

LEAN OUT

THE TRUTH ABOUT WOMEN, POWER,
AND THE WORKPLACE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of nonfiction. The events and experiences detailed are all true and have been faithfully rendered as I have remembered them, to the best of my ability. Though conversations come from my keen recollection of them, they are not written to represent word-for-word documentation; rather, I've retold them in a way that evokes what was said, in keeping with the nature and character of the events. I have also changed the names and identifying characteristics of my colleagues, as well as the names and features of the projects that I worked on, in order to protect individuals' privacy and to avoid the possible disclosure of confidential information.

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A Series of Fortunate Events

On a Sunday afternoon in March 2016, I hit send on an email to Sheryl Sandberg, setting in motion a series of events that ended eighteen months later, when I was fired from my job at Facebook.

To explain, I first need to go back to the fall of 2014, which was my eleventh year working at Google. At the time, the company was organizing a spate of thought leadership and training programs aimed at helping their female employees succeed. I've always been passionate about helping women, so naturally I got very involved in these efforts and attended everything Google offered on the topic. But after a while, I became disenchanted. The discussions never seemed to be real or honest, and they lacked any sort of practical application to our daily lives.

I decided to write my own perspective on the topic, and a month later, I was in a small conference room, delivering the presentation to a handful of women, most of whom were my close friends. Over time, however, more women showed up, and it grew from one presentation into a series of lectures that I presented at other companies and even a few colleges across New York City. By the middle of 2015, I'd presented

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to more than a thousand people, and this little side project was bringing significant meaning into my life. And it was right around this time that I got the call from Facebook.

Until then, I'd never considered leaving Google. Although there were ups and downs, as with any job, for the most part I was happy, and my friends there were like family. But the more I talked to Facebook, the more it seemed like a perfect move. Less than half the size of Google, it was growing fast, with plenty of opportunities to work on exciting projects. And above all, this was the birthplace of *Lean In*. Would anywhere else on earth be more likely to support my work on the women's leadership series?

As a single mom of three kids, I did have a lot of important things to consider before making such a big change. Being rash and impulsive, I disregarded most of them. This was Facebook. Obviously, they would understand and support my need for flexibility. Besides, nothing was going to crush my fangirl dreams of being discovered by Sheryl Sandberg, who, blown away by my brilliance and passion for helping women, would give me a one-way ticket out of my day job. I started Facebook in February 2016, eager, optimistic, and blissfully unaware of the downward spiral in which I was about to step.

Sheryl Sandberg and I are from the same hometown: a small Jewish community in an unincorporated part of Dade County, Florida, about halfway between South Beach and Fort Lauderdale. We went to the same grade schools and grew up in homes less than half a mile apart. The parallels continued into adulthood, as we joined Google in its halcyon days before they went public, pursued our mutual passion for helping women, and now, both worked at Facebook.

For all the things we had in common, there were just as many we did not. The most obvious being that she was a billionaire and the COO of one of the world's largest corporations, and I was nowhere

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close to being either of those things. There were also the minor details: she had two Harvard degrees, launched Google.org, served as chief of staff for the United States secretary of the Treasury, founded LeanIn.org, served on the boards of Disney and Starbucks, was named one of *Time*'s most influential people, and was designated *Forbes*' fifth most powerful woman in business. I, on the other hand, went to University of Florida, where my biggest accomplishment upon graduating was not having died of alcohol poisoning.

Despite the childhood and career connections, Sandberg had no idea who I was. We were ten years apart in school, and she was ten layers above me at Google, so we'd never met. Over the years, I thought about reaching out to her to introduce myself but could never muster the courage, and I wasn't quite sure what I'd say anyway.

My first week at Facebook, however, I found out she'd be speaking onstage at our sales conference the following week in San Francisco. Figuring this was the perfect opportunity to reach out, I drafted an email introducing myself, and asked if she could spare a minute to meet in person. After writing and rewriting the email at least a hundred times, I nervously hit send. And a couple of hours later, when she replied with a gracious offer to meet for twenty minutes before she took the stage at the conference, I was elated.

The next week I found myself waiting outside the stage area for Sandberg's assistant, Paige, ten minutes before we were scheduled to meet. Trying to be cool and casual, but failing miserably, I fidgeted with the hem of my dress and silently recited Stuart Smalley affirmations about being good enough and smart enough. Paige finally showed up and lead me through a maze of hallways to the green room. When we arrived, Sandberg turned to me and smiled. I remember thinking she was much smaller than I'd expected. I mean, I wasn't necessarily picturing Hulk Hogan in a dress, but I guess I just assumed

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she'd be more physically imposing. But she was petite, and I felt like a bumbling, awkward giant. Then, I made it way worse: I went in for a hug. I know. *I know*. And it was just as bad as you might expect—the half-second embrace was weird and cold, and I felt as though I'd violated her before we even sat down.

She pointed to a couple of steel folding chairs, and we sat across from each other as she asked a couple of questions about my time at Facebook thus far. Still recovering from the hug, I pretended to be cool and in control, while she pretended to be interested in what I was saying. Grasping for some kind of human connection, I dropped a few names of people we knew from back home, trying to spark more gossipy-girlfriend-type of conversation. This, too, went as badly as you might expect, as things were only getting more awkward. I was about to give up when the subject changed, and she made a passing reference to the career challenges of single moms. Ah, something real! I snapped back into my normal self, and for the next few minutes, rambled on about the hard times in my life and what they taught me about perseverance and confidence and self-respect.

As I continued, she leaned toward me, her eyes widening and head nodding.

Wait. Could it be . . . ? I think . . . I think she's into me.

Feeling emboldened, I continued on about being grateful for the hard times in life because they made me feel as if I could do anything (except get promoted, but we'll get to that later on). As I became more myself, she seemed to get more real too, and at one point stopped me midsentence.

“Do you mind if I get my laptop for a second? Sorry, but this is really powerful stuff, and I just want to write it down.”

Um, what? This could not be for real. But it was, and for the rest of

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the meeting, Sheryl Sandberg went on to *transcribe* everything I was saying. *OMG, she really does care about what I have to say!* Well, sort of.

“I have to get onstage now, but listen—I’m writing a book on resilience and think you and your story would make a perfect feature. Do you mind if my researcher emails you to set up an interview and discuss next steps?”

