

Lean in, but keep your **BALANCE**

>> Sheryl Sandberg has an enviable pedigree. She is Chief Operating Officer at Facebook and is ranked on Fortune's list of the 50 Most Powerful Women in Business. She has strong views on why so few women make it to the top but is she right?

In 2010 Sandberg gave an impassioned TEDTalk in which she encouraged women 'to sit at the table'; to be ambitious and to step up to leadership. Sandberg's now infamous book *Lean in. Women, Work and the Will to Lead* is the culmination of her personal career reflections and a call to action to professional women.

I have just returned from the USA where I witnessed that many organisations including Visa have already established 'Lean in Circles'. But is this the solution? As a scholar in the field of women's leadership for over thirty years, I think not. Of course, women must be prepared to put themselves forward for leadership positions but this is only a small part of a much bigger, more complicated situation that explains the continued lack of women in leadership.

In my experience of working with organisations, the tried and tested

way to get to the top is 'to push'. This involves being visible, ensuring you have a good reputation with those who make the promotion decisions and being hungry for leadership (threatening to leave seems to be a popular strategy here). It is not surprising that many of our leaders are egotistical, manipulative and arrogant and find it difficult to be collegial and inclusive. I am purposely painting the dark side of leadership here of course; these same leaders can be charismatic, inspiring, enthusiastic and decisive. The point I am making is that everyone should not have to push their way to the top and that strategy promotes only certain facets of leadership.

I teach women impression management skills – how to self-promote, to take risks and to network strategically, but many tell me that they feel uncomfortable engaging in such behaviour. I believe the tension stems from many women's belief that good leaders identify highly talented employees, provide constructive

feedback to them, develop them and 'pull them' through to the top. This is a core task of good leadership. It guarantees the future well-being of the organisation. Such a task should not be heavily dependent on individuals' own efforts at self-promotion. If organisations applied 'pull' as well as 'push' talent management strategies then maybe we would see many more women (and different men) getting to the top.

A delegate who attended a recent customised women in leadership programme that I ran, wrote to me afterwards to say that before the programme she had felt she was 'circling the drain' at work. After the course, she discovered that she was not only valued by her organisation but was seen as a high potential individual they wanted to promote to Partner. She was advised how she could take responsibility for her next steps and having been given constructive feedback, went back to work with a structured plan. Her view of herself was transformed. Before

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we all dash to create 'Lean In Circles' can we begin by having honest, developmental conversations with our female team members? According to our experience at Cranfield, too many female professionals are either given no feedback or fobbed off with such advice as "Don't be impatient," "You are doing fine," or worse still "You need to have more gravitas."

Organisations need to take a hard look at the lack of women in their leadership roles. If women are disproportionately under-rated, why is this? How many women appear in the succession plans for the top jobs? At each level what proportion of women are internally promoted compared to men? This year our research uncovered that 62% of male directors on FTSE 100 executive committees were internally promoted compared to 48% of the female directors – a significant difference and perhaps symptomatic of the ways women are continually disadvantaged at work.

A female colleague of mine at the Harvard Business School told me how she was invited by a law firm to design and run an in-house women in leadership programme. Her team of Harvard researchers first wisely carried out interviews and collected great amounts of data from the law firm's Human Resources department to understand their work context. In the

end, she and her team of researchers concluded that the challenges facing women lawyers at the firm emanated from how the law firm organised, measured and rewarded the way work was carried out. These findings were given to the Senior Partners who rejected them. It was much easier for them to label the issue "a woman's problem."

The biggest obstacle to women's advancement into leadership is not women's failure to lean in, but top

management's reluctance to accept their own critical role in fostering a gender inclusive leadership team. **MF**

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