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# Top 10 inspiring women leaders in 2026

Story by Nadia Brown • 3d • 7 min read

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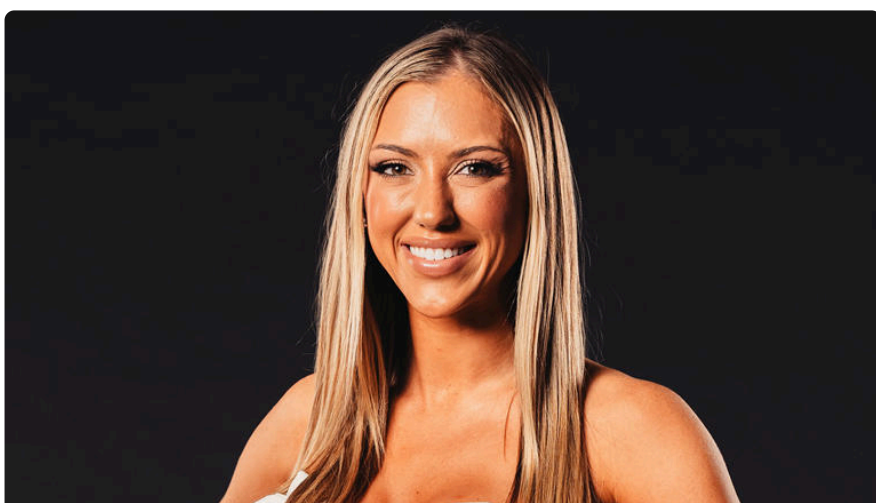
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Our world's most impactful leaders aren't just managing organizations; they're changing entire industries, breaking down traditional norms, and broadening what we believe is attainable. Across business, technology, health care, education, and social impact, women are proving that a driven vision, an unwavering tenacity, and a deep-seated desire to effect change have no limits-their impact goes well beyond organizational bottom lines, and it is altering the cultures, communities, and conversations around the world. The Top 10 Inspiring Women Leaders of 2026 recognize trailblazers who are continually breaking barriers and whose work and influence are leaving an enduring imprint. With their vision, conviction, and bold dedication, they are setting new standards of achievement for all aspiring leaders.

## Mason Bettis



Our world's most impactful leaders aren't just managing organizations; they're changing entire industries, breaking down

Mason Bettis is the owner, creative director, and founder of Evolve 26 Dance Company, a nationally recognized competitive dance studio based in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. With over 26 years of dance experience and more than 15 years of teaching and choreography experience, Mason has built Evolve 26 into a training program known for its discipline, artistry, versatility, and strong sense of community. What sets Mason apart is a commitment to developing dancers beyond technique... helping young artists grow in confidence, professionalism, work ethic, and self-expression both on and off the stage. Despite navigating the challenges of Type 1 Diabetes while



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building and leading a fast-growing business, Mason has remained dedicated to creating a positive and inspiring environment where dancers are encouraged to persevere, believe in themselves, and evolve both as performers and individuals. Under Mason's direction, Evolve 26 dancers have earned top overall awards, scholarships, convention recognitions, dance opportunities within the professional industry, and several dancers continuing their training and careers at the collegiate level. Through innovative choreography, high-level training, and a passion for mentorship, Mason continues to inspire the next generation of performers while redefining what a competitive dance studio can be.

## Cathy Cardenas



Top 10 Inspiring Women Leaders in 2026

Award-winning publicist and entrepreneur [Cathy Cardenas](#) has combined her media expertise with her passion for helping others succeed to build a business rooted in results and strategy. Cathy Cardenas PR is nearly one-hundred percent referral-based and a direct reflection of the growth her clients represent. For nearly two decades, Cardenas has earned her reputation as one of the most successful and prominent publicists in the entertainment and branding industries. Recognized for her impact in media and business—including multiple features in Forbes magazine and named 30 Women to Watch Awards—she is as inspiring as she is accomplished. Coming from humble beginnings, Cardenas' grit, resilience, and unwavering faith have helped define her purpose-driven career. In addition to public relations, the proud mother of two is also the voice behind the "Grace Begins" podcast and the founder of the inspirational clothing brand "Hope Wear."

