

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### CYNTHIA MILLS, FASAE, CAE, CMC, CPC, CCRC

**Cynthia Mills, FASAE, CAE, CMC, CPC, CCRC** is Founder, President & CEO of The Leaders' Haven. Mills' consultancy partners with clients to align for impact and exceed expectations. Nicknamed "The Board Whisperer" by several clients, Cynthia relishes transformational journeys.

**Transformation Architect:** An award-winning national and international CEO, she designs transformational and sustainable impact as business strategist, succession planning & transition facilitator, board consultant, leadership development catalyst, executive coach, change management guide, and speaker. Serving a diverse client portfolio, Mills brings depth and unique perspective to each engagement, matching culture and enhancing corporate soul to deliver relevance in the business, industry, philanthropy, and faith sectors.

**Leader Cultivator:** Mills parlayed her expertise building strategy, people, and teams into lauded designer of leadership programs and executive coach. As New England College adjunct faculty, she developed curricula and taught strategic planning and policy, the dynamics of governance, and thesis preparation to master's degree candidates.

**World Citizen:** A small town girl, Mills has been blessed to live and speak abroad, lead diverse teams, and represent organizations in Asia, Europe, Scandinavia, the UK, Mexico, Canada, Bermuda, the Caribbean, and the U.S.

**Eternal Student:** Mills holds an MA from the University of York, England, earned as a Rotary International Ambassador Scholar, and a dual BA from Queens College while a Presidential Scholar. She is a member of the Institute of Management Consultants, International Coach Federation, American Society of Association Executives, and Strathmore Who's Who Worldwide, which named her "Professional of the Year in Consulting, Coaching, and Professional Development." Mills is certified as a Master, Professional, and Christian Coach, and Association Executive and an ASAE Fellow.

**Author:** *Breaking the Concrete Ceiling* is Mills' fifth book, following *CEOs First 90 Days: Breathing Tips for the Other End of the Fire Hose*, *The Empty Front Porch: Soul Sittin' to Design Your porch to Porch Plan*, *The Female Factor: A Confidence Guide for Women* and *The Big Secret*, a best seller as a co-author with Jack Canfield.

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# CHOOSE AIR

**Cynthia Mills, FASAE, CAE, CMC, CPC, CCRC**

**F**rom the day we cry out with our first breath, we launch into systems. The hospital and insurance systems tell your mother how long she may stay. The legal system limits how fast your parents can drive you home. The educational system determines what is important for you to know in your formative years. The family dynamic outlines possibility or limitations. The political system declares when you are mature enough to vote. The personnel manual proscribes your work environment, and on and on. As civilized societies, we organize to avoid chaos. As a result, women have concrete, glass, or air above us, depending upon the systems we're born into, where we reside, and how we choose to engage. Those who erect them, expect us to accept their permanence and impermeability.

Women have struggled for millennia to breathe. Today, we have more air above us than at any time in recorded human history. A young girl can have a voice and stun the United Nations with poignant challenges to the status quo. Women lead nations, corporations, and military forces. We form businesses at unprecedented rates. Our presence on boards of directors increases bottom lines. It is harder

to pour concrete to cure above our heads. While we must raise jackhammers periodically, the systems are crumbling - sometimes due to enlightenment, occasionally because of a vacuum, and always, because we choose air.

What favors us now is our accelerating interconnectedness, the speed of change, abundant opportunity, the interdependence of solutions, and the impact on one another if we fail. The world cannot afford to waste the talent of women – not in our numbers, not in our intellect, not in our caring, and not in our determination. The future is not about taking over. It is about women and men, collectively and respectfully, using all of our foresight, insight, and capacity to design transformational solutions for our world. When we stand together in a place of trust, leveraging our gifts and talents for the betterment of all, we create the moment where hope, intention, and reality blur.

We must choose air; behaving as if concrete and glass ceilings are not present and rejecting efforts to suffocate our aptitudes. To live in reality, we also must acknowledge the attempts to keep ceiling installations intact. We do not, however, have to be defined by them. We can proactively declare them irrelevant and design alternate realities, not always without a price, and yet relentless in our determination.

Undisputed achievement yearns for repetition when we consistently exceed expectations, so be persistent. A barrier is but an invitation to genius. Creating abundance, opportunity, and a world that blesses every person's ability to flourish individually is addictive. It thwarts naysayers, attracts supporters, and reduces the impact of status quo hoarders.

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### **The Ceiling, the Slab, & the Oxygen Mask**

Simply because of the era of my birth, I watched women go before me to seek their dreams in an environment in which their very presence broke the rules. As they experimented with how to “be allowed” to contribute their gifts, they displayed different personality types and deployed a variety of leadership styles. Depending upon the environment, the beliefs, personalities, and attitudes of others, and their own emotional intelligence and skill set, some experienced success, while others failed.

