater confidence in their ability to achieve more professionally
- Feeling recognised and supported
- The value of Learning Linkups, e-learning, and facilitation
- Introducing inclusive practices within their own teams.

Constructive feedback was also offered, particularly regarding the accessibility and intended audience of some e-learning content, and the desire for stronger organisational accountability for systems change. These reflections reinforce the program's relevance and provide clear guidance for refinement, without detracting from overall participant value.

## **Mentor Pre-Program Analysis**

Thirteen mentors responded to pre-program qualitative questions, and their responses reflected strong goodwill, openness, and motivation to support women with disability in leadership and employment contexts.

Mentors demonstrated:

- Awareness of systemic and organisational barriers
- Willingness to learn and reflect on their own assumptions
- Concern for accessibility, systems, communication and time pressures
- Commitment to acting as effective advocates and allies.

While some mentors identified significant organisational constraints, others expressed confidence and readiness to engage. Across responses, there was a clear recognition that inclusive leadership requires both intent and structural support, aligning strongly with program objectives.

When asked what they hoped to gain from participation, mentors most commonly identified:

- Supporting and developing their mentee
- Learning from mentees' lived experience
- Strengthening mentoring and leadership capability
- Improving organisational advocacy and inclusive practice
- Expanding networks and strategic influence.

The tone across mentor responses was consistently one of enthusiasm, reflection, and responsibility.

## **Mentor Post-Program Analysis**

Feedback from mentors following the program highlights a range of meaningful shifts in understanding, confidence, and practice. Mentors consistently reflected on how the experience deepened their awareness and strengthened their ability to support inclusive leadership pathways within their organisations.

- Increased understanding of barriers faced by women with disability
- Heightened awareness of unconscious bias
- Greater confidence in fostering inclusive opportunities
- Enhanced capability to support leadership progression.

This reflection strongly aligns with program intent and demonstrates the potential multiplier effect of mentor learning on workplace culture.

## **Survey Qualitative Analysis Outcomes**

Across mentee and mentor responses, qualitative findings demonstrate that the Advancing Women project:

- Engaged participants with high motivation and leadership potential
- Addressed real, lived experiences of disability and systemic exclusion
- Built confidence, connection and self-advocacy
- Provided insight that directly informed program refinement
- Strengthening inclusive leadership capability among mentors.

While not designed to measure long-term employment outcomes, the qualitative evidence indicates meaningful early impact at the level of confidence, awareness, behaviours, and opportunity positioning. These findings reinforce the program's value and highlight strong opportunities to deepen and extend impact through continued investment.

# Mentee Pre-Program Free-Form Survey Questions

**Q Is there anything else you would like to share?**

## Responses

I'm concerned about the emphasis on networking :( Where is the work to dismantle systemic ableism that has that responsibility placed on non-disabled folk to change?

In the past few years, as I started getting more exposure to the work I am doing independently and as a team, I felt I am empowered to lead. From training new team members to seeking advice from the experienced team members, I felt that now is the time to step up. The opportunity to shadow one of my very experienced colleagues provided me with the possibility to enhance my technical skills, however I am a strong believer in "True learning happens through doing, not just by absorbing theory." I became reliant on that person even to make a small decision. The intent of the opportunity is to learn the new skill and enhance my current knowledge, while I became good at technical aspect but slowly started keeping quiet as I was not confident enough to express my point of view and

thought what if... I am incorrect. I lacked decision making ability from my childhood and I always have dual mind whenever I have to decide about something (personal or professional). This is something I am trying to achieve in this mentorship program. The pathway of leadership has been carved for me by my manager; I believe my potential to learn as well as the ability to teach and influence others must have been the factor. Networking is something I have not done at workplace, it would be interesting to connect and interact and exchange information which helps develop professional contacts. At the same time, I agree in the importance for women and gender diverse individuals with disability to network together to support each other on their career advancement. Thanks for this opportunity, the journey of leadership has begun...

It really depends on how much energy I have to mask on that day as well as how I am feeling physically. It is difficult for me to stand still and talk to someone and if it's not a good day, I can only talk to someone in the seated position which very much limits me. I have a non-apparent physical disability as well as neurodivergence. These overlap and affect networking.

I am in a leadership position but continually struggle with meeting perceived expectations of the role. I suffer from unrelenting imposter syndrome and continually doubt my organisational and decision-making abilities. I also feel that leadership training I've attended hasn't improved my skills - that it wasn't designed with me in mind - and am hoping this approach will help me improve my leadership skills and aspire to go further in my career.