## Debra Stangl



Top 10 Inspiring Women Leaders in 2026

Debra Stangl is the Founder of [Sedona Soul Adventures](#), one of the world's premier private and custom-designed transformational retreat companies. What makes Debra's story especially powerful is that before transforming lives through healing work, she spent 20 years as a successful divorce attorney, witnessing firsthand the pain, disconnection, and emotional suffering that destroy relationships and

families. That experience became the catalyst for her life's mission: helping people heal, reconnect, and create deeply fulfilling lives and relationships. For over two decades, Debra has guided thousands of individuals and couples through profoundly life-changing retreats that combine emotional healing, practical tools, and transformational experiences tailored specifically to each client. She is the author of *\*The Journey to Happy\** and is currently co-authoring her upcoming book, *\*High-Vibe Relationship\**, with her husband Richard Kepple, teaching couples how to heal core wounds, deepen connection, and create thriving conscious partnerships filled with authenticity, love, joy, and purpose.

## Kena S. Hollingsworth



Top 10 Inspiring Women Leaders in 2026

**Kena Hollingsworth** is redefining what divorce can look and feel like for families navigating one of life's most difficult transitions. After more than 25 years in family law, she recognized that too many people were being guided through divorce with unnecessary conflict, fear, and emotional and financial devastation. Determined to create a better path, she founded Hollingsworth Law Group and developed her "Divorce Done Differently" philosophy—a future-focused approach that combines legal advocacy with compassion, education, and holistic support. Through her work, Kena is challenging the traditional belief that divorce must be destructive and contentious, helping clients navigate change with greater dignity, clarity, and confidence. Recognized as a Super Lawyer for more than a decade and featured in magazines, articles, and podcasts, she has become a leading voice for a more intentional approach to family law. Her mission is to help individuals and families move forward with less fear and more peace, and create a joyful future beyond divorce.

## Olivia Phillips



Top 10 Inspiring Women Leaders in 2026

**Olivia Phillips** is redefining what it means to be a modern cybersecurity and AI leader. In an industry often focused on technology alone, she has built her career on translating complex cyber risks into business opportunities, helping organizations strengthen resilience, accelerate innovation, and make smarter strategic decisions. With more than two

decades of experience, Olivia has led transformative initiatives that reduced enterprise risk, modernized security operations, and influenced executive and board-level decision-making across large and complex organizations. Recognized as an award-winning cybersecurity executive, global leadership honoree, speaker, and advisor, Olivia has become a trusted voice on cybersecurity, AI governance, fraud prevention, and enterprise risk management. Her unique ability to connect technology, business strategy, and human behavior has earned her recognition as one of the industry's emerging thought leaders. Today, Olivia is focused on helping organizations navigate the rapidly evolving intersection of cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and digital trust. Her mission is simple: empower leaders to transform uncertainty into opportunity, turn risk into strategic advantage, and build secure, resilient organizations prepared for the future.