I once witnessed men deriding a woman, long after she was gone, who was first to hold a leadership role. Every encounter was perceived as a tiresome battle. Her intelligence was not in question. Her right to hold the position or have a voice was not debated. Stylistically, her choices had not served her well in their eyes. Instead of cracking the ceiling, she had laid another concrete slab. Instead of the usual slap on the back and a beer of reconciliation that guys would engage in after disagreements, this repetitive experience had become engrained in their storytelling.

Yet, it was not a concrete slab that was reinforced for all females. Several women followed, who demonstrated alternate leadership styles. Their opinions and business acumen were valued and recognized. It was a selective concrete slab that was hovering over one person’s head and not the pervasive concrete ceiling of previous decades.

I never heard her account. Perhaps her adoption of this style was the only way she believed she could be in the conversation. Maybe she previously had repeated negative experiences that led to the development of her style. Whatever the reason, this chosen behavior did not ultimately succeed for her, and she was unable to alter her interactions for effectiveness. Presumably, she thought she was choosing

air but did not pay attention to how her choices were suffocating those around her. Instead of calling others to her, she had pushed the early advocates for destroying the concrete ceiling away.

My experience was that regardless of gender; competence, confidence, and results erase detractors and attract champions. Both men and women showed up to play, as success upon success was co-created. Therein lay the lesson – don't imagine concrete or glass ceilings where they no longer exist. *If* given access and opportunity to deliver, repeated achievement triumphs over concrete and glass - and style matters. Don't suffocate those who are offering you the oxygen mask and encouraging you to breathe the air with them. Not everybody is out to pour concrete.

### **The Phantom Ceiling**

The most immovable concrete ceiling of all originates when women engage in self-limiting beliefs, negative self-talk, or inaction. We choose to allow carbon monoxide levels to rise, stealing our air, when we internalize the belittling we heard in the home or at school. We decide to believe we'll never do well in science or math. We assume we could never successfully lead a business. We doubt we'll ever travel farther than the next state instead of to Thailand or Belgium. We expect to be penalized for being mothers, while leading demanding careers simultaneously. We don't negotiate hard for the raise we deserve. We believe success is for someone else. When we create this personalized, negative podcast loop, we design a phantom concrete ceiling.

Yes, there are very real obstacles that persist in the world, erected with intentionality to block and contain, many of which are very difficult to overcome. However, we build our own concrete

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ceilings when we accept that the barriers others have constructed will determine our path, or when we birth phantom ceilings from our own architectural renderings. We help pour the mixture over our heads.

Cease the imagining of self-imposed phantom ceilings and recognize your role in their design. Brandish your dreams and take action, demonstrating refusal to bow to the real ceilings. Stand for women, who are blocked, abused, harassed, ridiculed, enslaved, demeaned, or killed. As we strengthen our resolve, hone our abilities, alter laws, govern, create businesses, and ultimately deliver significant achievements, we can demonstrate hope for women who believe they are trapped in irredeemable circumstances. The real ceilings then lose their power and become phantom ceilings. Choose air and model success to help other women trash the inertia of self-imposed phantom ceilings and demolish the real ones.

### **Rejecting the Ceiling**

It takes muriatic acid to dissolve newly laid concrete. Eviscerating fully cured concrete is an entirely different story. Rule makers hope for the cured version. They set parameters; expecting others to play within them like the concrete's frame that is laid before pouring. They like concrete, because it's a floor for them and a ceiling for others. When you choose to reject the ceiling and transform, the rules no longer fit, requiring adjustments to be made.

At some point, one man after another decided to step into transformation, creating opportunities with women. Work place collaboration was viewed as having a benefit. Professional gifts and success were valued for what can be contributed, not from whom they originate. Men and women began rejecting the concrete ceiling together.

I first experienced this through both male and female educators, encouraging me to seek my dreams. They gave me air and reinforced taking actions towards possibility. They promoted labeling concrete or glass ceilings as irrelevant to embolden me away from real or self-imposed limitations.

During this same time, women before me sought a level playing field, experiencing the reality of daily blocks in environments with inappropriate behavior occurring around them and to them, while a concrete ceiling hovered above. They also saw some of that concrete being held in place by a few women who chinked a bit out, crawled on top of it, and filled the holes back in for those still below. Women sometimes created a harder concrete ceiling for other women than men. Those below gulped for air and jackhammered holes where they could, creating vents for me to breathe more easily as I followed. When we achieve results for ourselves, may we never forget the global “w” and “e” in women.

Today, women in many cultures lead in the home, in worship, in business, in governance, in education, in the sciences, and in media. We receive the majority of higher education degrees. We have voted for almost 100 years in the U.S., and we have choices. Yet, in my consulting and coaching practice, I occasionally work with women who are still valued by whether or not they lead like men stylistically - viewed as confrontational when decisive and weak when collaborative. Let's also not deny or discount the existence or impact of negative media images, movies, social media, human trafficking, lack of access to education, sexual harassment, health care access, talking over top of us in meetings, poverty, or failure to promote.

