# Top Ten Basics of Feminist Leadership in ActionAid

#### What does ActionAid mean by feminism?

Our embrace of transformative feminist leadership arises from our wider commitment to intersectional feminism as an ideology, an analytical framework and a social change strategy. Feminism's main goal is to dismantle patriarchy (male dominance) by transforming the ideologies, institutions and structures that reproduce it. Intersectional feminism shows us that in order to defeat patriarchy, we need to acknowledge and fight the other forms of oppression that reinforce it - not just discrimination based on gender, but also race, class, caste, sexuality, age, physical ability etc.

#### What do we mean by feminist leadership?

Patriarchal leadership reinforces a dynamic of dominance and subordination. It makes power a zero sum game: if I get some, there is less for you. Feminist leadership seeks to transform that dynamic: it tells us that we can become powerful by making those around us feel empowered, able and respected. It seeks power *with* others instead of power *over* others.

At ActionAid, we define feminist leadership as **positive and inclusive use of power to build an organisation that is capable of changing the world.** 

#### Why are we adopting feminist leadership?

ActionAid is embracing feminist leadership not only because it is consistent with feminist values and principles - a way of "walking the talk" - but also because it is *necessary* to succeed in our mission.

We want to change the world. We are trying to achieve social and gender justice. And that requires nearly superhuman levels of effort, unity and passion. Transformative feminist leaders makes that possible by sharing power with others, enabling teams to create and mobilise around goals that everyone owns. They get the best out of every single person in the team because they respect and value the unique contributions each person can make to collaborative success.

Feminist leaders also help us persist and stay energised despite the really tough challenges we face. They do this by helping us to tap, and share, the *power within* ourselves: our inner sources of strength, compassion and inspiration. That only happens when we feel we can bring our "whole self" to work and share who we really are - our needs, differences and vulnerabilities as well as our ideas and ambitions - without fear of being judged or belittled.

In short, feminist leaders enable ordinary people to do extraordinary things in pursuit of global justice.

# Why do these Basics focus on what *I* should do? Are they really relevant to me? What about the wider organisation?

The "Top Ten Basics" outline the feminist leadership practices and behaviours that ActionAiders shall strive to follow. In line with the feminist precept that "the personal is political", and because leadership begins with changing our own behaviour, they are framed as pledges starting with the words "I will".

Becoming a feminist leader is a never-ending journey. The Top Ten Basics set aspirational goals to serve as our guidestars in that journey. They are not policies. No one is expected to execute all of them perfectly: that would be contrary to the spirit of feminist leadership which says that we are all imperfect and we should all expect to fail, learn and keep improving. The Basics are relevant for people of all genders and at all levels, from Board members and Executive Directors to new hires just starting their first job with ActionAid. Anyone can develop and exercise feminist leadership - you don't have to be in a position of authority to be a leader in a feminist organisation. But it is especially important that people in management or governance roles strive to fulfill these pledges, set personal targets for that, and are evaluated on the progress they are making towards fully achieving them.

These Top Ten Basics will not solve all of the challenges that must be overcome for ActionAid to fully embrace feminist leadership. As our Global Strategy recognises, changes in ActionAid's systems, structures and policies are also required to address imbalances of power in our organisation, ensure safe, diverse and respectful workplaces, and provide a conducive environment for staff to apply these Basics. Some critical initiatives are already underway internationally, such as stronger safeguarding policies and training in how to implement them. Additionally, as Pledge 3 in the Top Ten Basics states, all of us - particularly those in management roles –must take responsibility to initiate, implement and/or influence the organisational changes needed, at whatever level we can.

## **Next steps**

Each member country and GS unit is requested to engage everyone across their entire team or organisation (including at governance level) to:

- Determine what changes are required in your ways of working to implement the Top Ten Basics;
- Decide how you will promote, measure and sustain these changes; and how people will be held accountable for them.
- Adapt and elaborate the Do's and Don'ts for your own context

Executive/Country Directors, Board Chairs, International Directors and GS Heads are requested to:

- Create regular spaces for safe and respectful team exploration of the core concerns and issues covered by the Top Ten Basics
- Set a personal example by occasionally doing a critical self-assessment of your own areas for learning and growth against the Top Ten Basics, and sharing this openly with your team.
- include in annual performance plans for yourself and your direct report, at least one goal for developing feminist leadership practice and skills, in line with the Top Ten Basics.

