



Still One To Watch An Allies Guide to Supporting talent

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Your Guide to Supporting Mums Returning to Work and Progressing into Leadership

Returning to work after maternity leave isn't just a return.

It's a re-entry into a workplace that may not have changed, even though she has.

This guide is for allies, line managers and leadership teams who want to support their talented mums to stay, progress and thrive.

When you say,

"You're still one to watch,"

you're doing something that changes the game.

You're reminding her she never stopped being valuable.

Why Allyship Matters

- Flexible policies aren't enough. Our Mums In Construction research shows that day-to-day relational support matters more than written policy.
- Confidence dips are common, not because of skill loss, but because returning mothers often feel unseen in their growth.
- Managed well, return-to-work is a leadership opportunity, not a detour.
- No one is a better advocate than a well supported mum.



The Mum Brain advantage

Neuroscience shows that pregnancy, birth and early parenting don't make us frazzled and forgetful. They rewire it for leadership.

Research highlights:

- Enhanced pattern recognition
- Increased empathy and emotional regulation
- Stronger focus and prioritisation
- Heightened situational awareness and decision-making

When we value these skills, we stop asking
"what does she need to catch up on?"

And start asking:

"What has she mastered that we haven't thought to measure?"

Conversation Prompts for Managers & Allies

Here are powerful prompts drawn from leading research to help you hold supportive, future-focused conversations.

Identity & Transition

- What has surprised you about coming back to work?
- In what ways has becoming a parent changed how you see yourself at work?
- Do you feel like others see the same version of you that you see now?

✦ Why this matters: Identity is fluid post-maternity. When managers name this, they open space for confident reintegration.

Confidence & Contribution

- When do you feel most confident at work right now? When do you feel most unsure?
- Are there parts of your skillset you haven't had a chance to show or use?
- What would help you feel more supported, visible, or valued?

✦ Why this matters: Visibility gaps – not capability gaps – are often the root of returner challenges.

Future Visioning

- What kind of work excites you right now?
- What would a next step look like that fits your life and your ambition?
- What kind of development would feel energising, not overwhelming?

✦ Why this matters: 69% of returning mums feel unclear about how their career can evolve. Your questions plant the seeds of possibility.

Reflecting Belief

- Would it be OK if I shared something I see in you that others should see too?

Examples:

"You lead with empathy – and that sets the tone for the whole team."

"You're already operating at the next level – even if your title hasn't caught up."

"You've grown in ways this organisation is lucky to benefit from."

✦ Why this matters: Saying it out loud turns invisible leadership into visible impact.

After the conversation

This is just the start. Allyship grows through small, consistent actions:

- Recommend a visibility opportunity or mentor
- Share her name in rooms she's not in
- Follow up with: "How are you doing now?" two weeks later
- Reflect belief more than once. Let it echo.

Because belief isn't a one-off. It's a ripple effect.

Mentorship vs Sponsorship

🧑 Mentorship: Offers advice, feedback, and listening.

🛡 Sponsorship: Actively advocates behind closed doors and creates opportunities.

Being a mentor says: "I see your potential."

Being a sponsor says: "Others need to see it too – and I'll make sure they do."

How to Sponsor Well:

- Name her in promotion or stretch project conversations
- Advocate for flexible roles that fit her strengths
- Publicly celebrate her wins
- Use your power to build pathways, not just give praise



A Final Word

Allyship isn't about fixing. It's about seeing clearly.
The mums in your team aren't coming back diminished.
They're coming back transformed.
They don't need permission to lead.
They need recognition that they already are.
Say it.

"You're still one to watch."
And mean it.

Further reading:

- Hoekzema, E. et al. (2017). Pregnancy leads to long-lasting changes in human brain structure. *Nature Neuroscience*, 20, 287–296.
- Ranstad (2022). *Women in Construction Report*.
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