I am ready to support, listen, learn and lead. I am keen to take the next step in my career; and as a side benefit, perhaps move up the ladder.

I think it is important to build people's capacity and utilize each person's skill sets

More information on what you mean by networking would be useful. Networking can be challenging for people with 'energy' and other psychosocial related disabilities. My capacity to network is limited by disability related matters, part-time work, and competing demands. Not by opportunities, confidence, or skills. It would be useful to have a conversation around, how to Network when your disability says no (or something like that). Finding Strategies that help. This survey assumes that I am looking for employment opportunities. It may depend

on where people are in their leadership or career progression. It may be helpful to understand where people are on their leadership journey and what is it they are seeking. OR understand people's motivations and goals for being on the program?

## **Mentee Pre-Program Free-Form Survey Questions**

**Q If yes, can you describe how?  
(Do you think your involvement  
in the Advancing Women project  
has improved your employment  
experiences or opportunities?)**

**Responses -  
Describe how the project has  
improved your employment  
experiences/opportunities?**

I feel a stronger connection to my new-ish team and more confidence in my dealing with them. I'm also more aware of how my disability might impact the team I work with and am more honest about those impacts, rather than trying to hide it or make up reasons when things aren't going well.

I had the knowledge and support to ask for accommodations from my specialty college to allow me to complete specialty training. This has never been approved for a trainee in the past. I was successful.

The program has provided me with education, practical tips and insights from participants sharing their lived experiences. It has opened up a different career pathway for me and I feel excited to take on this next chapter of my career.

I think depending on the role in while you have is depending on the development in the role in the business. I am grateful to be employed and does not matter at what level. I think it would be grate however it is harder to be in higher positions if you have a disability

Mentees reported improved confidence, stronger workplace relationships, and increased ability to advocate for their needs, including successfully securing workplace adjustments. Participants highlighted enhanced awareness of their strengths and career pathways, with some identifying new opportunities and directions. At the same time, responses reinforced ongoing structural challenges, particularly in accessing higher-level roles, indicating the need for continued organisational change alongside individual support.

## Q Would you like to share anything else?

### Responses

It's hard to choose just one thing that was the best part. I liked the learning link ups and e-learning works well for me. I feel like I have reached some goals - my confidence in decision-making seems to be improving and I have a sense that I can achieve more than I have in my career so far. Thanks. :)

The information in the eLearning felt basic of people with disability and explained what we already know we are going through without solutions. It felt more appropriate for those already in leadership who don't have a disability to read, learn, understand and implement.

Thank you so much for providing me with this opportunity. I am so grateful to be recognised and supported. I loved the e-learning modules too, it was easy to follow, and I have introduced many of the initiatives within my team. Thank you again! Michelle and Summah were amazing. I hope you continue with the program, it will benefit so many women.

I would like more accountability and transparency on behalf of organisations to commit to genuine systems change.

Mentees expressed strong appreciation for the program, particularly valuing the Learning Linkups, accessible e-learning, and supportive facilitation. Participants reported increased confidence, motivation, and application of learning within their teams. Feedback also highlighted opportunities to strengthen content relevance for participants with lived experience and called for greater organisational accountability and commitment to systemic change.

## **Mentor Pre-Program, Free Form Survey Questions**

**Q 2 Thinking about the prospect of employing or working with women with disability in your current organisations, please share any concerns you have or difficulties you might experience?**

### **Responses - share concerns**

Sometimes it can be tricky to navigate being an advocate without overstepping or treading on a persons autonomy.

I am not sure, but discrimination maybe from others that are in the wider team, as there is systematic bias culture.

The organisation I work for is not safe for people with disability. So, in mentoring, managing or leading teams with disabled people in them, I would want to be mindful of the toll this environment takes on people and proactive in trying to avoid the worst impacts on colleagues/ staff I supervise, to the maximum extent possible.

No concerns, this opportunity will provide me with a deeper understanding of the challenges for women with disabilities in the workplace.

My organization is investing in making healthcare accessible for all - including staff. There are some limitations for some opportunities purely due to the skills required (e.g jobs with intense physical labor or risk of musculoskeletal strain from repetitive tasks) however, it is such a large service with lots of opportunities for ALL!

