

Aga Khan Foundation Partners with CCL to Design and Deliver WiL Programme



CLIENT Aga Khan Foundation

LOCATION Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland

SIZE 3,950 staff serving 13.5 million beneficiaries per year in 13 countries

INDUSTRY Nonprofit Foundation

CLIENT PROFILE AND CHALLENGE

Founded over 50 years ago, The Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) seeks to improve the quality of life, promote pluralism, and enhance self-reliance in marginalised communities across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. As an agency of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) — one of the world’s leading international development organisations — AKF works in partnership with communities, governments, and others to deliver a long-term, community-based approach to development. In addition, AKF often plays a convening, partnership development, policy dialogue, and resource mobilisation role for AKDN and its agencies.

Each year, AKF invests approximately US \$220 million in the potential of people of all faiths and backgrounds, especially women and girls, using a holistic approach that is locally rooted but globally informed. AKF draws on the expertise of highly skilled local staff in each of the countries where it operates, as well as colleagues across the wider AKDN, to deliver sustainable, innovative, and locally led programmes.

As part of its commitment to gender equality, AKF invested in a Women in Leadership (WiL) programme to elevate its emerging female leaders. Their intention was to focus on self-development and to provide coaching, sponsorship, and peer support on a sustained basis, while engaging key stakeholders before, during, and after the engagement. AKF also focused on the importance of creating a supportive, inclusive environment to enable the women in the programme to succeed. AKF’s inclusive approach involved bringing together line managers, male allies, and the participants themselves into joint sessions to create the space needed to discuss the challenges they would face in their leadership journeys.

AKF received more than 100 applications from women leaders in a variety of fields and roles, and 25 were selected for the programme using a multi-layered evaluation and interview process. Those selected represented 13 different countries (including 3 leaders from AKF’s sister agencies, Aga Khan Agency for Habitat (AKAH) and Aga Khan Health Services (AKHS)).

“The programme completely changed how I viewed myself as a leader, I was able to look at my strengths and perceived weaknesses as a whole package, needed for my specific kind of leadership brand. I noted that several women leaders ... struggle with very similar challenges; what’s important is to push through the challenge.”

— WiL Programme Participant



SOLUTION AND RESULTS

AKF partnered with The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)[®] to design and deliver the WiL programme. It kicked off with a co-led meeting with opening remarks from the AKF General Manager and an inspiring keynote speech by an Afghani executive from Roshan Telecom, who shared insights from her journey to become a female leader in a complex environment.

The WiL programme design engaged a multi-module and multi-modal format over a 6-month period to create safe spaces for honest discussions and active exercises leading to heightened experiences. The 4 core modules, which were presented in live online sessions, focused on the following themes:

- Women's Leadership Identity and Self Awareness
- High Stakes Communication
- Building Networks and Partnerships
- Power and Influence

CCL infused WiL's learning journey with a thoughtful variety of lessons, experiences, and conversations which were each tied to the participants' personal leadership challenges. In addition to the live online core modules, the programme elements designed to boost engagement and learning included:

- 3 assessments, debriefed by an International Coaching Federation (ICF)-certified CCL executive coach
- 6 hours of executive coaching across the 6-month training period
- A conversation with each participant's line manager to understand the AKF leadership landscape
- 3 intermodular sessions focused on effective leadership from an equity, diversity, and inclusion perspective for participants, allies, sponsors, and line managers
- A capstone event to celebrate achievements and share stories
- Informal "Learning Circles" hosted by AKF to build relationships between core modules
- A Reflection Journal jointly developed by CCL and AKF for participants to record their learning experiences, insights, and thoughts
- An action-oriented 6-month AKF mentorship component connected to a Collaborative Learning Project to ensure sustainable impact post-programme

RESULTS

"AKF's global Women in Leadership (WiL) programme not only brought greater awareness overall to the importance of investing in female leadership, but also created the demand for more leadership, coaching, and developmental opportunities for both women and men across the organisation," said Staci Frost, Director, Organisational Effectiveness.

Following AKF's 6-month Women in Leadership programme, participants committed to share the knowledge gained with their teams, build more resilient work cultures, engage in more networking and mentoring, and find ways to support other women. For example, alumni from 3 different countries worked together to grow the Learning Circle component of the WiL (informal, facilitated conversations with female leaders) into a standalone programme, which is now being implemented in their respective countries.

PARTICIPANTS SAY

“All the modules covered during the 6 months ... from how to give feedback to networking, self-care, and high-stakes communications ... were very well designed and each one covered a very important concept to help me improve and grow professionally and personally.”

— WiL Programme Participant

“Having a safe space for women to interact, discuss, and learn from one another created a safe haven and forged bonds of women globally who can be lifelong supporters.”

— WiL Programme Participant

BY THE NUMBERS

92%

Overall programme satisfaction reported by participants

96% of participants said they are likely to recommend the programme

100% said they will be able to apply the knowledge and skills learned to improve their impact on their organisation or community's success

100% of participants reported making meaningful connections

96% believe that their AKDN agency is committed to their growth and development