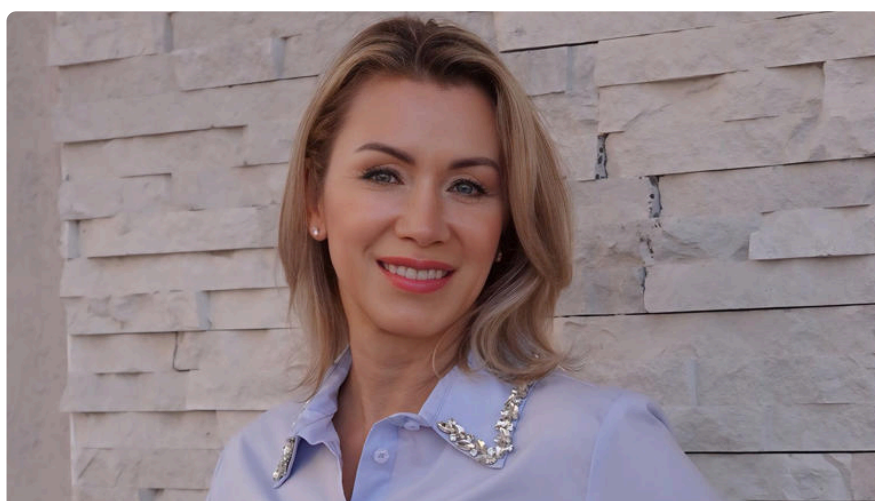
## Jackie Lauer



Top 10 Inspiring Women Leaders in 2026

[Jackie Lauer](#) knows that great cultures depend on great relationships. As the founder of a boutique consulting agency for 26 years, she specializes in culture transformation and leadership development, currently guiding companies through the AI evolution. Her profound impact earned her recognition as one of Success Magazine's most impactful coaches to know in 2025, alongside being named a "Master of Achievement" and business icon by CXO Magazine. A seasoned mentor to tech CEOs and a powerhouse keynote speaker for over 20 years, Jackie is best known for her refreshingly direct, "no-BS" approach and the infectious laughter she brings to every room. Recently nominated for Woman of the Year in her region, Jackie continues to show leaders how to marry the neuroscience of trust with high performance to build future-ready workplaces where individuals and systems thrive.

## Maria Tarasova



Top 10 Inspiring Women Leaders in 2026

Maria Tarasova is the founder of [ITALICA](#), a luxury fashion boutique bringing the elegance and sophistication of Italian style to Sarasota. Driven by her belief that fashion is more than clothing, but a powerful form of self-expression, Maria created ITALICA to offer women access

to high-quality European fashion that combines timeless elegance, modern trends, and exceptional craftsmanship. Recognizing a gap in the local market for refined, designer-inspired collections, she carefully curates pieces from Italy known for their premium fabrics, impeccable tailoring, and attention to detail. Under her leadership, ITALICA has become a destination for women seeking distinctive styles that celebrate individuality, confidence, and femininity. What sets Maria apart is her personalized approach to fashion. She believes every woman deserves a wardrobe that reflects her unique personality and lifestyle. By building meaningful relationships with clients and understanding their preferences, she creates a boutique experience centered on trust, style, and exceptional service. Through ITALICA, Maria continues to bring authentic Italian fashion and hospitality to the Sarasota community.

## Mara Opperman



Top 10 Inspiring Women Leaders in 2026

[Mara Opperman](#) is a serial entrepreneur, marketing innovator, and Co-Founder of [Louped](#). Since launching the company in 2007, she has helped redefine the diamond industry by championing a smarter, more sustainable approach to luxury jewelry ownership. Under her leadership, [Louped](#) has grown into a trusted destination for consumers seeking authenticated pre-owned engagement rings, diamonds, watches, and fine jewelry. She is also the Founder of Crown Jewels Capital, a collateral-based financing company providing lending solutions secured by diamonds, fine jewelry, luxury watches, handbags, and other high-value assets. Through both ventures, Mara continues to pioneer innovative ways for consumers to maximize the value of their luxury assets. With a passion for disrupting traditional industries and creating consumer-first solutions, Mara has built a reputation as a thought leader in luxury resale, asset-backed financing, sustainability, branding, and e-commerce. She is frequently sought out for her expertise on the evolving luxury marketplace and has been featured in major media outlets discussing jewelry, entrepreneurship, and innovative financial solutions.

## Lea Clothier



Top 10 Inspiring Women Leaders in 2026

[Lea Clothier](#) is transforming the way people think about wealth, success, and their relationship with money. With more than 25 years of experience in finance, she is a former award-winning Financial Adviser, now Coach, who has guided thousands of clients globally and been featured in publications including the NY Journal, LA Wire, and Daily Mail. After witnessing firsthand that financial strategies alone rarely create lasting change, [Lea](#) pioneered a new approach that bridges personal finance, behavioural finance, psychology, and emotional well-being. As the founder of Mindful Wealth, she helps people understand that money is not simply a numbers game, but a reflection of our beliefs, identity, self-worth, and sense of safety. Through her coaching, writing, and speaking, Lea is helping redefine financial well-being for a new generation. Her work empowers individuals to break free from inherited money patterns, build genuine financial confidence, and create wealth that supports not only financial freedom but a life of purpose, fulfilment, and meaningful impact.