I do not think we have the adequate supports, facilities or the environment to ensure women with disability are supported and given opportunities.

Accessibility to systems used.

I work in the disability sector, and we have a number of people with disability working in our team/s. Access to our systems can be a challenge, where our systems cannot be accessed efficiently using accessible software.

I personally do not see concerns. We need to be open to possibility.

I'm very open to this, and we do currently employ a number of people including women with disability. One department that we do find it more challenging is on our front of house team. The role works in the museum floor, and will talk to visitors, give tours, and also is an important role managing safety for visitors. Whilst we try and design our exhibitions to suit a variety of accessibility needs, occasionally the displays have elements that are not accessible for people who are sensory avoiders. The tours also involve lots of walking, and standing, including leading tours up the Clock Tower which is heritage listed and has some stairs as well as being restrictive for people sensitive to heights. The roster means that staff get rotated around different tasks and we've been able to manage this previously by having special rosters so that staff with access needs are not rostered in certain areas, but the reverse impact can be a less stimulating role with not as much variety. There's also a limit of how many

access needs we can accommodate on one day. So we'd love to provide more job opportunities in this team, but it feels like there is a cap of how many people we can support in this team.

One concern I have is missing non-verbal or hidden cues from mentees with disability, which could lead to miscommunication. I'm committed to learning how to better recognize and respond to these signals to ensure respectful and effective engagement.

I don't have any specific concerns other than I hope to be an effective mentor to women with disabilities in my organisation. The biggest issue for all of us is time: it is a very busy service provision organisation so need to prioritise this to ensure mentees can participate without the pressures of their day to day work.

I do not see this an issue.

Mentor responses reflected a mix of strong goodwill and openness to participation, alongside practical and structural concerns within organisational contexts. While some mentors reported no significant concerns, others highlighted challenges including workplace accessibility, system limitations, time constraints, and the presence of

broader cultural or attitudinal barriers. Several mentors also expressed uncertainty about navigating advocacy appropriately, balancing support with respect for autonomy, and responding effectively to diverse communication needs.

Overall, responses indicate that mentors were motivated and committed but recognised that meaningful inclusion requires both individual capability and supportive organisational environments to be effective.

### **Q3 What are you hoping to gain from participation in the Advancing Women project?**

#### **Responses**

Learn how to be a better advocate, colleague, mentor and leader to women in the workplace with a disability Hear and learn how we can champion better accessibility and representation as an organisation

Increasing network across organisation to assist others to grow and learn from my experience.

An opportunity to reflect on my own skills and career development through the process of mentoring a younger colleague.

Ability to support and develop the mentee and opportunity to take a wider strategic approach for other employees support.

To develop my own mentoring skills and insights into how I've worked my way into a leadership position despite navigating my own neurodivergence experiences. I hope to use mystery to inspire or guide other women in their journey.

I am hoping I can be a useful resource to my mentee. I am hoping to learn a lot from my mentee.

Hoping to be able to make a positive impact for my Mentee

Supporting my mentee, learning more about her journey as a disabled woman in the workforce/leadership.

Supporting the development of future generations of leaders

I'm hoping to broaden my knowledge and to get a better awareness of how I can bring this knowledge into my people management approach.

I hope to strengthen my leadership skills while connecting with a diverse community of women. I'm also passionate about supporting others in becoming the best version of themselves and contributing to a culture of growth and empowerment.

I want to strengthen my skills as a mentor so that I can provide effective mentorship to mentees. I want to learn more about how I can be a strong ally for women or gender diverse people living with a disability.

Supporting and empowering people to achieve their best outcomes

When mentors were asked to comment on what they were hoping to gain from participation in Advancing Women, 13 responded. Supporting and developing their mentee was a common theme (10 mentions), as was hoping to learn from mentees and develop their own skills (8 mentions). Networking and connecting was also mentioned. Again, the tone is strongly of goodwill and enthusiasm.

## Mentor Post-Program, Free-Form Survey Questions

I would like to thank you for delivering such an insightful and engaging training. Your guidance on supporting women with disabilities in advancing to leadership roles has been invaluable. The sessions not only deepened my understanding of barriers they face but also helped me reflect on and reduce my own unconscious bias. I feel better equipped to create more inclusive opportunities and foster workplace where diversity can thrive.