#### The GS HROD team will:

- Act as the GS unit that leads on rolling out the Top Ten Basics.
- Compile country and GS commitments, and facilitate mutual accountability by all parts of the organisation for progress made.

- update tools and templates for performance reviews, job descriptions, competency assessments etc. to reflect the Top Ten Basics as goals for all staff to strive towards.
- Develop training modules on the Top Ten Basics that can be rolled out alongside the safeguarding training being planned for 2019/20.

#### AAI's International Board will:

- Hold AAI management accountable for progress on ensuring adoption and uptake of the Basics.
- Ensure that this document is a living charter that is reviewed and updated at regular intervals as AAI progresses in its feminist leadership journey, with a first review proposed for 2022.
- Encourage and assist national Boards to integrate the Basics into board development, governance practices, and relationships with management, as well as into their recruitment, guidance and performance management of executive directors.

# ActionAid's Feminist Leadership Top Ten Basics

ActionAid's transformative vision of a just world free from poverty, oppression and patriarchy requires transformative feminist leaders: leaders who enable others to lead, building power with them instead of over them. In striving to develop these skills, I make the following commitments to myself, my colleagues and the wider organisation:

#### 1. Self-awareness

I will keep my ego in check, so that I can lead with empathy and an open mind. In order to do this, I will work towards accepting my vulnerabilities, as well as recognising and valuing my strengths and those of others.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Humility

#### 2. **Self-care** and caring for others

I will take care of my emotional and physical well-being, in order to renew my inner sources of inspiration and compassion so that I can continue to give of my best to colleagues. I will encourage and support others to do the same, actively working towards a more flexible and supportive work environment, particularly for those with caring responsibilities.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Mutual respect

#### 3. **Dismantling bias**

I recognise that society gives me (and others) certain advantages that are not asked for or earned (for example, based on gender, class, race, caste, ability, sexual orientation, education or other factors). I will help to uncover and challenge these forms of discrimination in our day to day workplace practices and policies. I will be aware of how my own privileges can make others feel disempowered or inferior, as well as how I react to others' privilege, and deliberately change my behaviour to treat all of my colleagues as equals.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Mutual respect, Humility, Equity and Justice

#### 4. Inclusion

I will create ways for everyone to be equally heard, respected and successful in my team and organisation. I will challenge myself to build diverse and inclusive teams and to recognize and respond to different barriers to participation.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Mutual respect

#### 5. **Sharing power**

I accept that the ultimate test of my leadership is the space I create for others to lead. Involving my team in setting shared goals, I will trust and empower them to share leadership with me in reaching those goals. Likewise, I will trust and support those in positions of authority to guide me in the best interests of our mission.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Courage of conviction

#### 6. Responsible and transparent use of power.

I will be clear, timely and transparent in making the decisions entrusted to me, with appropriate consultation and in the interests of our mission. If involved in allocating

resources and choosing partners, I will ensure these choices promote ActionAid's values and aspirations. I will communicate decisions, and the reasons for them, openly.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Integrity

#### 7. Accountable Collaboration

I will ensure that goals are clearly defined and mutually owned, and hold all team members, including myself, strongly accountable for our individual and collective efforts to achieve them. I will measure my own achievements by the contributions I've made to team success. I will recognise and value successful collaboration, while addressing poor performance fairly but decisively.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Integrity

#### 8. Respectful Feedback

I will seek, give and value constructive feedback as an opportunity for two-way learning. I won't wait for formal reviews – instead I will practice continuous feedback, sideways (to my colleagues) and bottom up (to my manager and those senior to me) as well as top down (to those I manage). I will work to resolve conflict through active listening, timely intervention and promoting non-violent and respectful communication and behavior.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Integrity, Humility

