

Stop Leaning; Stand Up Straight

By: Amber D. Nelson

Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 break out bestseller, *Lean In*, has created both a groundswell of support and a vocal backlash. The support comes from women in the corporate and entrepreneurial spheres that share Sandberg's philosophy. Sandberg, the ultra-wealthy COO of Facebook, has changed the conversation around women at work in wide and varied ways through her book, her TEDtalk, and her *Lean In* Foundation. Her primary contention is that women need to push harder and do more at work to build careers that will take them to the c-suite. Her vision of success requires full representation for women on corporate boards and executive teams at Fortune 50 companies and all across corporate America. The backlash response encourages women everywhere to "Lean Out." Sandberg's detractors suggest that there is more than one way to be successful and that opting for 16-hour workdays and frequent business travel certainly emulates the male model of work but perhaps isn't the best model for all (or even most) professional women.



I've watched a number of career women, including those in the executive ranks and those doing the entrepreneurial hustle, wrangle with the whole premise of leaning. Some embrace Sandberg's approach and feel vindicated to have a champion for their corporate climb. Others feel guilt and pressure to do more than they already do, as though their commitment to work isn't enough and that they should put aside parenting, volunteering, and social lives to be higher achievers, to be certifiably successful. Whatever camp you fall into as young women, you have a vast array of choices ahead of you. I'd like to suggest that you move past the discussion of leaning in or leaning out, decide what success means to you, and develop considerable communication skills to navigate the path you choose, and stand up straight.

Every professional decision you make can be positioned to support your career goals if you have the right tools. Below are three strategies you can use right now to move your career forward in the direction of your choosing.

Claim your territory.

As a young woman, you have hopes and dreams for both your personal and your professional life. Spend some time figuring out what is important to you. Do you want long paid vacations? Creative, flexible work? A path to a corner office? Status? Money? Craft language around the way you define success. In reviews with your manager, job interviews with potential supervisors and networking opportunities you'll be able to name what you want so that others can help you fulfill those dreams and wishes. Prepare yourself for opportunity with phrases including, "___ is really important to me," "___ is on my bucket list," "I'd jump at the chance to ___," and "___ is a deal breaker." Also recognize that, over time, what's important to you will change as you achieve more and your life evolves.

Collaborate, don't alienate.

Sure, surrounding yourself with women who share your perspectives can be affirming but when you cross paths with someone with different goals and ideas, pause for a moment and see if you can collaborate. Her skills, ideas and world view may be just the thing your project or proposal needs. Consider comments such as, "I never would have looked at it that way," or "We come to this from such different angles; I'd be curious to hear how you'd approach this issue." Use the opportunity to build a bridge rather than reflexively claiming the high ground for yourself.

Use your words to support others.

Avoid the teen queen trap of one-upping the women in your world. It's totally fine if you wouldn't want to crank out yet another PowerPoint for a cranky supervisor, or if taking a creative part-time job seems pointless to you. You can keep the negatives to yourself and support the women in your world. Build rapport with an honest, "It looks like you've really found your niche," or "This work seems to make you really happy." Words like these are inexpensive but priceless in creating foundational networks that will help support you as you stand up straight.

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