Only one mentor provided a response post learning. This is an interesting finding and may reflect survey fatigue. The response received was highly positive 'I would like to thank you for delivering such insightful and engaging training. Your guidance on supporting women with disabilities in advancing to leadership roles has been invaluable. The sessions not only deepened my understanding of barriers they face but also helped me reflect on and reduce my own unconscious bias. I feel better equipped to create more inclusive opportunities and foster workplace where diversity can thrive.'

# Learning Journal Results

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Learning journals were used as a reflective evaluation method to capture participant's voice, intention, and sensemaking at the commencement and conclusion of the program. Journals were designed as an optional, creative exercise to complement survey data and provide deeper qualitative insight into participant experience.

## Mentee Pre-Program Learning Journal

Eight mentees completed pre-learning journal entries. Responses varied in form and tone, including reflective prose, poetry, narrative responses, and structured goal setting. This diversity of expression reflects both the accessibility of the method and the varied ways participants choose to communicate meaning.

Across entries, mentees articulated a strong sense of identity, purpose, and aspiration, alongside candid reflections on systemic barriers, masking, fatigue, and confidence. Participants consistently expressed that barriers to leadership were not due to lack of skill or motivation, but rather to organisational structures, ableism, and expectations that do not accommodate disability or neurodivergence.

Key themes included:

- A desire to lead authentically, without masking or self-suppression
- Recognition of existing capability, experience, and knowledge
- Struggles with confidence, self-doubt, and imposter syndrome
- Frustration with tokenistic inclusion and inaccessible systems
- Motivation to represent and advocate for others with disability
- Commitment to ethical, values-based leadership.

Several journals powerfully articulated lived experience through creative language, conveying emotional labour, resilience, and leadership readiness in ways not easily captured through traditional evaluation tools. Participants positioned leadership not as status, but as influence, service and cultural change.

## Text-Based Visual Insight

A word cloud generated from mentee pre-learning journals showed prominent use of first-person language, reflecting strong self-reflection and ownership of learning goals. Dominant words included:

- **Primary prominence:**  
want, am, me, my, about
- **Secondary prominence:**  
myself, disability, learn, think, feel

This pattern reinforces the finding that participants entered the program actively self-directed, with clear intention and readiness to engage at a personal and developmental level.

Figure 11: Mentee pre-learning journal word cloud



## Mentee Post-Program Learning Journal

No mentees participated in the post-learning journal activity. This aligns with broader evaluation findings regarding participant preference for relational and conversational

engagement over written reflective tools as the program progressed. As such, the absence of post-journals is considered an engagement insight rather than a limitation, reinforcing the importance of personalised and dialogue-based reflection methods for this cohort.



# Mentor Pre-Program Learning Journal

Five mentors completed pre-learning journals. These entries reflected high levels of goodwill, reflective practice, and commitment to inclusive leadership. Mentors expressed motivation to:

- Support and empower mentees
- Build inclusive workplace cultures
- Reflect critically on their own leadership behaviours
- Learn directly from lived experience
- Advocate for systemic and cultural change.

Many mentors identified leadership as relational and values-based, emphasising compassion, fairness, equity, and human-centred practice. Several entries acknowledged organisational constraints while maintaining a strong sense of responsibility and optimism.

A word cloud of mentor journal responses revealed similar linguistic patterns to mentees, with frequent use of reflective and purposeful language.

Dominant words included:

- **Primary prominence:** my, want
- **Secondary prominence:** workplace, goals, mentorship, leader

This similarity suggests early alignment between mentors and mentees in how leadership and learning were framed as intentional, personal and relational.



Figure 12: Mentor pre-learning word cloud.

## Mentor Post-Program Learning Journal

One mentor completed a post-learning journal entry. The response was reflective and strongly affirming of program intent. The journal highlighted increased understanding of the value that women with disability bring to workplaces and described how mentoring interactions reinforced the link between inclusion, innovation and organisational productivity.

The reflection emphasised:

- Enhanced awareness of systemic barriers
- Recognition of lived experience and disability representation as central to effective and inclusive leadership
- Strengthened commitment to inclusive leadership practice.

This post-learning reflection aligns with earlier qualitative survey feedback and suggests that even brief engagement can contribute to meaningful professional insight and leadership development.

## Summary of Learning Journal Findings

Learning journals provided rich qualitative insight into participant mindset and leadership readiness at program entry. Findings indicate that mentees entered the program with strong foundational capability,

high motivation, and a clear desire for growth, while mentors brought enthusiasm, reflective openness and a commitment to enabling others.