#### 9. **Courage**

I will constantly aim for transformative change, seeking out new ideas and learning from mistakes rather than fearing failure, and empowering teammates to do the same. When I encounter defeatism or cynicism in myself or others, I will strive to restore belief in our goals; where there is competition or insecurity over status and turf, I will build trust; and where I find complacency or mediocrity I will help to renew passion and creativity to excel in our mission.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Courage of Conviction, Humility

#### 10. **Zero Tolerance**

I will call out any form of discrimination and abuse of power that I witness or experience in the workplace, and safely enable and support those around me to do the same. I will ensure my own conduct is free from any form of harassment, exploitation and abuse.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Equity and Justice

#### APPENDIX: PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

These practical examples have been crowdsourced from the various groups who have commented on the Top Ten Basics so far. They are suggestions, not policies, and we urge you to develop your own version, relevant to your context. Please note where do's/donts suggestions are blank, we encourage you to discuss and develop your own relevant examples. It is not to say that no clear examples of these actions/behaviours exist!

#### 1. Self-awareness

I will keep my ego in check, so that I can lead with empathy and an open mind. In order to do this, I will work towards accepting my vulnerabilities, as well as recognising and valuing my strengths and those of others.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Humility

DO	DON'T
Learn to recognise the situations in which you feel threatened, and tend to become defensive or aggressive. These are situations where your ego is in the driver's seat.	We tend to associate ego with being overconfident and boastful, but in fact ego feeds on fear (fear of loss of status, fear of rejection, fear that others will discover your weaknesses). Don't allow your fears to dominate your responses when you find yourself in a difficult situation.
Stop and observe your emotions when someone makes you feel angry, undermined or threatened. Identify what you really want from the interaction, so that you can press the reset button.	Let the short term needs of the ego (putting the other person in their place, protecting your image, "winning", etc) get in the way of your true goals.
Learn to understand and overcome feelings of powerlessness or self-doubt. Lack of self-confidence, like overconfidence, is often driven by ego and fear. By understanding your limitations, you will also gain confidence in your true strengths, and courage to learn and change.	Require perfection from yourself (or others)  Tell yourself stories in which you are the passive victim of other people's actions
Listen more than you talk (though raise your voice when you need to).	Talk more than you listen.

Accept that other people are just as smart, if not smarter, than you. Allow others to share their knowledge and ideas, so they can contribute to getting the work done.  More minds = more impact on the mission.	Feel that you have to solve every problem, create every new initiative or have the best idea in every meeting.
Practice having a "beginner's mind." Approach things from the perspective of actively seeking out what you don't know. Be open to new ideas and suggestions.	Judge things based on what you already know.
Build a team that is smarter and more talented than you. Be aware of your own areas of development to learn from your team.	If you are always the smartest person in the room, you have utterly failed as a feminist leader.

# 2. Self-care and caring for others.

I will take care of my emotional and physical well-being, in order to renew my inner sources of inspiration and compassion so that I can continue to give of my best to colleagues. I will encourage and support others to do the same, actively working towards a more flexible and supportive work environment, particularly for those with caring responsibilities.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Mutual respect

DO	DON'T
Set an example by keeping your own working hours balanced, and taking enough leave.	Create expectations for working at night and over weekends, as a regular practice.
Recognise when you need support and be open to receiving it. This will also set a positive example for those who report to you, that it is OK to ask for help.	Try to solve all of your problems yourself.
Know when you need to seek support or ask for help to complete your work.	Take on more and more work so that you are busy all the time, to reinforce your importance.

Set aside sufficient time to sustain mental, emotional, physical, and social well-being.	Dismiss or diminish others when they request time to sustain their well-being.
Review goals and plans (yours and those of your direct reports) to avoid overworking, removing or postponing activities and outcomes that are not high priority.	Reward and reinforce overworking by colleagues which will drive an unhealthy culture.
Make sure deadlines and work schedules take into account unpaid care obligations, taking extra steps to protect women in particular from an excessive dual burden of work and unpaid care.	Assume you know what unpaid care burdens your colleague is carrying.
Pay attention to others' wellbeing, and check in with colleagues if they appear stressed or overworked.	Ignore signs of stress and overwork.
Provide and encourage flexible working options that balance individual and organisational needs.	Shutdown requests for flexibility without hearing your colleagues point of view.

