Lean In
Women, Work, and the Will to Lead

By Sheryl Sandberg
While women in the United States and the rest of the developed world are now better off than at any time in history, “men still run the world,” says Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer at Facebook, and previously a senior executive at Google and the United States Treasury Department.

For Sandberg, a watershed moment took place while at Google, when she discovered that Google had no reserved parking for expectant mothers. Pregnant at the time, she realized that the need for reserved parking simply hadn’t occurred to any of the male executives. None of Google’s pregnant employees had the confidence or seniority to raise the issue. “Having one pregnant woman at the top ... made the difference,” says Sandberg.

In the early 1980s, the percentage of college graduates that were female, edged over 50%. But
while women have gradually advanced over the past few decades, continuing to earn more college degrees, securing more junior-level jobs and gaining entrance into areas previously dominated by men, the number of women in leadership roles with American corporations hasn’t really changed. Of the Fortune 500 CEOs, only 21 are women. In the US, 14% of executive officer positions and 17% of board seats are held by women.

“While women continue to outpace men in educational achievement, we have ceased making real progress at the top of any industry,” says Sandberg. She explains that there are two kinds of barriers preventing women from reaching the top. First are external barriers, including discrimination, harassment, limited childcare and parental leave options, difficulty in finding mentors and sponsors, and the need for women to prove themselves more exhaustively than their male colleagues.
The second kind of barrier is internal. “We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in,” says Sandberg. She describes these external and internal barriers as two “fronts,” and says women need to push for progress on both of them. The important thing about the internal barriers, though, is that they are within the control of women, and can be overcome and changed by women themselves. Once women vanquish these internal barriers, and gain greater power, they can tackle the external barriers more effectively. By encouraging women to “lean in,” Sandberg’s goal is no less than to re-spark the women’s revolution and achieve equality for all.

In *Leaning In*, Sandberg outlines 10 workplace issues that can challenge women and offers
practical solutions to deal with them. We’ll explore each of these issues in more detail.

1. The Leadership Ambition Gap: What Would You Do if You Weren’t Afraid?

It’s a fact that more men than women aim for leadership roles. Sandberg says that professional ambition is a given for men and expected by society, but it’s not always a given for women. Studies of people in the workforce, recent college graduates, and even kids in middle school consistently show that fewer females want to take on leadership roles.

Why? There are many factors that feed into this divide.

Young women entering the workforce today know that “doing it all” is just not realistic, having watched their own mothers struggle to balance work and home.
Boys and girls are treated differently, even as infants, with mothers hugging their girls more and encouraging their boys to play by themselves. Cultural messages are also at work. For example, in 2011 Gymboree sold onesies that said “Smart like Daddy” and “Pretty like Mommy.”

Strong girls are “bossy,” while strong boys are leaders. Teachers let boys interrupt, but scold girls for calling out answers. “Young women internalize societal cues about what defines ‘appropriate’ behavior, and in turn, silence themselves,” says Sandberg.

These gender stereotypes are reinforced throughout our adult lives. Men are recognized - and rewarded - for being aggressive, but for women, aggression is perceived as a negative trait. Women see that it’s mostly men who hold the leadership positions, and that men usually make
more money than women, so they expect things to be this way.

All of these things contribute to the leadership ambition gap, but Sandberg says that fear is what’s at the root. Fear of being disliked, being perceived negatively, or failing - at work, or in being a wife or a mother at home. She encourages women to face this fear - to ask themselves, “What would I do if I weren’t afraid? And then go do it.”

2. Sit at the Table

Women tend to underestimate themselves. This can lead to the “imposter syndrome,” where successful people feel like they are perpetuating a fraud. While both men and women fall prey to the syndrome, women tend to be more limited by it. Sandberg recounts a meeting she organized, where four female attendees chose to sit at chairs against the wall, rather than at the board table.
with the rest of the attendees, who were male. Sandberg invited them to move to the table, but they declined - even though they were every bit as qualified as the others at the table.