“That would be great! Thank you, Sheryl!” Clearly, we were going to be besties now; first names seemed appropriate.

I was on cloud nine. Just seven days at Facebook, and I had impressed Sheryl Sandberg. I fantasized about all the brilliant things I was going to contribute to her book, how she’d recognize my potential and pluck me from corporate obscurity.

After the conference I returned to New York and plunged myself into the new job. I hadn’t heard back from Sandberg or her book researcher, so I put it out of my mind and focused on work. Things went smoothly for about two weeks, when suddenly, I became a victim of workplace bias. I don’t mean bias toward men, but toward those in power. More specifically, toward the whims of a powerful female executive named Kimberly, who, for a reason I couldn’t quite discern, was silently enraged that I existed.

My third week on the job, we had our first meeting together, just the two of us. Up to that point, I had held Kimberly in the highest regard. She had also worked at Google, and although I didn’t know her directly, she had a tremendous reputation and was well liked by almost everyone.

Kimberly was also the person who’d finally convinced me to join Facebook. During the recruitment process, she had showered me with outlandish compliments and knew exactly what to say to make me feel like . . . she gets me. Her enthusiasm and flattery were so over-the-top they bordered on cartoonish, but all my ego could see was validation

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and the promise of accolades on the horizon. At one point, I did hear a small voice in my head whisper, “*She doesn’t even know you,*” which in retrospect was a big, flashing red warning sign sent from my subconscious. But my ego persisted, “*She must have heard about how great I am from George,*” a mutual friend who now worked for her. So humble of me.

I approached Kimberly outside the conference room for our meeting, and right away I sensed that her attitude toward me had changed. As the door clicked shut behind us, the fake, perfunctory smile vanished from her lips, and a look of icy annoyance flashed across her face. Outside that door, where the world was watching, she was one person. Sitting across from me, where I was the only witness, she had transformed into someone entirely different.

It reminded me of Large Marge from *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure*. That scene haunted me as a child. The image of her human mask being ripped off and her eyeballs shooting out like yo-yos from alien-like sockets. I understood Pee-Wee’s terror as he watched her transformation. Some of the scariest moments in life are when we find out we’re not dealing with the person we thought we were.

I’ll never forget the smug look of anticipation on Kimberly’s face as we sat down. Whatever she was about to say, she was going to enjoy it.

“Marissa, I’m going to give you a little bit of feedback.”

Hmm. That was odd, considering I’d worked there for a hot minute and still didn’t know how to use Outlook. But sure, I’m always open to feedback!

“We hired you because we know you’re good. So, you don’t have to go around trying to prove it to everyone. You’re coming off as frazzled and out of control.”

The gut punches kept coming. I ask too many questions. I’m never happy. I’m trying too hard. I spoke up just once during all of this, to

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ask, “Are there specific examples you can share that would help me understand why I’m appearing this way?”

She paused, started to go in one direction, then seemed to change her mind. With a dismissive brush of her hand, she answered, “Look, Marissa, you’re just not the same person you were in the interview process.”

Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you! But okay. I got what this was now. After the tongue-lashing, we walked out of the conference room together, and her persona of lovely, benevolent leader returned. Just in time for her to be seen by anyone who actually mattered.

The following months were a blur. I was supposed to be Kimberly’s marketing and strategy partner, but her apparent disdain for me made this impossible. Not about to let a pesky thing like my *humanity* get in the way, she refused to acknowledge my existence or engage me directly. She didn’t reply to my emails and deleted all of our meetings from the calendar, so I found it almost impossible to do my job, or to do anything, really. The problem was compounded by the fact that I was brand-new and didn’t know anybody yet. Kimberly, on the other hand, had a sterling reputation and had been at Facebook for over three years. I tried talking to my manager about what was happening, but she only knew Kimberly’s perky, public mask. She assumed that we were dealing with a normal situation that could easily be solved with mature, grown-up communication.

My attempts to explain what was happening only made me look bad. “She won’t talk to meeeee!” doesn’t come off the same way in the office as it does in the schoolyard. I would start to tell someone, then stop when I heard how petty and immature it made me sound. Panicked about not being able to do my job and not having anyone to confide in about it, I started feeling isolated and depressed.

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One night I went out to dinner with a few of my former Google coworkers. When they asked how things were going at Facebook, I danced around the subject a bit. But as soon as I mentioned Kimberly, my friend Jocelyn interrupted.

“Wait—you’re working with Kimberly? Okay, I know what this is about.”

Jocelyn had spent several years working for Kimberly, and for the majority of that time, things were great. But one day, everything suddenly crumbled. She explained.

“I passed by Donna [Kimberly’s boss] in the café one day, and she asked how things were going on our team. I suspected Kimberly didn’t like it when we talked to people above her, but what was I going to do? Not say anything? Anyway, Donna invited me to sit down with her, and we ended up having a really great conversation over lunch. I never said anything about Kimberly—her name didn’t even come up! But it doesn’t matter. Kimberly hates that shit.”

You know those pictures that were popular in the ‘90s, the ones that looked like a random bunch of colors and lines, but then suddenly, if you looked at it right, a 3-D picture emerged? A second ago it looked like an abstract mess, but now you can see the picture so clearly. That’s what it was like after hearing Jocelyn’s story. Everything snapped together, and I could make sense of why Kimberly’s attitude might have taken such a swift and vicious turn only three weeks into my job. She was probably pissed about my meeting with Sandberg. I had seen the two women scooting around together occasionally, but it never occurred to me that my meeting with her would be seen as some sort of political maneuver. I mean, I went in hoping to gossip like old friends! But it was clear that Kimberly saw it as a power move and a threat to their budding courtship.

From that angle, I could only imagine what she was thinking when

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I told her how well my meeting went: *Who the hell does this girl think she is, meeting with Sheryl in her second week, when I've had to kiss her ass for three years?*

The absurdity of it all was almost amusing, and I felt better now that I could make sense of things. But it didn't change the situation. And in fact, things were only getting worse.

Six months into my time at Facebook, I got a call from HR. Someone, I still don't know who, had told our HR business partner that she or he suspected Kimberly was bullying me, and it was Facebook's policy to investigate any and all claims of that nature.