## 3. Dismantling bias

I recognise that society gives me (and others) certain advantages that are not asked for or earned (for example, based on gender, class, race, caste, ability, sexual orientation, education, etc.). I will help to uncover and challenge these forms of discrimination in our day to day workplace practices and policies. I will be aware of how my own privileges can make others feel disempowered or inferior, as well as how I react to others' privilege, and deliberately change my behaviour to treat all of my colleagues as equals.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Mutual respect, Equity and Justice

DO	DON'T
Read widely about feminism, understand it, practice it and help your team members understand practice it	Use "I'm not a feminist"/"Men can't be feminists" as an excuse for not engaging.
too.	Assume that everybody should be at the same level in understanding and practicing feminism or feminist leadership.

Be mindful and aware of the power you hold Discriminate against or make assumptions due to your job title, your gender, or other about any colleague because of their factors such as age, education, race, etc. gender (or their sexuality, race, ethnicity, or any other 'differences' from the "Check your privilege" when you interact accepted norm). with colleagues: reflect on the ways that your gender or social status might have given you an advantage - even if you didn't ask for it or earn it – while their gender or social status might have given them a disadvantage. Learn to be compassionate towards the particular struggle that they have had, and to acknowledge that their struggle has been different than yours. Identify policies and processes that could Allow discriminatory policies and be changed to encourage a more equitable processes to persist because "that's how things work" or "that's someone else's distribution of opportunities, resources and decision-making in ActionAid. If you have responsibility". direct responsibility for these policies, change them. If you don't, then work to influence others for change. Examples might include maternity and paternity leave. childcare/breastfeeding facilities, safeguarding, wellbeing, how meetings are chaired, who sits on what decision-making bodies, how information is shared, pay equity, etc. Take collaboration and teamwork for Collectively identify positive forms of power, and celebrate instances where good granted and fail to celebrate it. feminist leadership is being modelled. Develop your own capacity to stand up to Disengage or stop participating when you voices who are dominating, and to express feel you aren't being heard. Attack or your views positively. undermine others as a way to get your views across. Learn to recognise when you might be the Assume everyone wants/needs to hear voice dominating the room, and balance your opinion on every point. your contributions with active listening.

## 4. Inclusion

I will create ways for everyone to be equally heard, respected and successful in my team and organisation. I will challenge myself to build diverse and inclusive teams and to recognize and respond to different barriers to participation.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Mutual respect

DO	DON'T
Constantly work to ensure that any marginalised voices within the organisation are an integral part of the conversation - so that we no longer have people or voices that are marginalised.	Isolate or marginalise perspectives that are different than what is considered mainstream in your team.
Encourage reflection and discussion about personal experiences of discrimination and privilege. This could take the form of teamwide workshops; and/or safe spaces such as women's forums, LGBTI forums, etc.	Assume that discussions about personal privilege and power will just happen and if they don't happen, they aren't needed. They are almost always needed and they will rarely happen unless a safe space is created for them.
Make sure that everyone in a conversation has access to the same information. Be mindful of who's leading the conversation.	Privilege some over others.
Ensure that women and other disadvantaged groups have opportunities, support and encouragement to take up decision-making roles in the organisation.	
Identify barriers to inclusion and set aside the time and/or money needed to overcome them.	
Consciously address the impact of change on different people in our organisation including gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation et al and how they intersect with each other.	Assume that discussions about how change affects different people are unnecessary.

Actively seek and move forward with diverse opinions both in terms of recruitment and operationally.	Listen only to opinions from a certain group.