Women are often hard on themselves, and tend to internalize failure and insecurity. The larger world can be harder on women, too - a New York Times article described Sandberg as being “lucky” to have risen to the COO position, a description rarely applied to male executives profiled in the newspaper.

“A lack of confidence can be a self-fulfilling prophecy,” says Sandberg. She explains how realizing that intense feelings of failure or self-doubt are a distortion, rather than a reflection of the truth, can open the door to a helpful emotional adjustment. “Fake it till you feel it” actually works.

“Feeling confident - or pretending that you feel
confident - is necessary to reach for opportunities.” While at Google, Sandberg noticed that men were the ones going after new jobs and opportunities. Women were more cautious. But “It is hard to visualize someone as a leader if she is always waiting to be told what to do,” she says.

3. Success and Likeability
Our evaluations of others are based on stereotypes: men are decisive and driven; women are sensitive and communal. But all the traits that contribute to professional achievement fall into the male column in this stereotype.

The Heidi/Howard study, conducted by Columbia Business School professor Frank Flynn and New York University professor Cameron Anderson, tested perceptions of men and women in the workplace. Students were presented with an identical business case that described the
achievements of either Heidi or Howard, and asked for their impressions. Heidi and Howard were judged equally competent, but Heidi was perceived as selfish, while Howard was likeable.

“Success and likeability are positively correlated for men and negatively correlated for women,” says Sandberg. Competent, successful women are perceived as acting like men. “And if [a woman] acts like a man people dislike her.”

Sandberg says that she has always been cautious about being branded too smart or successful. For girls, being smart can be a turn-off for boys.

Deborah Gruenfeld, professor of leadership and organizational behavior at Stanford, says that women are expected to be nice and nurturing, and if they behave in ways that suggests otherwise (“bossy,” decisive, demanding), it makes others uncomfortable.
What makes it even harder is that most people want to be liked. And being liked is necessary for success. Sandberg calls this a double bind, where women need to be liked, but also need to be competent (and therefore possibly disliked). She recounts that she felt nervous negotiating with Mark Zuckerberg over her compensation package at Facebook, because she didn’t want to lose her chance at the job.

She suggests these tips for women when negotiating compensation:

• use “we” instead of “I” where possible - “We had a great sales quarter” instead of “I had a great sales quarter”

• tie into the needs of all women, and preface the negotiations by mentioning that since women typically get paid less than men, you are going to negotiate rather than
accept the first offer

• justify an increase by referring to an “authority” - “My manager suggested .... “ or “My research shows that jobs in this industry typically ... “

And in general, learn to withstand criticism. In her first review with Mark Zuckerberg, about six months into her new role at Facebook, Zuckerberg told Sandberg that her desire to be liked would limit her - you can’t please everyone if you want to make real changes.

4. It’s a Jungle Gym, Not a Ladder

Don’t view your professional journey as ascending a ladder, says Sandberg. Ladders are too limiting - you can only move up or down, or off. Instead, consider the progress of your career as making your way around a jungle gym, with “dips, detours and even dead ends.” Like many
top execs today, Sandberg didn’t chart out the steps in her professional career. She didn’t see herself at Facebook. (Mark Zuckerberg was only seven years old when she left college.) Be open to opportunities that will widen your experience and exposure.

Often women are more risk-averse than men. At Hewlett-Packard, an internal study showed that women will apply for a job when they are 100% qualified, while men will apply if they have 60% of the required qualifications. Many women think that they’ll be recognized for their hard work, so they don’t advocate for themselves. Don’t wait for power to be offered, says Sandberg - reach out for new challenges and roles.

She suggests having two types of goals: a long-term goal, and an 18-month plan. A long-term goal might be to work in a particular field. An
18-month goal should zero in on two areas: setting targets for what your teams should accomplish in that time, and setting personal goals for learning new skills. Choose something that you’ve never done, or are afraid to try. Sandberg turned to a communications coach to help her become less talkative - a trait that had hindered her in negotiating deals while at Google.

And in making a decision about which company to work for, there’s only one criterion - that company’s potential for growth. It doesn’t matter what title you start out with - if the company’s growing, there will be the opportunity to take on greater responsibilities.