Kimberly was a powerful executive with friends in high places; there was no way this could turn out well for me. But declining to pursue the matter wasn't an option; my participation was required. To address my concerns, she gave me a rundown of Facebook's anti-retaliation policy, emphasizing that I would not be punished for speaking the truth. I thought about all the people who'd heard that line right before they ended up dead.

I was panicked at first and tried to come up with a strategy. Picturing myself as Bobby Axelrod in the Showtime series *Billions*, I imagined the investigation as a chess game, plotting out my next moves. Then I remembered that I possess neither political savvy nor the ability to keep words inside my brain, which meant there was a 99.9 percent chance I was going to tell them every single honest-to-god detail.

I accepted my fate and surrendered to the situation. At one point, I even became a little excited by the drama of it all. You know how on *Sex and the City*, the girls would meet for brunch and share the gory details of all the messed-up things men had done to them? And how they'd laugh at the ridiculousness, reminding each other that they're amazing women who deserve better? Yeah, well that's what I imagined

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my meetings with HR would be like during the investigation. I know. *I know.*

The investigation concluded eight weeks later, and surprise! It was nothing like my fantasy, and everything like the reality that a sane person would have expected: no evidence of bullying was found.

Two months after the investigation concluded, and only eight months into my time at Facebook, I got the news that I was being put on a performance improvement plan, or PIP for short. PIPs are supposed to help failing employees improve their job performance. But in reality, getting put on one means the company is planning to fire you, and the PIP covers their ass from a legal perspective. My identity as a conscientious, well-respected hard worker was completely unraveled.

The official PIP document included my impending termination date and the key reasons for my poor performance, the biggest of which was my failure to build good relationships with Kimberly and her team. I was incredulous.

I called June, our new HR business partner, and asked how one might go about developing a good relationship with someone who was just investigated for bullying you. That was when I learned that June had no idea about the investigation. She had joined shortly after it concluded, and nobody had filled her in. I summarized what had happened and mentioned the anti-retaliation policy that was supposedly going to protect me from this exact situation. She said to give her some time to learn more about all of this, and she'd follow up with me in the coming weeks.

June was no dummy. She was a seasoned HR professional who knew this was a ridiculous situation and that someone had obviously screwed up. The legal implications were crystal clear. Now she needed time to figure out how to fix it and keep Facebook out of trouble.

My performance made a miraculous recovery after talking to June,

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and like magic, I was off the PIP. I was relieved, but in the back of my mind, I knew I was a dead man walking.

Everyone around me, both at work and in my personal life, encouraged me to leave and find a new job elsewhere. But I'd already decided to ride out the remainder of the year at Facebook and then return to working on my women's leadership series. The course of events forced me to come to terms with what I'd always known but until then refused to admit: I was never going to be truly happy in the corporate world. In my heart, I desperately wanted to pursue my dream of writing a book and being a public speaker. So, I chose to see the time at Facebook as a gift; a chance to maintain an income while I figured out a plan to pursue things that mattered.

One of the first things I did was reread *Lean In* as a starting point for my research. The first time I read it was in 2014, when I'd just begun working on my lecture series. With the excitement and novelty of a new project as the backdrop, I enjoyed the book and admired Sandberg's courage.

But now I was reading it through an entirely different lens, and it led me to a significant realization: *Lean In* was completely antithetical to everything I taught in my workshops and ran counter to everything I believe as a human being. *Lean In* is a battle cry for women to change—to be more assertive, ambitious, and demanding. In other words, it pins the blame for the gender gap squarely on women and offers a prescription on how to behave more like men. I, on the other hand, blamed the failure of our institutions, which haven't changed since the industrial age, a time when few women were in the workforce. I encouraged women to reject the dogma and rhetoric about what they should want and who they're supposed to be, and offered a framework for defining success purely on their terms. The entire spirit of my lectures was irreverent and tinged with a subtle corporate rebelliousness.

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I don't know why the contrast between our approaches was so invisible to me the first time around. But when I read Sandberg's book the second time, the profound irony hit me with a sharp smack to the face. When it came to success, I had been listening to her advice instead of my own. And I was angry. Angry at myself for buying into someone else's idea of who I should be and what my career should look like. Angry because none of it was real, and angry because, deep down, I had known it all along.

That summer I was sitting in an audience at a women's leadership breakfast when Sheryl Sandberg took the stage with none other than Kimberly. They both sat down and began a discussion about female empowerment in the workplace. Kimberly told the audience all the things she does to support the women around her. Not only did she run her office's monthly Lean In Circle, but she always went the extra mile to help women succeed. This seemed to please Sandberg, and the audience politely clapped while I tried not to throw up. I wanted to scream, "None of this is real! This isn't even about women! It's about power and personal agenda." How could I not have seen this all along?

In that moment, I made a promise to myself. Instead of getting angry and self-righteous about the theater of feminism, I would continue sharing my truth and telling my story.

Despite making significant progress on my own book several months after the conference, I was still too terrified to straight-up quit my job. Thankfully, the universe stepped in and did it for me. By "universe," I mean a call from June on my way home from what I thought was a regular day at the office. She said that despite my marginal improvements, I still wasn't meeting the expectations for someone at my level. And with that, I was fired.

Oh, and the anti-retaliation policy? It's protection only lasts so long, and my time had just run out.

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The prologue is meant to give you a sense of who I am and why I wrote this book. But *Lean Out* isn't about Sheryl Sandberg or my time at Facebook. Rather, it's about unraveling the larger dogma and rhetoric currently dominating the national conversation on women and work. My experiences at Facebook and Google are only recounted to support the larger arguments outlined in the following pages.

Feminism isn't about making women stronger. Women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength.

—G. D. ANDERSON

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First, we know we're not crazy, the system is crazy.

—GLORIA STEINEM

Lean Out is a book based on my original lecture series that I started at Google over five years ago. At the time, there was a spate of thought leadership and training programs aimed at empowering women in the workplace. I've always been passionate about helping women, so I got involved in these efforts and attended everything Google offered on the topic. But after a while, I became disenchanted. The discussions never seemed real or honest, and they lacked any sort of practical application to our daily lives. I couldn't connect the dots on how any of it would help us succeed.