Although post-learning journal participation was limited, the data collected reinforces key evaluation conclusions:

- Participants value depth, trust, and relationship over formal documentation
- Creative, flexible methods surface nuance not captured through surveys
- Leadership aspiration among women with disability is strong, purposeful and systems-aware.

Overall, the learning journals affirm the program's relevance and design, while pointing to opportunities to embed conversational, relationship-based reflective practice in future delivery and evaluation.

## Mentee pre-program learning journal responses

She moves through walls the world can't see,  
With strength that flows so quietly.  
Her voice, a spark, her will, a flame  
She rises proud, without shame.  
Not bound by labels, nor by fear,  
She builds the path and draws us near.  
A force of grace, of grit, of light  
She leads with power, bold and bright.  
That's her unseen wings...

I want to learn how to sit in discomfort and navigating difficult conversations in a workplace setting. I want to learn to be confident in myself and back myself as I know I am experienced and hold a lot of knowledge and expertise. I also want to discover if being on the front line is for me, or is perhaps going into business for myself a better option for me. I struggle with the 'red tape', unclear answers, poor communication and at times lack of guidance working for a community services organisation, but am so incredibly passionate about the work. Sometimes, I feel like I am molding myself to fit into a box, and often feel like I am masking most of the time which leads to feeling so exhausted, from holding up the mask 8-5, 9 days a fortnight

I believe accessing leadership positions in the workplace is already difficult for women. Women with a disability face an even bigger challenge. We have the skills, we have the knowledge, we have the ability, yet we are often overlooked because everyone is too caught up on how our disability will impact our ability to complete the role. They don't even ask us, they don't even give us a chance.

What do I want to achieve from this program> What are my goals in this context? - To find & feel comfortable with where my place is within "leadership" at this stage in my career Why are these goals important to me? - I think that if I can do this, it will help to set me up for success as I explore how I want to transition with satisfaction into retirement What do I need to achieve these goals? - Patience and Time to complete the required tasks! Things that resonated with me from Week 2 content: - Recruitment & rejections are really rough – jobs that say they encourage people with disabilities to apply often fall flat on many levels - On-boarding & Reasonable adjustments are REALLY difficult, even with an employer who is a service provider for your specific disability! - I have definitely experienced "token efforts of inclusion" but again, they have fallen flat as there has been a genuine lack of authenticity at these times/ - I still need to clearly define & set firmly my own Values and Motivations which will assist me to determine what my own "leadership style" is or I want it to be

Unmasked See me for who I am. I am strong and courageous. I prefer to communicate in many ways, I hope that you support me. There is no one way to communicate, it can be varied. Some days I prefer the creativity of writing and projects. I like the focus and silence. Speaking in front of people can

cause fears. 'Am I enough, do I sound knowledgeable, can they understand my points'. Sometimes this leads to extreme exhaustion, and my brain pauses. I am a mum and carer. Some days I have spent hours before work preparing my AuDHD children for school, supporting their needs and cuddling them during the night. I advocate for them tirelessly when I receive emails from teachers about why they can't sit still or fidget. I shield them from the hurt, and tell them their differences are not less, but they have so much to offer the world. I show up because I care about my job. I care about the people I serve; I care about health equity and providing better health outcomes. I show up to give it my all. Please see me for who I am. I don't want to hide behind a mask anymore. I want to be unmasked, strong and courageous.

I think for me confidence and being empower is something I have struggled with. I second guess myself. Due to be disability I have a lot of issue with focusing and feeling equal. I have always wanted to lead a team but never believed someone would give me a chance

1. What do you want to learn from the mentorship program? I dont know. I think i am a good candidate but I am not sure what I will learn. 2. How do you feel about starting this mentorship program? Nervous 3. Do you have any goals you

would like to achieve? I understand this kind of thing should be helpful for me to progress in my career. I want to represent in a leadership role for other women who have disability, are neurodivergent, are gay, are non binary, all these things that are invisible in those roles. 4. Why are these goals important to you? Equality 5. What kind of leader do you want to be? The kind I want to have. The kind who help their team get what they need to thrive.