5. Are You My Mentor?
Sandberg’s high-profile mentors - Larry Summers (most recently director of the White House National Economic Council under President
Obama), Don Graham (CEO and Chairman of The Washington Post Company), and Pat Mitchell (President and CEO of The Paley Center for Media and the former President and CEO of PBS) - have played an important role in her career. But she cautions women to make sure there’s a connection before seeking a particular mentor. Asking a stranger to be a mentor is rarely successful.

It’s not necessary to label the relationship, either. Asking a senior executive for advice on a specific issue, or getting their take on a concern can be very helpful. Many executives will guide high-potential employees, providing direction and advice, without ever formalizing the relationship.

Some mentees make the mistake of using their mentors to vent, or blow off steam. Mentors aren’t meant to be therapists, and this is a good way to
jeopardize a mentor’s support.

Sometimes senior men are uncomfortable mentoring junior women, in case the relationship looks more like dating than something strictly professional. But given the scarcity of women executives, senior males must find a way around their discomfort. For example, when at Goldman Sachs in the ‘90s, Bob Steel decided that he would only meet with employees, male or female, at lunch or breakfast. That way, he wouldn’t have to worry about the implications of being seen with a woman at dinner.

Other organizations are moving to formalize mentorship programs, giving structure to the relationship, and removing any stigma from the senior male/junior female relationship. Studies show that women who find mentors in formal programs are 50% more likely to be promoted than
women who find mentors outside of a program. Peers can also provide good advice and support. In considering her move to Facebook, Sandberg’s peers recognized the potential, while some of her older mentors counseled against the move.

6. Seek and Speak Your Truth
Women sometimes hold back in speaking up at work, afraid to be perceived as critical, or not supportive of the team. But sharing the truth is important. At Facebook, Sandberg encourages employees to tell her if she’s made a bad decision. “If they hear a bad idea, even one they believe is coming from me or Mark, they should either fight it or ignore it.”

Many women also try to suppress their emotions in the workplace. Sandberg believes that workplaces benefit when people show and share emotion. While she wouldn’t encourage women to make a
routine of it, she has cried at work, several times, and hopes that crying in the office will someday be perceived “as a simple display of authentic emotion,” instead of the embarrassment it’s mostly seen as today.

This suppression of emotions can apply to men too. But showing emotion can result in more “authentic communications,” like those shown by Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz. When he returned to the helm of Starbucks in 2008, after stepping down as CEO in 2000, he teared up at a global managers’ meeting, explaining that by departing, he’d let the company down. Employees warmed to Schultz and the challenge and orchestrated a turn-around that saw Starbucks eventually realize its highest earnings ever.

7. Don’t Leave Before You Leave
Many women start to scale back at work long
before they actually have children. They decide not to aim for a partnership, or a demanding job, in the expectation that when they do have a family they’ll require jobs with more flexibility.

Sandberg calls this “leaving before you leave,” and says many women start accommodating their future families years before they even exist. So by the time a woman has a baby, her career may already have been stalled. As a result, the job a woman returns to after having a baby may be less challenging and fulfilling than it would have been otherwise with fewer opportunities for advancement.

“The months and years leading up to having children are not the time to lean back, but the critical time to lean in,” she says.

Women still do most of the caring for children, and more women than men leave the workforce
to care for their families. Many highly-educated women married to men who work long hours leave the workforce at this time. This is one of the main causes of the leadership gap.

Studies show that leaving the workforce for one year will lower women’s annual earnings by 20%, and by 30% when leaving for two or three years.

A mistake that professional women can make is to measure the cost of childcare against their current salary. Instead, compare the cost against your future salary, and consider the cost an investment in your career.

When it comes to your career, “Keep a foot on the gas pedal until a decision must be made,” says Sandberg.

8. Make Your Partner a Real Partner

When Sandberg had her first baby, within a few months she and her husband had fallen into
traditional gender roles, with her taking on most of the responsibility for caring for the baby. This is typical; studies show that even today, where both partners work full-time, the woman does 40% more childcare, and about 30% more housework. For Sandberg, family care evened out when her husband changed jobs and started working closer to home, and they are now closer to a 50/50 division of labor.