## 5. Sharing power

I accept that the ultimate test of my leadership is the space I create for others to lead. Involving my team in setting shared goals, I will trust and empower them to share leadership with me in reaching those goals. Likewise, I will trust and support those in positions of authority to guide me in the best interests of our mission.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Courage of conviction

DO	DON'T
Demonstrate trust by supporting and guiding people to perform their roles effectively	Micro-manage or Fail to set clear goals and expectations
Define the resources and ways of working to enable your team to achieve shared goals and objectives.	Set unrealistic or poorly defined expectations.
Create positive opportunities for people to practice, demonstrate and be recognised for feminist leadership behaviour, regardless of their role or position in the hierarchy.  We all practise leadership in our own area of work, and this should be respected, supported, and encouraged.	Only give opportunities to people who are already well known and respected in the organisation.
Be aware that some team members/colleagues may not recognise their own value/abilities, and in those cases proactively encourage those individuals to put themselves forward for promotions, committees, or other opportunities.	Overlook people who fail to put their hands up, even though they may have the right skills and talents.

Try to learn something new every week from someone in a different role than you, and thank them for teaching you.	Act like being a leader means being the best at everything.
Enhance a culture of teaching, mentoring and sharing within your team.	Keep the knowledge for yourself.
If you are in a less senior role, challenge yourself to propose solutions as well as identifying problems.	Ask what the organisation can do for you but ask what can you do to contribute to achieving the shared goals
If you are in a position of authority, learn to listen, reflect and be open to challenge.	Block out other people's voices and feedback.
	Shut down challenges through defensiveness or the need to be right.

## 6. Responsible and transparent use of power

I will be clear, timely and transparent in making the decisions entrusted to me, with appropriate consultation and in the interests of our mission. If involved in allocating resources and choosing partners, I will ensure these choices promote ActionAid's values and aspirations. I will communicate decisions, and the reasons for them, openly.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Integrity

DO	DON'T
Transparently communicate why decisions have been reached; the arguments and analysis underlying them; and how people's views and opinions were considered.	Try to keep everybody happy by postponing or "fudging" difficult decisions.  Delay communicating decisions and why they were taken.
Practice accountable delegation of decision-making.	Create bottlenecks through excessive dependence on you or other positional leaders.
Be clear on the differences between informing people, consulting them, or giving	Allow inconclusive or unclear consultation processes to delay progress.

them a say in the final outcome.	
	Use hierarchy and positional power to push decisions through without the participation of those affected.

#### 7. Accountable Collaboration

I will ensure that goals are clearly defined and mutually owned, and hold all team members, including myself, strongly accountable for our individual and collective efforts to achieve them. I will measure my own achievements by the contributions I've made to team success. I will recognise and value successful collaboration, while addressing poor performance fairly but decisively.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Integrity

DO	DON'T
Define and implement reward and recognition processes that celebrate collective achievements, as well as individual contributions to those achievements.	Benchmark staff against each other unfairly.
Make sure that everyone involved in a success is acknowledged.	Only give credit and recognition to those who shout the loudest or have the most senior job title.
Put your team members in the limelight.	Take credit for your team members' work and successes, or blame your team members when things don't go well.
When things don't go well, encourage creative thinking about what you as a team could have done differently and how you could have worked together better to overcome external challenges.	Blame outside factors (other teams, budget cuts, the donor, your Board, "senior management" etc.) when you don't achieve your objectives.
Ensure objectives are clear and understood.	Create confusion amongst your team about about the directions they should be taking.

Tackle poor performance in a fair but timely way.	Ignore or gloss over poor performance until it is too late to change.
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## 8. Respectful Feedback

I will seek, give and value constructive feedback as an opportunity for two-way learning. I won't wait for formal reviews – instead I will practice continuous feedback, sideways (to my colleagues) and bottom up (to my manager and those senior to me) as well as top down (to those I manage). I will work to resolve conflict through active listening, timely intervention and promoting non-violent and respectful communication and behavior.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Integrity, Humility