Perhaps the most difficult part for me to accept was the incessant stream of advice on how to behave. Instead of encouraging us to lean into our individual strengths and celebrate the value women bring to the table, we were essentially being told to behave more like men. Of course, nobody said it like that. This was the corporate world. Instead, they called it “success behaviors,” which really meant “male behaviors,” but changing the word made everyone feel better. Is there anything *less*

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feminist than implying that men are the “norm” and they’re doing it “right,” and that there’s something inherently less valuable about the way we are as women?

My disenchantment slowly gained strength, and the final straw, the one that originally inspired my lecture series, happened during a women's workshop on "successful communication" at Google, which I attended with my best friend, Carol.

I'd met Carol ten years earlier, when we shared an office shortly after she joined Google, and she is now more like a sister to me than a friend. And yet, despite ten years of deep friendship, I still occasionally bristle at her aloof tone and the directness with which she communicates. For example, when we arrange a girls' night out, our text conversation usually goes something like this:

margarita stat 🍹🍹🍹👯📱🍷🍸🥂🕶️👋 xoxoxo

Carol: k

Me: <Feels pang of anxiety.>

<Wonders if she's mad at me.>

<Takes mental inventory of what I could have possibly done wrong.>

*<Scrolls through calendar to see if I missed
her daughter's birthday.>*

<Checks email to make sure I responded to anything important.>

<Debates whether to be annoying and ask her if she's mad.>

<Realizes I will do this anyway because

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I'm neurotic and obsessive.>

Me: Is everything okay?

Carol: Yes. Restaurant gets busy so pls don't be late.

Me: <Decides she's definitely mad.>

*<Knows I can't ask her again because I'm
already annoying as hell.>*

*<Decides I will get there early and have
a drink before she arrives.>*

<Tries to let it go.>

<Can't let it go.>

Me: 😞

*<Sends emoji with ambiguous expression to communicate
that I'm uncertain of how she's feeling toward
me and that she should throw me a bone, an
emoji, **something**, to make me feel better.>*

Carol: <no response>

Me: <Gives up.>

<Makes note to talk to therapist about my anxiety.>

<Googles "generalized anxiety disorder.">

<Gets anxious from reading the results.>

<Puts phone away and goes back to work.>

<Remembers I hate work and leave early for a drink.>

It's not a stretch to say Carol and I communicate differently. She's direct, to the point, and wouldn't be caught dead using an emoji. I'm more expressive, and you've gotten the point about my relationship to

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emojis. Like most things in life, each communication style has its good and its bad.

Or not. According to the communication workshop we were attending, mine was just bad. Over the two-day course, we learned all the ways women undermine themselves, and how to behave more assertively. We learned that women apologize more often than men, speak more emotionally, and use qualifiers such as “I might be wrong, but,” or “I’m no expert, but.” As the instructor lambasted us for our shameful use of exclamation points and our expressions of icky girl things, like feelings, I turned to Carol and whispered, “You can leave now.” It was clear the instructor’s advice wasn’t aimed at her; she had a black belt in this shit already.

During the next section of the course, we learned that men are more likely to state their views as facts, even when they’re unsure it’s a fact. They communicate with the intention to establish authority (even when they don’t have said authority) and often don’t take the perspective or concern of the listener into account. Shocking, right? I mean, tell us something we don’t know!

Then, our instructor told us something we didn’t know; their bravado and self-aggrandizement are precisely what make men more successful at work. So, if we wanted to be just as successful, we needed to be arrogant too.

Carol sat on one side of me, and on the opposite side of me sat our former manager, Kathy. Kathy was a walking example of someone who communicates with certainty and with the intent to ~~crush your dreams~~ establish authority. Her self-centered arrogance was obvious to everyone except those above her in the food chain. Despite our team being tortured for the duration of her eighteen-month reign, she had just been promoted to the coveted title of senior director. Her natural talent for ~~being an asshole~~ speaking with authority seemed to prove

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our instructor's point: the more assertive, the better, because nice girls don't succeed.

During the two-day workshop, there was no discussion on any positive aspects of what I suppose is a "female" style of communication. It was as if we were better off not even admitting we spoke like *girls*. It felt like shame. Like, don't be so *you*, or you'll never succeed. It was disappointing, but I was starting to understand it.

Having studied influence and communication over a decade, I knew that the most effective styles have a balance of authority *and* warmth. In fact, research has shown that listening, empathy, and emotional intelligence are more important than directness when it comes to being influential and effective.¹ They are traits correlated more highly among women.² So why weren't we teaching *men* to speak more like *us*? Because these traits, while valuable in the real world, don't translate the same way inside the unique power dynamics of a large corporation. A corporate hierarchy has a specific, unspoken set of rules for winning. One of the biggest: pretending to know everything will get you way farther than actually knowing anything. Thank god there are men around to show us how it's done!

The workshop with Carol was the turning point that inspired me to write my own thought leadership perspective for women at the company. I was trying to get across two main points. The first was that the prescriptions for female success hinged on us being more like men, which carried the implication that women are inferior. This was not only insulting, but also wrongheaded. My second point was that the gender gap wasn't caused by dysfunctional women, which almost everyone seemed to be implying, but by a severely dysfunctional system.

A competitive hierarchy is simply a construct, developed by men in the industrial age, to organize and motivate other men, since few

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women were in the labor force at the time. It also originated in an era when most employees produced actual things, for example, assembling parts or building trains or whatever it is people do with things like steel. Employee performance was visible and objective and could be compared easily. Johnny clocked in, pumped out five cars, and clocked out.

Today, of course, the economy is radically different, and output is mostly delivered in the form of intellect, critical thinking, creativity, and imagination, things you can't see, which makes it harder to tell who's doing a good job. In this ambiguity, and without objective means of measuring output, our brains default to what's most visible—like aggression, self-promotion, and self-aggrandizement—using these proxies to determine who's winning. Visible behaviors of this sort are also things like aggression, self-promotion, and self-aggrandizement. These proxies may correlate more highly with men than with women, but they don't correlate with competence.

We're at an incredibly sharp inflection point. Our systems of organizing employees, evaluating performance, and motivating people were built by men, from a male worldview, with the intention of making their male employees more productive. They were built to serve an economy that's long gone. While the whole world, the entire fabric of our economy, and the composition of our workforce have transformed since then, our systems have remained almost exactly the same. The dysfunction also suffocates creativity and innovation and reduces well-being among the country's workforce.