Some women inadvertently discourage their partners from contributing, when they criticize them for doing things wrong, or delegate tasks instead of setting up as a partnership.

Society expects women to take on more of the childcare, and expects men to have the more demanding jobs. For some successful professional women, this translates into having to worry about a husband’s ego when she out-performs the man.
At the same time, most successful female leaders depend on supportive partners. Out of the 28 women who have been CEOs of Fortune 500 businesses, 26 were married.

“If you want a fifty-fifty partnership, establish that pattern at the outset,” says Sandberg. Research shows that this equal division of responsibilities results in happier relationships. It also models equal relationships for children.

9. The Myth of Doing It All
Many working mothers compare themselves to their male colleagues, who tend to have fewer family responsibilities, and also to their stay-at-home mom counterparts, and view themselves as failing in both areas. But being able to “have it all,” or “do it all,” was a myth in the early days of the women’s movement, and it’s a myth today.

One of Sandberg’s favorite lines from a
motivational poster is, “Done is better than perfect.” When she had her first child, she worried that, once back at work, she wouldn’t be able to maintain her usual 12-hour days at Google. When she cut back on her hours, she came up with creative ways to mask the fact to employees that she was no longer coming in at 7 am, such as scheduling early morning meetings in other buildings. “Looking back, I realize that my concern over my new hours stemmed from my own insecurity,” she says.

When she realized that she didn’t have to put in such long days, she became more efficient, streamlining meetings, and finding ways to be more productive while at work.

For many women, there is a fear that they’ll be seen as putting their families ahead of careers or work responsibilities. And then there’s the reverse:
working women who feel guilty about not spending more time with their children. But studies show that children who are cared for by others do not develop any differently, in cognitive and other skills, than those cared for by their mothers.

“Guilt management can be just as important as time management for mothers,” says Sandberg. Identify your real priorities, at home and at work. Don’t try to do it all. Instead, aim to do what is most important for your family and you.

10. Let’s Start Talking About It
While a strategy of fitting in has worked for the first waves of women to work for corporate America, it is not advancing the progress of women overall. “Instead, we need to speak out, identify the barriers that are holding women back, and find solutions,” says Sandberg.

For many women, this is hard. Bringing up gender
issues in the workplace can result in things getting worse, rather than better. Many men are afraid to raise gender issues as well, meaning that the discussion often gets shut down before it starts.

We need to talk about it, says Sandberg. “We need to talk and listen and debate and refute and instruct and learn and evolve.” Men need to be aware of the internal barriers that might lead women to sit against the wall, instead of at the table, and encourage women to come forward.

Managers, both men and women, can be more aware when women “step back” in meetings, and use their managerial authority to pointedly silence interrupters. But this can backfire. “A manager who is trying to help a female employee by pointing out a gender-driven style difference could be charged with discrimination for doing so,” she says.

We’re all biased when it comes to gender
differences, says Sandberg. Thinking that we are not can make things worse, leading to a bias blind spot that makes us think we are objective when we really need to correct for our own particular bias. We need, “to speak up about the impact gender has on us.” Biases exist, and we have to figure out how to understand and deal with them, in order to progress toward an environment that delivers more equality to all.

**Working Together Toward Equality**

Women in the workplace are sometimes more critical of female executives than the men are, feeling that they must compete against each other. They’ve internalized sexism, and are reflecting it back.

Women may also engage in the “mommy wars” - pitting the working moms against the stay-at-home moms, stirring up feelings about the validity of life
choices.

More and more, though, women are helping each other. Many high-level women make it a point to help other women develop talents and careers. And many families are now operating outside of traditional gender roles, with a father taking on more of the childcare role, helping kids to see that there are plenty of options.

But we need to keep pushing since there is so much more that needs to be changed. Says Sandberg: “I believe that if more women lean in, we can change the power structure of our world and expand opportunities for all.”