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# Are You Leaning In?

By Jennifer Fleck

**W**hen Facebook's COO, Sheryl Sandberg, released *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* in March this year, it started a firestorm of controversy that most leadership books don't see. The controversy started weeks before the book was even released. I read it to see what all the fuss was about, and I found it to be an inspiring book with quite a bit of good advice that applies to men and women alike. I could relate to her reasons for writing the book. While I'm not the COO (yet), I've seen a similar thinning of the women in leadership roles as our generation moves up the corporate ladder. Sandberg explains:

*I graduated from college in 1991 and from business school in 1995. In each entry-level job after graduation, my colleagues were a balanced mix of male and female. I saw that the senior leaders were almost entirely male, but I thought that was due to historical discrimination against women. The proverbial glass ceiling had been cracked in almost every industry, and I believed that it was just a matter of time until my generation took our fair share of the leadership roles. But with each passing year, fewer and fewer of my colleagues were women. More and more often, I was the only woman in the room.*

Why is this? One of her theories is that cultural assumptions are still out of balance:

*For many men, the fundamental assumption is that they can have both a successful professional life and a fulfilling personal life. For many women, the assumption is that trying to do both is difficult at best and impossible at worst. Women are surrounded by headlines and stories warning them that they cannot be committed to both their families and careers. They are told over and over again that they have to choose, because if they try to do too much, they'll be harried and unhappy. Framing the issue as "work-life balance"—as if the two were diametrically opposed—practically ensures work will lose out. Who would ever choose work over life?*

So, how does she propose we take on these challenges? The book is full of personal stories and examples that illustrate her good advice. Here is my take on some of her best advice.

## WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WEREN'T AFRAID?

So often fear is what holds us back. Fear of not being liked. Fear of making a wrong decision. Fear of failure. If you don't step out and face your fears, you may not fail, but you most likely won't rise to the top. Ask yourself every day, "What would I do if I wasn't afraid?" and then do it.

## SIT AT THE TABLE

Have you ever gone into a meeting that was going to be full and sat at one of the chairs to the side of the room, instead of at the table? It makes you look like a spectator and not a participant. It makes it harder to be heard. It makes it easier for others to discount you. It's hard to be top of mind when the next promotion opportunity opens up, if others don't hear you speaking up and making your positions known.

## IT'S A JUNGLE GYM, NOT A LADDER

Ladders are just for going up and down, but jungle gyms allow for more flexibility and creative exploration. If you think of your career as a jungle gym, you will realize there are a lot of ways to the top, not just straight up. Try out a different rotation than you are comfortable with. Try a role in a non-actuarial part of your company. You may be surprised at how your skills are transferrable if you think more broadly.

## MENTORS

We've all heard the importance of being a mentor and having a mentor. Many actuarial programs already have official mentoring programs where the mentor and mentee are assigned to each other. Sometimes these work out, and sometimes they are just awkward. Go beyond the standard actuarial mentor and find other successful people outside the field to reach out to.

However, Sandberg points out that successful people get quite a few requests to be a mentor. The



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**Sandberg advocates staying fully vested in the workforce until the day you decide to leave.**

best mentoring relationships tend to happen more naturally than that; mentors choose protégés based on performance and potential. Mentors want to work with people who they think can really benefit from their help and are truly open to feedback. Sandberg wants to turn the advice around from “Get a mentor and you will excel” to “Excel and you will get a mentor.”

**DON'T LEAVE BEFORE YOU LEAVE**

Sandberg describes a classic scenario where an ambitious and successful young woman has the thought of having children someday in the back of her mind. She may make small decisions along the way that hold her back because she knows someday she will need to make room for a child in her life. She may hesitate to go for a position with bigger responsibilities or travel requirements. Slowly these decisions make her feel less fulfilled, underutilized or unappreciated. Sandberg advocates staying fully vested in the workforce until the day you decide to leave. She isn't downgrading the decision to become a stay-at-home parent either. Each family needs to make that decision for themselves. She just warns against cutting back too soon, so that work remains a place where you feel fulfilled and challenged.

There are a number of other topics in her book that contain good advice for both men and women. The controversy was from critics who said she was too rich to give advice to “real-women.” Yes, she can afford nannies, but I'd rather take advice from someone who got there than someone who didn't. Critics also said that she was blaming women for holding themselves back. Maybe. I like to call it personal responsibility. No one is going to take responsibility for my career except for me. I don't expect “society” to change it for me.

I think the book struck a nerve. As of this writing in August 2013, *Lean In* continues to hold the No. 1 spot on the *New York Times* Hardcover Business Book Bestseller List. It has been there since April. It has also been on the overall Nonfiction Bestseller List for 21 weeks now.

For more information, grab a copy of the book, or check out the website [www.leanin.org](http://www.leanin.org). The site encourages people to start “Lean In Circles,” to get together with others in their area at a similar place in their careers to talk about the issues and encourage each other.

What do you think? Let's keep the conversation going on the Management & Personal Development (MPD) Section's LinkedIn site. ●