To close the gender gap, what makes more sense: rewiring women's personalities or rewiring the system to better meet their needs?

Problems can only be solved when the root cause is well understood. Therefore, it's critical to examine and test our understanding of why the gender gap exists. But we've mostly jumped straight to

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solutions, without a deep examination into why the problem exists in the first place. We've accepted the reasons we've been given and, as we'll explore later, have been scared to ask why or offer any dissenting opinion. But we must. We must question and poke and prod and examine and inspect—the stakes are too high not to. Without shining a light on where we've gone wrong, there's no hope for getting it right and little chance for real progress.

Part I of the book unravels the major tenets of conventional wisdom on women at work. Chapter 1 explains how we got to this point and why today's feminist leaders have failed to make progress. Chapters 2–6 each debunk a different theory behind the gender gap and the related elements of modern feminism. Part II, chapters 7 and 8, stitches things back together and presents a new model of understanding about what causes the gender gap. Part III, chapters 9 and 10, offers a new way forward for women individually and corporate America at large.

A few important caveats: in different chapters I make the point that generally speaking, there are significant differences in personality and behavior across men and women, and that these differences aren't just a product of culture; they also have a biological component. As such, absolutely *nothing* in this book, in any way shape or form, can be used to explain or argue *anything* related to race, religious, and ethnic diversity, or affirmative action. Ethnicity and gender are two totally different, unrelated things, and cannot be lumped together when it comes to diversity. For example, men and women have different physical organs that produce different levels of certain hormones. Obviously, the same cannot be said when comparing whites and blacks, Hispanics and Asians, Jews and Catholics, and so on. The lack of female CEOs and the lack of black CEOs are born from two distinct and unrelated systemic issues. The latter has to do with socioeconomic, historical, and cultural forces that are outside the scope of this book.

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The second caveat is that the arguments I make about the gender gap are specific to corporate America. Although the corporate gender gap may share similarities with gender diversity issues in other realms, such as politics and small business, it isn't exactly analogous, and therefore outside the scope of this book.

Finally, I recognize that in many ways, what I address in the following chapters are very much "first world problems." At times I feel silly even making arguments around what's best for an elite set of professional women, when far more pressing concerns face this nation's women. But in the end, this is part of my whole point. We've wasted a tremendous amount of time and resources without making substantial progress. By recognizing where we've gone wrong, we can direct our time, money, and attention toward solving problems that will make the greatest impact on the largest number of women.

PART ONE

UNRAVELING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

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*It's hard to go against the beliefs of powerful people.
Therefore, for each of us, as difficult as it may be to
accept, reality has a lot to do with what a lot of us or
some important or powerful people say it is.*

—WILLIAM GLASSER, MD, *CHOICE THEORY*

“Raise your hand if you were called bossy growing up.”

This was the first thing Sheryl Sandberg said as she took the stage in front of two hundred women at a female leadership breakfast in Detroit. Her comment wasn't delivered with the curious tone you'd expect from someone genuinely interested in the answer. Rather, it was said with an expectant nod and knowing look, as if she were really saying, “I know you hated being called bossy as much as I did, so raise your freaking hand!” Which is ironic because she was being kinda bossy about it.

Slumped in the seat next to me, my friend Jackie half-heartedly

raised her hand. Knowing for certain she'd never been called bossy a day in her life, I turned to her and rolled my eyes. With a look of confusion, she crouched down low, cupped her hand over her mouth, and whispered, "What? What did she even say? I wasn't listening."

Sandberg went on to make the point that women are punished for being assertive at work. They are accused of being bossy or too pushy, whereas men who assert themselves are seen as leaders. As a result, we mute ourselves, lower our ambition, and give men the advantage.

Jackie's chronic lack of assertiveness at work could easily be seen as evidence of Sandberg's point. But it wasn't, because it was due to something much simpler than social conditioning. Like so many of us, Jackie didn't *care* enough about her job to be demanding about it.

After the day of empowering lectures on how to be ~~more like men~~ your best self, Jackie and I went out for margaritas. As we plopped ourselves down on a couple of barstools, I asked her why Sandberg always talked about bossiness so much.

"Because she's bossy. And she probably gets a lot of shit for it."

"I get that, but I don't know many other women who struggle with that kind of thing. Why do we always talk about it so much at these women's events?"

"Because bossy people are in charge of them."

Oh, right.

During countless conversations with my girlfriends over the years, we complained about almost everything. Being ashamed of our bossiness was perhaps #827 on the list. You know what was way higher? Being bullied by senior women who felt threatened by other females. That was something I never heard discussed openly, even though it was such a central challenge for many of us. Just bring up the subject among professional female friends, and the conversation can last until the third glass of wine (we'll get to this in more detail later—the

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secret bullying, not the secret alcoholism). Number 4 on the list: we were already the CEOs of our households and often felt unappreciated for our efforts, so, we were ambivalent about seeking promotions; it seemed like *more* responsibility for even *less* acknowledgment.

At Google and Facebook, the gender gap was a hot topic, with a lot of involvement from senior leaders. But across their dozens of women's leadership events over the years, we rarely addressed any of these important issues. Because the events were high-profile, they were co-opted by opportunists who sounded more like corporate cheerleaders giving hollow stump speeches than like people who were interested in solving a real problem. Most women's initiatives devolved into platforms for visibility and a means to advance one's career rather than serving as real change agents. This is perhaps why, despite my strong feminist leanings, I could never identify with the leaders who took the stage on women's issues. And I don't think many other women in the audience did either.

I often wondered what would happen if, instead of the parade of powerful women, a low-level manager juggling a household, kids, a husband, and a personal life took the mic and said, "Raise your hand if you're apathetic about your job because it's all politics and bullshit anyway." Would the majority of us once again have our hands in the air? Perhaps. We can't know for sure because nobody ordinary appears onstage, and it's a question no one ever asks.

The lack of authenticity wasn't isolated to public conversations on female empowerment. It also governed the politics of our individual careers. As I discovered right away, the first rule of being a woman at work is never to tell the truth about all the reasonable feelings and concerns you have about being a woman at work. I've always been bad at knowing what I can and can't say in certain situations, so I learned this painful lesson early and often.