Rejecting the ceiling is not a matter of ignoring real circumstances. Those who currently have access to resources must choose air first,

connecting, caring, and helping little girls to dream and women to breathe. Men and women must believe that every story matters and every woman has a contribution this planet needs, keeping muriatic acid handy for attempts to pour new concrete and jackhammers ready to eviscerate outdated ceilings.

### **Choosing Air Partners**

The home is where we first get a taste of expansion or restriction – support and encouragement or degradation and derision – concrete or air. My mother modeled how she expected to be treated by my father and me. The demonstration of freedom came by example - achieving advanced education, working, and choosing for herself what her role in life would be. She showed me how to take deep breaths and to share the air from a spirit of generosity – that success comes first in how we honor others.

While we do not get to choose our families of origin, we can later select whom we take on the journey with us – friends, spouses, and colleagues. For women who choose not to be single and for whom the home is a traditional family, selecting a husband is not just about falling in love. This is the primary place of modeling and practicing what collaboration and partnership looks like to the external world – when you make significant life choices, provide examples of marriage for engaged couples, and demonstrate to your children how families should interact and communicate.

Before saying, “Yes,” to that proposal, conduct a test to be sure there is nothing but air around you. Can you breathe easily? Does your potential spouse put on their oxygen mask first, not to deprive you, but to protect possibility for you? Before we were married, my husband



offered that he would have a supporting role so that I could follow my star, though I had no idea where my star was at the time. With an age difference, he said he never wanted me to resent him, and he needed the peace of mind of knowing I could take care of myself. Admittedly, I did not know what a tremendous gift he was giving me at that time. He took responsibility for it and followed through three times when he received significant career opportunities at the exact same moments I did. Three times, he said, “We’re following your star.” He had his oxygen mask on first and made certain there was nothing but air above my head.

Choose well for the home. Select a partner who can see when others are pouring concrete around you and who is willing to help you pour some muriatic acid before it sets. Search for the person who will help you take deep breaths and expand your options.

### **The Breath of Choice**

You can look up and choose to see a hardened surface of concrete, light glancing off of glass, or air. This does not diminish the realities that we often have to overcome, but it does embolden us to seek air. We can be taught, have experiences that validate, and then accept that there is a concrete ceiling – that it’s going to be tough, unfair, and our life experiences will be limiting - and then take a combative approach. We can also expect opportunity, take every unexpected step to move forward, challenge in a style that wins others to our aid, be persistent, be self-affirming, and quiet the inner and outer voices that assail our worthiness.

We always have at least three choices. Men and women can accept the status quo and perpetuate the rigidity of stifling concrete blocks.

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Women can walk away and save ourselves, creating something new elsewhere, thereby leaving those who choose to remain to their fate; or we can work within the existing cultures and seek to change them by displaying alternate behaviors, challenging unhealthy norms, and lighting new pathways.

Those who have gone before us did not expect that their attempts to win the right to vote, to lead in the military, or to no longer be their husbands' property would be easy. The system was rigged against them. They chose to deny the concrete ceiling its power. They chose to believe that something could be – no would be - different because of them. They discounted the rules, tore out the concrete's frame, and made sure the sand, gravel, cement, and water could not get near each other again. In the process, the true nature of real partnership was born – in marriage, in families, in the workplace, and in communities.

If you're an outperformer in your business, a transformer in your home, and a leader in your community, you are altering the very DNA of the future; breaking the concrete framework apart. How you choose to work within and through existing systems, and with those who can make a difference is the linchpin to your success. Your behavior reveals either your adherence to inappropriate archaic rules, simply by not fighting against them, or your choice to create an alternate reality. The magnetic force of a newly designed world view can sweep others towards a new set of behaviors, blowing up the concrete in its path, allowing everyone to breathe pure air.

We get to choose. Do we accept the concrete ceiling? Do we select the leadership styles, people, and opportunities that create an alternative, or do we adopt "the given?" As this evolution continues, at some point, it is possible for "the given" to become the absence of concrete or glass above our heads, born from one woman's success after

another's. It's how we have arrived at more females earning degrees in higher education. It wasn't a worldwide movement. It was one woman after another, being provided with access and choosing opportunity. There aren't more female-owned businesses starting because of a UN resolution. It occurred when one woman at a time decided to be entrepreneurial and not to remain inside of a system that does not honor stages of life, provide appropriate pay, or allow voices to be heard.

Women dream. Men dream. Then, they both act – separately and together. It leads to success, magnificent success; transformed societies, higher profits, exponential brilliance!

Choose air.