## Kelsey Crystal



[L](#) Top 10 Inspiring Women Leaders in 2026

[Kelsey Crystal](#) is a dynamic entrepreneur, business strategist, and wellness advocate dedicated to helping individuals and organizations achieve sustainable growth through resilience, leadership, and personal transformation. As the founder of KelseyCrystal LLC, she combines her background in business, healthcare, and human development to create impactful solutions that bridge professional success with personal well-being. Known for her holistic approach, Kelsey focuses on empowering people to navigate challenges, build confidence, and unlock their full potential. Her expertise is strengthened by advanced training in somatic stress release and integrative trauma-informed practices, allowing her to bring a unique perspective to leadership, performance, and personal growth. Beyond her professional work, Kelsey is actively involved in community service and advocacy initiatives, reflecting her commitment to creating meaningful change. Through her work, she continues to inspire others to embrace resilience, prioritize well-being, and pursue success with purpose, authenticity, and long-term impact.

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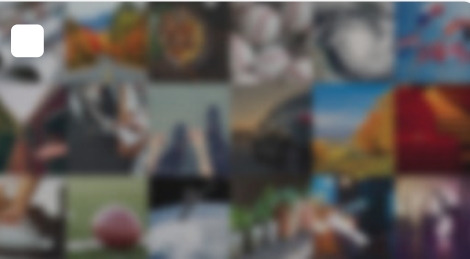
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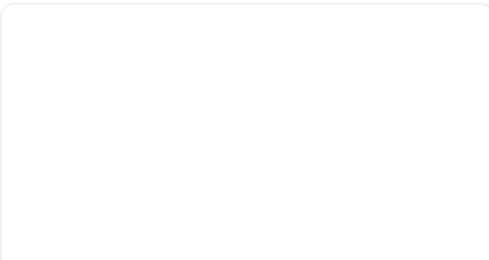
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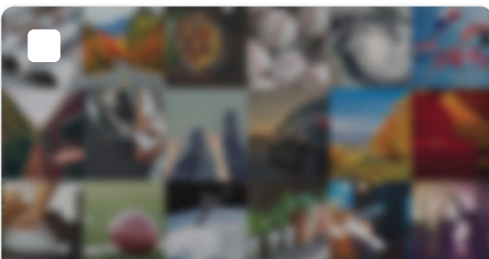
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## South Korea's ex-first lady jailed for taking luxury gifts as bribes

Story by Arpan Rai · 3h · 2 min read

A South Korean court sentenced former first lady Kim Keon Hee to seven years in jail for accepting luxury gifts, including jewellery and a



Visit The Independent

Ms Kim is the wife of ousted president Yoon Suk Yeol, who is himself facing numerous court cases and prison sentences for his failed attempt to impose martial law in late 2024. She "exercised her power as first lady to offer jobs and business favours", the Seoul Central District Court said. "Given the nature of the position, a president's spouse must exercise the highest degree of self-restraint and vigilance."

"Nevertheless," it added, "defendant Kim Keon Hee neglected that social responsibility and repeatedly accepted valuables by exploiting her influence as a means of brokering favours."

The court found Ms Kim received a Van Cleef & Arpels diamond necklace, a Tiffany brooch, a Dior handbag, a pair of Graff earrings, a storage case for a gold turtle figurine, and a painting by famous Korean artist Lee Ufan while her husband was president. She also received a Vacheron Constantin watch worth about £19,000.



A man walks past a banner showing a picture of South Korea's former president Yoon Suk Yeol and his wife Kim Keon Hee on a street in Seoul (AFP/Getty)

The court ruled that the gifts must be confiscated if they could be located and fined Ms Kim a sum of about £32,000.

The former first lady willingly used the influence of her high office to help people obtain government or parliamentary posts, the court

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