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One such time at Google, I had been in the same job for too long and was itching for a new role at the company. I found one I really wanted and quickly scored an interview with the hiring manager, Elizabeth. Since I came highly recommended by mutual colleagues, and she wouldn't have to spend time training someone new, I figured I was a shoo-in.

Ten minutes into our interview, however, I started to sweat. Cool and confident walking in, I was now fumbling my way through even the softball questions. Elizabeth graduated cum laude from Oxford and had an MBA from Wharton. A former star in the consulting world, she'd trotted the globe telling CEOs how to run their billion-dollar organizations. And all the while, built a side business that helped fund local charities in New York.

This would have been intimidating enough, but what made it worse was her restless energy, endless fidgeting, and frenetic pace of speech. Her brain processed my answers faster than I could talk. I'd barely eke out a sentence before she'd nod vigorously, raise her hand, and signal me to stop.

"I'd say my strengths are in the realm of creativity, since I—"

"Yep. Got it. Makes sense. Okay. Next . . ."

I sank farther down in my chair with each new question.

"How do you define advancement or your career goals overall?"

I gave my standard answer, one I'd given a hundred times before during performance reviews and career planning conversations.

"I don't really see it as a vertical-type ladder, like most people . . ."

I paused, giving her the chance to understand my point before I made it. But she was quiet, so I continued.

". . . I see it as circles of impact. Contributing more to the business or helping more and more people is my signpost for growth and advancement. It's more rewarding than a promotion."

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For the first time since the interview began, Elizabeth sat back and smiled. Obviously, she was impressed with my use of the word *signpost*.

“Marissa, I really love that. I really do—that’s such a great way to think about it.”

I felt about five inches taller.

But it didn’t last, and for the remaining questions we went back to our initial dynamic of brilliant prodigy frustrated by bumbling moron. When it ended, I returned to my desk and told my good friend Greg how badly I had blown it. To salvage any remnants of self-respect, I mentioned the one bright spot.

“There was one thing I said that she actually liked . . .” I went on to tell him about my answer on career advancement.

“Oh my god. You are an idiot. *Who says that?*”

I was incredulous.

“What do you mean? She *loved* it! It was the only thing I said that didn’t make her wonder how the hell I got a job here in the first place!”

Now Greg was incredulous.

“*Of course* she loved it. It means you’re someone she can throw more and more work on without the bother of having to fight for your promotion. You basically just gave her carte blanche to shit all over you.”

“Oh my god.”

“She’s gonna hire you. Watch—I guarantee it. Then you’re really screwed.”

“Shit.”

The truth was, I *didn’t* care about being promoted. The only things that mattered to me were money and compliments. As long as those two things were in ample supply, I was happy. But everyone else seemed to care about promotions so much, I doubted my instincts and figured

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I was being dumb or naive. Or worse. Maybe I was committing the gravest of female professional sins: doubting my ambition. (Gasp!)

I did get the job on Elizabeth's team, and in the years following the spectacular failure of political savvy, I dropped the martyr stuff and tried playing the game on its own terms. I was doing a great job of keeping up the facade and advancing at a decent clip. Everything was going so well that sometimes I even forgot I was acting! My delusional world was a safe, happy place. But like most acts, it eventually ended.

The curtain on my days of deluded ambition closed during a two-year span in which I birthed three children, went through a traumatic divorce, singlehandedly moved the four of us to a new town, and began a new life as a single working mom.

People say women lean out of their careers when they have kids, so they can spend more time with them, or for financial reasons or because of childcare issues. All are absolutely true. But I also think there's another reason. With their time squeezed and their energy scarce, women have a dramatically lower tolerance for politics, power games, and office bullshit.

After the birth of my twins (my older son was only two at the time), I tried figuring out how to handle the magnitude of work to do at home without compromising a promotion I was on track to receive and that was the culmination of many years of hard work. I didn't care about the title change, and I wasn't thrilled about the added responsibility, but I wanted the salary increase. Now that I was running a day care at home while fulfilling the demands of my day job, I was afraid of losing the raise. In a meeting with my manager, Dana, I asked what I'd need to do to stay on track.

Dana said she was planning to submit my promotion after the next review cycle, and that to get it approved, I'd need to start managing people. The peers on my team—the same level as me and all reporting

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to Dana—each managed at least five people, whereas I had no direct reports. I’ve always preferred to do work instead of lording over others who do the work, so I’d made the conscious choice to be an individual contributor instead of a manager. But as Dana explained, Google’s policy prevented me from getting a promotion without having direct reports. The fact that I had the highest scores on our team made no difference. It was a hard-and-fast rule that beyond my level, you were required to manage people.

My valiant effort to hold back a fountain of tears lasted precisely no seconds.

“Dana, of course I want to be promoted. But I also wanna do *work*. Managing a team means I won’t be able get deep in projects or be creative. And frankly, I’m a single mom of three *babies*. I’m responsible for enough people at home; I don’t want to be responsible for people at work. I just wanna *do* work.”¹

It was the only time I was ever direct and honest with a manager about my resistance to being promoted and advancing my career. Although this resistance was likely interpreted as a lack of ambition, it wasn’t. I did have a desire to do interesting work. I wanted to solve problems and make an impact on the business. But managing a team wouldn’t help me do that. My time would be spent managing other people’s work and creating endless PowerPoints to explain to the higher-ups what it was we did at work all day, since most of them had no clue what was going on in their own departments.

Alas, these weren’t the kinds of things people at Google said out loud, lest they ruin their chances to “succeed.”

At Google, if you’re at the same level for too many years without getting promoted, you’re in danger of being put on a path toward the exit door. It doesn’t matter how amazing you are at your job, and how much world-changing work you’re doing. If you haven’t been promoted

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in five years or more, HR starts breathing down your neck. *Why* you haven't been promoted, whether it's a personal choice or not, doesn't matter.² As a result, people go for promotions even when they don't want them, just to save their asses.

Indifference toward climbing the corporate ladder is treated universally as a negative. The entire goal of women's leadership seminars and training programs is to help you advance along with your male peers. Voicing reluctance is tantamount to exposing some secret failing and is a betrayal to our identities as modern, empowered women. As a result, there's a distinct lack of honesty in the public conversation about women at work. Dominated by a singular chorus of voices, we focus on tangential things, like bossiness, instead of addressing more significant issues that affect a larger portion of women. If we aren't honest about what's *actually* going on, how can we ever fix it?

