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## Lean In: A Book Review

Molly Kroeger

Johnson & Wales University - Providence, MKroeger01@wildcats.jwu.edu

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Johnson & Wales University  
Providence, Rhode Island

College of Management Graduate Studies  
Feinstein Graduate School

**LEAN IN: A BOOK REVIEW**

A book review submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the MBA degree  
MGMT 5800  
Prepared for Professor Martin Sivula

**Molly Kroeger**

May 8, 2014

## Summary

Sheryl Sandberg is a notable woman in today's business world, recognized by such publications as *Forbes* and *Time* for her influential voice. The current chief operating officer at Facebook and a former vice president at Google, Sandberg wrote 2013's critically acclaimed Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead. A compilation of personal anecdotes paired with scientific data, Sandberg identifies the struggles that women face in today's business world. Though the number of women in the workforce has grown significantly over the years, Sandberg believes that their presence is not equal to their male counterparts. The goal of the book is to educate any woman who wants to increase her chances of making it to the top as well as enlighten interested men on the struggles that women face in business.

Though data supports women's aptitude to lead, there is a noticeable leadership ambition gap. Leadership ambition requires risk and the ability to advocate for one's self, behaviors women typically treat with caution. While recent generations of women have tried to "do it all", today's women have eyes wide open. The author says that previous generations may have been perceived as naïve, while girls today know too much. Consequently, today's young women see that "doing it all" isn't possible. Women today are more practical and see that hard work doesn't always pay off with professional reward. Rather than attempt to "do it all", many women decide that their careers are an area to downplay. Moreover, there is a negative perception surrounding ambitious women. Though men are expected to be professionally ambitious, society has other plans for women. Culturally, pressure remains for women to get married and have children.

As a speaker at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Sandberg addresses the drastic differences in the ways boys and girls are raised (Ettus, 2012). Sandberg notes that young girls are lead down a narrow path filled with salon appointments and encouragement to be pretty versus ambitious (Ettus, 2012). Moreover, many young girls aspire to be princesses. Backed by the multibillion dollar Disney marketing machine, many of today's girls surrender to the lure of high heeled shoes, makeup, and fancy gowns, and the author astutely points out that "princesses won't be presidents" (Ettus, 2012). Young girls raised without ambition have the potential to transform into apologetic

Both the gap in leadership ambition and the apologetic working moms are, in part, a result of fear. Many of women's barriers in the workplace stem from fear. Amongst other fears, women fear being disliked, making the wrong choice, and being considered a failure. The author believes that many women are plagued with the "triple threat" of all fears, and that is the fear of being a bad wife, mother, *and* daughter. Therefore, the professional choices that women make, or choose not to make, are a reflection of inherent fears. To combat those fears, the author provides a case for "faking it until you make it." Exuding confidence outwardly will work to build confidence internally. Such confidence is necessary for women to get ahead and squash their fears.

In a notable study at Columbia University, the author describes a case that polled students on the professional story of "Heidi" and "Howard" (F. Flynn, personal communication, June 22, 2011 in Sandberg, 2013). The study involved the profile of a business person and polled students on their impressions of each. Of those surveyed,

more preferred “Howard” to “Heidi” as a potential colleague. However, the two stories were identical with the only difference being gender. The inferences that can be made suggest that positive, appealing traits in a man are unsuitable for a woman in business. Being smart can hold negative connotations for women, and being nice may be viewed as appropriate for those outside the realm of leadership roles. Therefore, women have to balance being both smart and nice.

Another key issue is that today’s women tend to de-emphasize their careers due to their aspiration to have a family. However, the author notes that some women start scaling back before they have a child, before becoming pregnant, and sometimes even before having a significant other. While there is a time to scale back, the author urges women for that time to wait until after they have a child. Too frequently women pass over opportunities for unspoken reasons, and those reasons tend to be family-related. Planning too far ahead and scaling back in certain areas of life prematurely leads to lost opportunities. Subsequently, lost opportunities have the potential to result in lost financial gain (e.g. higher salaries, promotions). Hence, women must *lean in* to opportunities as they become available. As well, they should feel empowered to ask for help as obstacles present themselves.