DO	DON'T
Give, and seek, both positive and negative feedback immediately and continuously - with your peers, your manager and those who report to you. If there is a practice of continuous feedback and learning in addition to formal reviews, this takes the fear out of feedback, and shows people that it is positive to make mistakes as long as you learn from them.	Wait for formal performance reviews before giving feedback  Only give feedback to those who report to you.  Allow disempowering and negative behaviours to pass unchallenged; or, comment on such incidents to other people, rather than to the person who engaged in the behaviour and/or their manager.
Reflect on your own emotions before and during a difficult conversation with a colleague. If someone's actions have made you angry, irritated or frustrated, understand what triggered these feelings for you, and try to understand how your colleague might be feeling. Focus on the positive outcome you want to get from giving the feedback.	Give feedback when you are too irritated, angry, or frustrated to practice empathy and self-awareness (see below).
Ensure that empathy and compassion guides engagement with colleagues. Cultivate your ability to step in the shoes of the other person and communicate in a way that is progressive, uplifting and genuine.	Make assumptions about why someone isn't meeting your expectations. There may be reasons you don't know about: for example, they may be overworked, suffering from depression or dealing with a sick family member. If so, you need to talk with them about how to ask for and receive

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support (see Commitment 2). This doesn't mean lowering standards or allowing poor performance to slide - it means helping the other person to address the underlying causes.
Make general statements like "You are always late" or "You don't make enough effort".
Criticise or belittle a person's underlying abilities or character instead of focusing on particular outputs, actions or incidents.
Argue with feedback, seeking to defend yourself instead of learning about how others perceive your actions and behaviour and how you can change that.
Make feedback conversations one-way, where one person does the talking and the other just listens.
Only give feedback to teammates or your boss through formal 360 assessments once a year – if you do, you are missing out on opportunities to recalibrate your working relationships with colleagues so that by the end of the year, you have both been more successful.
Be frightened that others will think less of you if you own up to your mistakes and shortcomings.

## 9. Courage

I will constantly aim for transformative change, seeking out new ideas and learning from mistakes rather than fearing failure, and empowering teammates to do the same. When I encounter defeatism or cynicism in myself or others, I will strive to restore belief in our goals; where there is competition or insecurity over status and turf, I will build trust; and where I find complacency or mediocrity I will help to renew passion and creativity to excel in our mission.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Courage of Conviction, Humility

DO	DON'T
Seek out new ways of doing things and be open to testing ideas and suggestions from others, even if (especially if) they are junior to you or come from a different department/location/discipline.	Play it safe and only agree to suggestions that fit with your customary ways of doing things.  Reject or shoot down ideas that don't fit in with your preferred approach/solution.
Involve and empower diverse groups of staff (and/or partners, community members or supporters where appropriate) in tackling challenges. Innovation happens when you bring together people who see the world in different ways.	Look only to the experts or people in charge for solutions.
As a manager, make sure your team know the areas where it's acceptable and encouraged to try new ways of doing things without asking for permission from higher up, while also clearly defining the areas where there are rules or hierarchical processes that must be followed (e.g. compliance with core policies).	Send contradictory messages by asking for innovation but then insisting on hierarchical approval for everything.
If you are the decision-maker on whether to test an idea or pursue an opportunity, and your assessment is that it is too risky or not feasible, explain your reasons constructively. Identify what was great about it as well as what was inappropriate, so that person or group making the suggestion is empowered to come up with a better idea next time.	Respond to other people's suggestions in ways that make them feel embarrassed, stupid or unappreciated.
Take initiative, but keep your manager and peers informed about what you are doing.	Confuse being innovative with being a solo player.

Tell your team members and peers about your mistakes, challenges and self-doubts	Try to appear perfect to your team and peers
Look for the valuable insights and ideas in every suggestion, even ones you disagree with.	Criticise and belittle your colleagues' suggestions without considering the substance behind them.

## 10. Zero Tolerance

I will call out any form of discrimination and abuse of power that I witness or experience in the workplace, and safely enable and support those around me to do the same. I will ensure my own conduct is free from any form of harassment, exploitation and abuse.

ActionAid values to which this relates: Equity and Justice

DO	DON'T
Ensure safeguarding policies, processes and expectations are defined clearly, accessible, and communicated.	Assume that people will automatically know and understand these policies and process just because they have been announced.
Work with your team to generate collaborative solutions that support the safety of all groups in the workplace and in the communities where we work.	Assume that having a written policy in place is enough.
Commit to report if you experience any abuse or witness inappropriate or abusive behavior.	Try to just manage it on your own, quietly.
Support colleagues who feel unable to speak up.	Assume that if colleagues aren't speaking up, it's because they don't want to.