I am seeking to learn ways to expand on my current experience within my industry. I have an extensive career and experience and over the years have failed to leverage this to further my career. I wish to learn ways to build and showcase my confidence and abilities while also promotion / acknowledging my hidden disabilities to give others similar to me a voice and or support. I am excited to begin the program as I am utilising it to help me be more open and confident with my own disabilities, and to show courage that it is not something to be hidden away or ashamed of. These goals are important to me, to grow personally and professionally. I want to me a strong leader who represents the many people who struggle privately to come forward and to educate people that we don't always know what others are facing and to be a more accepting society.

Mentees pre-learning journals showed a wide range of responses as is to be expected in a creative journal exercise. Eight mentees responded and responses can be seen in a word cloud representation. The words 'want' 'am' 'me' 'my' and 'about' are prominent, followed by 'myself' 'disability' 'learn' 'think' and 'feel'.

### **Mentor pre-program learning journal responses**

What do you want to learn from the mentorship program? How to effectively mentor other women with disabilities. How do you feel about starting this mentorship program? A little overwhelmed as my workload is quite large at the moment but excited. Especially excited when I found out who my mentee is because I already know of her & think she's amazing! She should be mentoring me!! Do you have any goals you would like to achieve? Learn how I can be a better mentor. Learn how I can contribute to a more inclusive workplace. Learn more about myself and my behaviours as a leader in this journey. Why are these goals important to you? To create opportunity for other women. To EMPOWER OTHER WOMEN! To continue to grow and develop myself. What kind of leader do you want to be? I want to inspire others. I want to create an environment where everyone feels safe, accepted and able to contribute. I want to be able to have difficult conversations more effectively with those who do

not display behaviours that align with organisational values or goals. Overall I want to be seen as inspirational but someone who is fair & equitable in my decisions and actions.

I have mentored 3 people in the past and experienced being a Mentee. Each interaction was very different eg one was about supporting a new grad developing their career as they were employed in a workplace that did not have another person of that qualification. This was remote mentoring. another was a person retiring from their role as a colleague and wanting support with the next stage in life. As a mentee, I was matched with a retired professor and our program was interrupted by COVID.

I was young and full of doubt. I am older and still have doubt. However, I have changed, grown and developed. I understand my value and how I can contribute to a different world and a better experience for all. Be proud of our achievements and ability. We are all capable. Our perspectives and experience matter. Our wisdom is special and unique. I look forward to walking with you, to celebrating your uniqueness and capacity.

What do you want to learn from the mentorship program? I want to learn how to better provide support to my direct reports and how I can build a better culture in the organisation to remove barriers to working and leadership. How do you feel about starting this mentorship program? Happy. Grounded. Ready. Do you have any goals you would like to achieve? My goal is to help my mentee however I can. I think this will be through building self confidence, sharing knowledge, experience and skills, and seeking opportunities for networking. Why are these goals important to you? It's important to me to provide a space that allows my mentee to thrive. What kind of leader do you want to be? I want to be a leader known for compassion, human centred leadership, with wellbeing at the heart.

- Women with disability or who are neurodivergent bring unique perspectives, talents and resilience to the workplace.
- Their inclusion fosters both diversity but encourages innovation, empathy and problem-solving
- Women with disability or who are neurodivergent challenge stereotypes, break barriers and motivate others through their determination to succeed.
- Their contributions need to be valued
- Women with disability or who are neurodivergent create a stronger, more adaptable workplace where diverse experiences are recognised as assets

-They are key drivers of positive change and progress in the workplace.

Five mentors participated in the pre-learning journal opportunity and one post-learning. A word cloud generated with the pre-learning responses showed predominance of the words 'my' and 'want', similar to the mentee learning journal entries. The words 'do' 'workplace' goals' 'mentorship' and 'leader' were common in the second level of dominance. The mentor that completed the post-learning journal also highlighted the workplace and culture and productivity.

### **Mentor post-program learning journal response**

Woman with disability we know bring unique perspectives, talents and resilience to the workplace. this was highlighted through the mentor/ mentee sessions where their inclusion not only fosters diversity but also encourages innovation, empathy, and problem solving. by empowering women with disabilities through accessible environments and equitable opportunities enhances workplace culture and productivity.

# Appendix E - Workshop Insights

## Discovery Sessions

The Discovery Sessions introduced organisations to the Advancing Women project, providing an overview of its purpose, evidence base, and anticipated outcomes. These sessions served as an initial engagement point, enabling organisations to explore the relevance of the program to their context. They also created space for early dialogue around workplace inclusion, leadership development, and the barriers faced by women with disability, supporting informed participation and organisational buy-in.

