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Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg: 'No one can have it all'

Coming to terms with that reality is invaluable for women trying to find fulfillment as both great leaders and great parents.

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg has emerged as a leading voice for gender equality since she delivered, in late 2010, a provocative TEDWomen address on why a smaller percentage of women than men reach the top.[1] In this interview with McKinsey's Joanna Barsh, Sandberg (an alumnus of McKinsey, the US Treasury Department, and Google) expands on issues from her new book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (Knopf, March 2013), and explains why women need to "lean in" to gain confidence, develop skills, and become more comfortable as leaders—herself included.

The *Quarterly*: *When were you first self-aware that you really were a leader?*

Sheryl Sandberg: I don't easily identify as a leader. Looking back on my childhood, I thought of myself as a little bossy. I think as a boy, I would have thought I was a leader. We need to change that if we want more women in leadership.

The *Quarterly*: *What drives you today?*

Sheryl Sandberg: I really want to do mission-based work. I believed in the Google mission. I believe strongly in what Facebook's doing. That's why I get up and go to work every day. But probably for the first time in my life around these issues for women in leadership—maybe a "calling" is too strong of a word—it feels like something I was meant to do, supposed to do, have an opportunity to do, maybe have a responsibility to do. I spent most of my career, including my time at McKinsey, never acknowledging that I was a woman. And, you know, fast forward—I'm 43 now—fitting in is not helping us. Women have held 14 percent of the top jobs in this country for ten years. No progress. We need a new and much more honest and open dialogue on gender.

The *Quarterly*: *When did the shift happen for you?*

Sheryl Sandberg: I left McKinsey; I went into the government for four years. When I then left Treasury, it took me almost a full year to get a job. By the time I got my job at Google, I was so happy to have employment that I was no longer afraid, I just wanted to start. I began with a team of 4 people and wound up with a team of 4,000. So for the first

time, I really managed a large group of people. At every stage, the men were in my office, saying "I want the next job. We're opening an office in India, I want to do it." And the women, when I tried to talk them into taking on something new, said: "You really need a new role." *"I'm still learning."* "You really should think about doing something else." *"I'm not sure I'm qualified for that job."* Sentences I never heard from the men.

If you drill into the data, study after study shows exactly the same thing. Starting in junior high, if you ask boys and girls, "Do you want to lead? Lead your high-school class, lead your junior-high-school class, lead your club in college, lead the organization, team, or company you join as an adult?" More men than women want that. All the studies show this. And that's how we get to a world where 14 percent of the top corporate jobs are held by women. We need to encourage women to lead, and we don't do that.

The *Quarterly*: *How did you step into that?*

Sheryl Sandberg: I sit here today not having a comfortable relationship with power, ambition, or leadership. For men, *leadership*, *power*, and *ambition* are unambiguously good words. As men get more successful and lead more, they're better liked. For women, those things are not encouraged and actually are actively discouraged, because all of us, men and women alike, dislike women who are more successful. As men get more successful, they are liked more. As women get more successful, they are liked less. That is a really powerful negative incentive for women to lead.

The *Quarterly*: *Why is building communities of women so important to you?*

Sheryl Sandberg: The tension between work-at-home moms and work-in-the-office moms is real. All of us feel it. That needs to change. I look at what the women in my community who are working in their homes are doing not just for their children but for mine. And this is hard because I drop my kids off and they're there. I volunteer some, but I don't volunteer nearly as much as those mothers. I can feel guilty and jealous. Or I can feel grateful that my kids are getting a better education because of them. The reverse happens, too, as I've heard from my friends who are stay-at-home moms. They say that when they see women in the workforce, they can sometimes feel bad about their own choices. But sometimes they'll say, "They're setting a great example of what's possible for my daughter."

One of the most important things women can do working together is to make it clear that every bit of work a woman does—whether it's in the home, in the school, in the community, or in the workplace—is valued as much as work that men do. Across the board, we are not there. Women are paid 77 cents for every $1 men are paid. For the same work, we are paid less and are less valued. We are promoted less. We get fewer of the top jobs. We do not live in an equal world. An equal world

would be a world of equal opportunity and equal choice and equal encouragement. Compare a career to a marathon. Men and women arrive at the starting line equally trained and fit. You could argue, based on educational attainment, that the women are *more* trained and fit. But at least equal. And think of a career like a marathon: long, grueling, ultimately rewarding. What voices do the men hear from the beginning? "You've got this. Keep going. Great race ahead of you." What do the women hear from day one out of college? "You sure you want to run? Marathon's really long. You're probably not going to want to finish. Don't you want kids one day?" The voices for men get stronger, "Yes, go. You've got this." The voices for women can get openly hostile. "Are you sure you should be running when your kids need you at home?"