These observations, amongst others, are made by Sandberg to both educate readers as well as advise women how to get ahead. Generally speaking, being one’s own champion is a key pillar to successful career management. *Leaning in* to the jobs women have, having an evolving 18-month plan, finding a great mentor, having a great support system at home, and supporting other women in business are all aspects that can empower women to succeed both professionally and personally.

## Analysis and evaluation

Sandberg makes various observations with the intent to make the audience question preconceived notions about women in business. One such observation is the elimination of the “corporate ladder.” The author notes that the average American worker holds roughly 11 jobs between ages 18 to 46 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012 in Sandberg, 2013). The notion of joining an organization and staying there until retirement is now considered antiquated. Thus, the author provides a case for no longer viewing one’s career as a journey up a ladder, but instead it should be considered a climb on a jungle gym. This metaphor more accurately depicts modern-day career paths. While a ladder has only one way to the top, the majority of successful business people today advance through a variety of avenues.

This metaphor applies to both men and women and provides them with some flexibility; it advises them that one wrong turn does not determine long-term success. Along the same lines, the jungle gym model can be positively viewed by women contemplating leaving or re-entering the workplace due to family obligations. Considering the business world as a jungle gym encourages women to be less fearful about leaving the workforce for any period of time, and it also invites them to be less fearful of returning. Again, one’s initial path does not determine one’s ultimate success. Therefore, in agreement with the author, the jungle gym model feels modern and applicable to today’s business professionals.

As one “jumps” around on the career jungle gym, the author also advocates having a mentor. To find a mentor, the relationship should form organically, and it should form out of the mentor’s personal desire to see the mentee succeed. The author

mentions that if one has to ask someone to be his/her mentor, then the two probably are not a good match. Though the sentiment is understood, it is very rare that two people find each other without aid and bond naturally as mentor/mentee. Given the author's notable success, several individuals have approached her after an initial introduction to form a mentor/mentee relationship. While one can see that this relationship of two virtual strangers does not equal a meaningful relationship, it does support the author's suggestion that women need to advocate for themselves. Though asking a stranger to be a mentor is not a good idea, speaking up and asking for help can be critical tools to success both professionally and personally. Therefore, this leadership advice is contradictory and moderately confusing. Seeking out a mentor, however necessary, should be deemed acceptable.

As previously stated, Sandberg feels that "having it all" is a myth. Consequently, the author takes to heart a poster hanging at the Facebook headquarters that states, "Done is better than perfect." Trusting in this motto helps to diminish unrealistic and unachievable goals, and it tells women to stop trying to be perfect in all aspects of life. Though many aspire to be the perfect mother, wife, *and* employee, ultimate perfection is not attainable. The author notes 12-hour (or longer) work days considered "normal" in her early years at both Google and Facebook but later learned to compromise. Being home at a reasonable hour to have dinner with her family has become a priority. Learning the lesson that being engaged in family life doesn't equate to being a bad employee has been imperative to the author, though she notes that she continues to struggle balancing the two.

Leaving work at a reasonable hour does not mean that someone is a bad employee, does not care about their job, nor does not aspire to lead. Though these are challenging lessons to learn, logging in more hours, sometimes just sitting at one's desk to stay until after the boss is gone, is not an optimal use of time. The idea of having a personal life should not hold a stigma and encourages both men and women to "unplug". It also validates the idea of flex time, which is becoming increasingly popular. Given the number of commitments that people balance today, both personal and professional, more people need to work with some level of flexibility of where and when. Then again, a serious issue exists of *never* being able to unplug, where employers can always connect with their employees via modern technology. However, it is the individual's job to know when to step back and how to balance all of life's obligations. As well, it is the individual's job to know that a healthy work/life balance should not impede future success.

In closing, Sheryl Sandberg takes on the complex issues that women face in business and offers practical suggestions to both manage careers and not be afraid to reach for their goals. Furthermore, she enlightens men that acknowledge the challenges women face and who seek to make the workplace an equal playing field; the author provides examples and offers relevant advice for men that lead women on how to better work with their female counterparts. While the subject matter may seem like it is biased, a women's leadership book written by an exceptional businesswoman, the author seeks to make claims supported by hard facts and scientific data. As well, the examples given include personal ones as well as numerous ones supported by her peers. Finally, women must seize their opportunities and truly *lean in* without fear or reservation.

Aiming for perfection is not achievable, and today's women need to accept that as they navigate their professional and personal lives.

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