## Scoping Sessions

The Scoping Sessions established the foundation for the program, bringing mentors and mentees together to build connection, shared understanding, and a sense of community. Using a facilitated, participant-led approach, the sessions encouraged reflection on leadership, mentoring expectations and workplace experiences. This early engagement supported relationship-building and set the tone for psychologically safe, collaborative learning throughout the program.

## Learning Linkups

The Learning Linkups were a core component of the program, providing 3 interactive, participant-led workshops online that combined practical knowledge, lived experience, and peer learning.

The sessions focused on two key areas: workplace inclusion and self-advocacy (including reasonable adjustments and leadership), and storytelling for leadership and professional identity (including personal brand, visibility, and sustainable advocacy)

Across these themes, participants explored how to navigate workplace systems, advocate for their needs, and build confidence in their leadership capability, alongside learning how to use personal storytelling as a strategic tool to strengthen professional presence and influence. The workshops blended practical tools and frameworks such as strategies for requesting workplace adjustments and structured approaches to storytelling with open, lived experience discussions, enabling participants to apply learning directly to their own contexts.

A strong emphasis was placed on connection and community, with participants consistently identifying the value of peer learning, shared

experience, and mentorship. The sessions reinforced that leadership is not a singular or traditional pathway, but can be relational, evolving, and grounded in lived experience, while also highlighting the importance of sustainability, accessibility, and choice in leadership journeys.

Overall, the Learning Linkups contributed to increased confidence, practical capability, and a stronger sense of belonging, while demonstrating the value of participant-centered, accessible learning environments in supporting leadership development and inclusion.

## Leading Inclusively Workshop

The Leading Inclusively workshops were led by Dr Michelle Hyde, HD Writing and Educational services. Dr Hyde is an experienced facilitator with First Nations heritage and lived experience of disability, family violence and dysfunction, and intersectionality. The workshops were designed to be inclusive and psychologically safe as a first principle. A “safe space” in workshops is often described in research as psychological safety: people feel able to speak, question, and disagree without fear of embarrassment, blame, or harm. Across diverse settings (education, healthcare, strategy, mentoring), several consistent elements emerge.

These include:

- Clear expectations and agreements: Explicit ground rules and collaboration agreements reduce hidden expectations and conflict, and support speaking up, especially in new or tense groups (Grailey, 2021).
- Blame-free, no-shame climate: Environments where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities, not failures, encourage openness and reflection (McClintock, 2022).
- Good relationships and trust: Strong interpersonal relationships and small groups make it easier to voice concerns and vulnerabilities (Pregmark JE, 2021).

The workshops used a yarning circle methodology which is a structured storytelling process that centres relationships, respect and shared control. It is important because it creates safe, insightful and ethical spaces. Participants were encouraged to collaboratively set ground rules and session expectations, and the importance of maintaining a non-judgmental space was emphasised. Relationships and trust were fostered in a variety of ways including by facilitators sharing personal stories. The workshops were not recorded due to ground rule negotiation.

Factors that the participants named as being important to them in creating safe spaces included responses such as ‘empathy’, ‘genuine kindness and understanding’,

'listening', 'mindful interactions', 'good facilitation', 'open space', 'quiet' and 'judgement free'. At the conclusion of each session participants were asked to provide one word to describe the experience. Responses included: 'motivating', 'safe',

'courage', 'recognition', 'empowerment', 'equity', 'diversity' and 'thought provoking'.

Leading Inclusively workshops were held on the following dates and locations:

Table 12: Dates and Locations of Workshops

| Date       | Location       | Format       | Attendance |
|------------|----------------|--------------|------------|
| 17.10.2025 | Melbourne, VIC | Face-to-face | 16         |
| 31.10.2025 | Brisbane, QLD  | Face-to-face | 16         |
| 27.11.2025 | Perth, WA      | Face-to-face | 5          |
| 09.03.2026 | Teams          | Online       | 15         |

## Learning Linkup Workshops

| Date       | Location | Format | Attendance |
|------------|----------|--------|------------|
| 18.09.2025 | Teams    | Online | 19         |
| 12.11.2025 | Teams    | Online | 13         |
| 18.12.2025 | Teams    | Online | 14         |

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## Your Contribution Matters

People with Disability Australia would like to thank everyone involved for their commitment to the Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace Project.

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