The *Quarterly*: *Women in their 20s seem worried: "I'm working too hard to find a partner." "I can't have a baby and do this." "I can't do all these things."*

Sheryl Sandberg: Women start worrying about balance at a really young age. We were raised in my generation with "You can do anything." We didn't have the example of trying to do both careers and families and it not working. We didn't worry about this at all. I never thought about whether or not I could balance kids. It just never occurred to me. It would just all work out. But the girls in college today—they're worrying about it. So I am worried that our leadership percentages at the top could actually go down.

In business, most trends that go up for a while, or are flat for ten years, then go down.

I fully understand that there are lots of reasons to take time out of the workforce or leave the workforce. And I'm fully supportive of any men or women who want to do that. But I really want to urge women: do that when you have a child. Not three years in advance. Because by leaning in and keeping your foot on the gas pedal, you just give yourself options. And then you can make better choices.

The *Quarterly*: *What about after women have a family?*

Sheryl Sandberg: No one can have it all. That language is the worst thing that's happened to the women's movement. You know, no one even bothers to apply it to men. It's really pressure on women. I think what happens to women is we compare ourselves at home to the women who are work-at-home mothers and we fall short. Compared to them, I fall short every day. And then you can compare yourself at work to some women but mostly men who have no other responsibilities, really. They go home whenever they want. And you can feel bad there, too.

So we can spend all our time feeling terrible about how we're lousy workers and lousy mothers. And, by the way, I do this a lot. All of us do. Or we can start realizing that we can be great mothers. The data on this is super clear: you can be a very successful parent with a

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great relationship with thriving children and have a full-time job. And you can be a great worker and a great colleague at work but not be there for 12 hours a day in person. And I think we have to let ourselves do that.

The move from Google to Facebook was scary. I was going from just running sales and operations to running the whole business side. Facebook's regular hours were often all-nighters. If I had just stayed there all night because that's what everyone did, I would have been exhausted. I would have decided that I was a bad mom, and eventually I would have quit. The other way it could have worked out was if I could come in early, work the hours I wanted to work, leave at 5:30 pm, get back online—which is exactly what I do to this day—and see if it worked out. And then if it did work out, I had a chance of staying.

What I think people don't see is, if you do it the first way—just do everything asked of you—you're not actually giving it a chance to really work. If you do it based on what you really need, then you can. And I'm not saying I don't make sacrifices. You know, there has never been a 24-hour period in five years when I have not responded to e-mail at Facebook. I am not saying it's easy. I work long hours. I am saying that I was able to mold those hours around the needs of my family, and that matters. And I really encourage other people at Facebook to mold hours around themselves.

The *Quarterly*: *Your aspiration is to make "leaning in" a global trend for women. In fact, you are seeding a nonprofit called Lean In. What are your hopes for that?*

Sheryl Sandberg: I am hoping that my book is just the start of the conversation. I really want to help build a global community where we're giving women not just the desire to lead but the support and the tools they need to do it. So the Lean In community is doing three things. First, we're helping to foster a daily conversation. It will take place on Facebook, unsurprisingly: people telling their Lean In stories, people discussing issues—creating opportunities for people to come together around the issues and challenges women face in leadership.

The second thing we're doing is Lean In Education. We're getting great practitioners and professors who teach classes for usually very elite groups of women. We're taping them and putting them online where they're broadly accessible to anyone. And the third thing we're doing is based on the YPO[2] model, helping women and men set up Lean In circles: peer groups of 8 to 12 people who agree to meet once a month. The idea is that by giving women the tools, the education, and the support they need, we can encourage more women to lean in and encourage more men and more organizations to explicitly support women in leadership.

I want to change the numbers at the top. I'd like to know that in my daughter's generation, they are not going to be 14 percent of the top jobs. That we're no longer going to write headlines saying that women are taking over the Senate when they get 20 percent of the seats; 20 percent is not a takeover. I want real equality.

[1] "Sheryl Sandberg: Why we have too few women leaders," ted.com, December 2010.

[2] Young Presidents' Organization.

Sheryl Sandberg is the chief operating officer at Facebook. She previously served as vice president of global online sales and operations at Google, as chief of staff to former treasury secretary Lawrence Summers, and as a consultant at McKinsey. This interview was conducted by **Joanna Barsh,** a director emeritus in McKinsey's New York office.