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The Sheryl Sandberg Question: To Lean In... Or Not?

02/26/2013

Sheryl Sandberg is about to make a whole lot more money. Not just from sales of her new book *Lean In*, but from mega-speaking fees from the big corporations who will book her to rev up their female troops to "lean in," AKA work harder.

Ever since I saw her famous TED talk, I have credited Sandberg's philosophy even as my own speeches espoused the value of 'taking time' to find one's calling (exactly what big companies don't want employees to hear.) That's why she is worth \$500 million and I'm... not.

Soon, Sandberg plans to reach past the podium and coach women through her "Lean In Circles." I wonder how many takers she will find -- and whether the smarter advice is to "lean back" first.

Who is the target of her crusade? My guess is a well-educated, well-funded and well-disciplined 28-year-old women with ambition to spare -- and a slew of self-help books on her iPad. She is new enough to life's bumps to imagine a smooth road to success if only she drives hard enough. Perhaps "lean in circles" will stoke the fires for her generation, as consciousness-raising groups did for mine. Millenials might emerge with sharper negotiating skills and a new equality will reign.

But with a career spent listening to women, I have my doubts. Like Sandberg, but without the double Harvard degrees or private jet, I've lived the corporate good life, been CEO of a large ad agency, run my own company advising big brands like hers, written four books about women including a NYT bestseller, and spoken around the world. Now, I'm raising money for women's causes and performing my one-woman play about my mother. After almost 40 years, work is still rewarding. But it wasn't always that way.

My sparkly resume doesn't include the years of burning out, not having kids, losing my parents or having breast cancer. Those are the missing pages in my own "lean in" story. I made a choice midway through to lean back and rewrite my life. But according to the rules of Sandberg's circles, only happy endings need apply. No Debbie Downers in the boardroom, please.

Sandberg speaks from the shiniest spotlight of a corporate celebrity. Who wouldn't lean in? Work today comes with longer hours, stretched by the techno-leash and aggravated by shrinking salaries, slimmer benefits and crabbier bosses who are overworked too. The gilded glamour jobs vanished like the Armani pantsuits of the '90s.

Somewhere along the way, we faced what we lost by leaning in too hard, for too long. There's a reason that college women grill me about work-life balance. They are smarter than we were. They won't blindly throw their lives into overdrive or risk smacking into a wall. While sadly, my peers sometimes see them as "uncommitted," I see this generation as smartly aware and wary of the corporate promise of fulfillment.

It's great that Sandberg is giving young women the gipper call to give it their all. I leaned in and I am glad that I did. But the best decision I ever made was to "lean back" and take a look at the price I paid. I have been more successful... and happier... ever since.