PERSPECTIVE-BLIND MAN

An ancient Indian parable called "The Blind Men and the Elephant" loosely goes as follows:

A group of blind men heard that a strange animal called an elephant had been brought to the town, but none of them were aware of its shape and form. Curious, they said, "We must inspect and know it by touch, of which we are capable." So, they sought it out, and when they found it, they groped about it. The first man, whose hand landed on the elephant's trunk, said, "This being is like a thick snake." To another, whose hand reached the elephant's ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. The third man, whose hand was on the elephant's leg, said, "The elephant is a pillar, like a tree trunk." The blind man

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who placed his hand upon the elephant's side said, "The elephant is a wall." Another, who felt the elephant's tail, described the elephant as a rope. The last man felt its tusk, stating that the elephant was hard and smooth, like a spear.

The story has several different endings. In one version, the blind men discover that they all see the elephant as something very different. Each man believes the others are being dishonest, and the group devolves into violent conflict. Another version ends with the men listening to each other's perspectives, considering all points of view, and therefore seeing the whole elephant. In a third version, a sighted man enters the scene and describes each person's perspective to the group; the men learn they were right about the elephant from their individual perspectives, but wrong from the others'.

Using the elephant as a metaphor for society's understanding of the gender gap, it has been defined by those who only see its trunk. Its causes and solutions have been established by a handful of powerful and elite women who have broken the glass ceiling and whose voices have dominated the public discourse. They all appear to agree on the biggest challenges women face at work and offer the same kinds of advice. Mostly reflecting their individual experiences, the narrative falls along these lines: they were afraid to speak up' they were punished for being bossy or assertive; they navigated work-life balance, they practiced confidence, they defied cultural pressures, and so on.

The homogeneity of the narrative wouldn't necessarily be a problem if other voices were in the mix. But no mainstream books are written by women who are still looking up at the glass ceiling from way down below. We conduct research and polls to capture the spirit of their challenges, but their perspectives aren't represented in the mainstream conversations.

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There is some logic to this. If we're trying get more women to the top of the ladder, shouldn't the authorities be the ones who are there already? What can we possibly learn about the gender gap from a corporate dropout, like me? Am I not the cautionary tale we're trying to avoid?

To take a page from the progressive ethos of Silicon Valley, failure is the best way to learn. In solving problems, failure is far more valuable than success because it shines a light on what's broken. The perspectives of those who've failed to break the glass ceiling have the potential to illuminate where we've gone wrong, and sometimes a new perspective is all it takes to make a leap of progress on a stubborn old problem.

There's also the question of who's best qualified to diagnose a complex societal problem. For instance, if we were trying to solve teen pregnancy, whose perspectives would be more valuable in solving the problem: those who had achieved "success" in delaying pregnancy, or those who hadn't? Would we seek the opinions of women who started nuclear families at the age of thirty, to share their advice on how others can do the same?

Part of the reason we've failed to solve the gender gap is because the spotlight is on the trunk of the elephant, which we've mistaken for the whole animal. Do women who were born to be the boss suffer penalties for acting out of type? Absolutely. But would the majority of women say that being punished for their bossiness is the biggest obstacle to their career success? I doubt it. We've over-indexed our time and attention on problems that plague a smaller subset of women, while ignoring the ones that are more common and perhaps more troublesome. You can only see them if you zoom out to see the whole elephant. And that's why it's so important to hear various perspectives from women on all rungs of the corporate ladder.

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Furthermore, many women don't see their challenges reflected in the modern campaign for gender equality. They don't identify with the women leading the conversation or connect with their message. But attempts to inject alternative points of view are almost always met with scorn and alienation. As a result, many women just keep their opinions to themselves.

The goal of this book is to uncover the truth about the gender gap. I'm not necessarily interested in who's right or who's wrong; I want to know what's true. To do that, I need to take my own advice and look at the elephant from other perspectives. So, before I share my own view on the issue, I wanted to better understand Sheryl Sandberg's. The popularity of *Lean In* has anointed Sandberg as the figurehead of modern-day feminism, and much of the country's understanding of the gender gap is born from the book's perspective.

I obviously can't get inside her brain and know exactly why she sees things the way she does, but I did the best I could to piece together her perspective. I read her speeches and books, watched her videos, and tried seeing success through the lens of her life experiences. Where is it coming from, and how did it shape the message of *Lean In*—and by extension, modern-day feminism?

FROM BLIND MEN TO BLIND SPOTS

Let's home in on the cultural expectation that opened the chapter: bossiness. Throughout *Lean In*, Sandberg recounts several anecdotes about her desire to be in charge as a kid, and the negative reactions she received from those around her, including her siblings. She wrote that when people called her bossy, they didn't mean it as a compliment. Most women have experienced a similar sense of shame; for some it's

liking sex too much, and for others it may be related to their appearance. Put in this light, almost every single woman can understand why Sandberg would feel conflicted about her rise to power. The driving forces that have made her a huge success also violate the deeply held cultural norms that call for women, to quote singer-songwriter Daya, to “sit still, look pretty.” It’s unfair and unfortunate that women are punished time and time again for not being the docile creatures we’re expected to be.

It also makes sense that Sandberg’s solutions to empower women center on the idea that we women must flout society’s expectations and embrace our inner boss. The message sprouts directly from her personal battles with a world that’s not always fair and not always kind to women who want to be in charge. I genuinely sympathize with her position on many levels and feel similarly repulsed by arbitrary expectations that are put on women. My intention isn’t to put her down. Rather, it’s to demonstrate that the issues she’s taking on are not only societal—they’re deeply tied to her identity. When something as personal as identity is at stake, your beliefs become so strong that they turn into convictions.

People holding convictions feel certain about something and get angry if their conviction is questioned. They resist new input almost to the point of obsession. If they’re powerful people, they’ll use their power to prevent opposition and silence dissent. It isn’t because they’re bad people per se, but because the idea that they could be wrong feels too threatening.

According to author and motivational speaker Anthony Robbins, “a conviction has usually been triggered by significant emotional events, during which the brain links up, ‘Unless I believe this, I will suffer massive pain. *If* I were to change this belief, *then* I would be giving up my entire identity, everything my life has stood for, for years.’ . . .

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[Convictions] can be dangerous because anytime we're not willing to even look at or consider the possibility that our beliefs are inaccurate, we trap ourselves in rigidity which could ultimately condemn us to long-term failure."³

That day in Detroit, in front of an audience of two hundred women, Sandberg told us to raise our hands if we were called bossy growing up. The reason she didn't seem interested in our answer is because it was never a question in the first place. It was an attempt to validate a conviction. To deal with the personal shame for her aggression, she likely assumes that every woman deep down is like her, all secretly yearning to be a CEO. But if 80 percent of that room had never been called bossy, what does it mean for her convictions on the gender gap? It means she might be wrong.

There's nothing inherently wrong with someone sharing his or her point of view. After all, that's what I'm doing with this book. And to be fair, it's hard for people to get out of their own perspective and see the bigger picture. But if people are truly and genuinely interested in helping others and solving a problem, then it doesn't matter whether their perspective is too narrow or their opinions are misguided. What matters more is that they encourage debate, tolerate dissent, and remain open to other points of view. A person's behavior in this regard hints at whether he or she is operating with a genuine desire to solve a problem, or with a desire to justify personal convictions and pursue his or her agenda.

Led by Sandberg, the public discourse on modern feminism has many hallmarks of a personal agenda, such as the attempt to control who is allowed to say what. The most notable example comes from LeanIn.org's nationwide campaign to ban the word *bossy*. Yes, an actual ban. On a *word*.

Banning the word *bossy* wasn't an offhand suggestion Sandberg

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made during a stump speech. It wasn't a joke taken out of context during a morning-show interview. It's a real campaign from LeanIn.org, in partnership with the Girl Scouts, to stop people from using the word *bossy* when referring to girls.

Can you think of anything bossier than telling people they can't use a word?

In *Lean In*, Sandberg explains that boys are rewarded for being vocal and opinionated, but women are called bossy. As a result of this double standard, she says that women mute their ambition, and men end up dominating conversations. Worse than the threat of authority figures silencing female voices, Sandberg contends, is that it causes women to "silence themselves."⁴

I'm all for being anti-authority, but what happens when the person drowning out other voices and silencing others is also a woman? What about banning the word *bossy*? Isn't that an example of an authority figure using her position to silence others?

Whether done by a man or a woman, controlling what people say is precisely the problem. It leads to the exclusion of some women in today's feminist discourse and borders on censorship, which is antithetical to the course of human progress.

Looking back on my experience at Facebook, the cultural tone under Sandberg's leadership wasn't exactly one of openness and objectivity. Compared to Google, where disagreement was tolerated if not encouraged, Facebook was drastically more controlling of *any* messaging, regardless of whether it was oppositional. It also wasn't just some abstract and harmless philosophical value. Draconian policies, coupled with vigilant enforcement, ensured a tight rein on messaging with our clients, and occasionally on stuff that wasn't even work related.

To wit, I once posted a story to my personal Medium blog about

how creativity is crushed by linear business planning, and how egos stifle innovation. At the time, I had a total of three blog posts and an impressive global readership of four (50 percent being my parents). The blog only contained my name. It had no other personal information or social media connections, making it impossible to know who I was or where I worked. The word *Facebook* didn't appear in any of the three stories.

Despite the anonymity and nonexistent readership, one day I received an email from Facebook's corporate communications team asking me to delete the posts. I was dumbfounded. How did they even find them? And why would they care about a couple of anonymous posts, rotting in a desolate corner of the internet?

A friend of mine who runs HR at a large bank explained that big companies often employ tech firms to surface anything their employees post on the web. The purpose is for ~~big brother~~ the company to make sure that employees aren't posting anything that could ~~expose the truth~~ put them in legal trouble.

Figuring logic would prevail, I explained to the corporate communications rep that it was impossible to connect my stories to Facebook, that the posts were never shared on social media, and that I didn't actually say anything *about* Facebook. So, there was no reason to take them down. She responded that someone could do a "quick Google search" and connect my "views on big business" to Facebook.

I can only imagine the salacious headline that would have crushed the multibillion-dollar conglomerate:

**Unknown, Unimportant, Midlevel Employee
at Facebook Posts Poorly Written Article
About the Negative Correlation Between
Creativity and Linear Planning Cycles**

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Good job, Facebook! You really dodged the bullet and saved your ass on that one!

I understand that most big companies operate this way, and it makes sense to reduce exposure or liability. But when the intention is to remove *anything* they find disagreeable, even when it has nothing to do with them, it crosses the line from practicality into paranoid censorship.

Company culture is a reflection of its leaders. Sandberg's intent to control the voices of Facebook's employees is similar to her approach on women's issues.

Over the past twenty years, across both private and public sectors, tremendous amounts of resources, time, and attention have been invested in trying to promote more women into power. All the while, the numbers have barely budged. Female CEOs at *Fortune* 500 companies have gone from 0 percent in 1972 to 4.8 percent,⁵ and the wage gap has narrowed from about 73 percent in 1998 to about 80 percent in 2018.⁶ Despite the glacial—if nonexistent—progress, we continue hearing the same rhetoric from the same public figures. If we want to chart a new course, we need more voices and different perspectives, and perhaps most important, we need to sort the rhetoric from reality. We'll begin by reexamining the most well-known and widely accepted theory of modern-day feminism: the "leadership ambition gap."

T W O

FREE TO BE JUST LIKE ME

A girl should be two things: who and what she wants.

—COCO CHANEL

Several distinct agendas or factions of interest dwell under the umbrella of feminism. One of them centers on achieving gender equality through the legal system—equal rights and access to opportunity. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women fought for the right to vote and for equal access to education and the labor force. Whether women *wanted* to vote, *wanted* to go college, or *wanted* to work was tangential. They now had the freedom to *decide for themselves*.

Another type of feminism contends that despite having equal rights and access, women remain oppressed by a patriarchal culture. In this school of thought, equality in America will only be achieved when men and women are the same in all respects. As Sandberg wrote in a Facebook post in March 2018: “An equal world will be one where

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women run half our countries and companies and men run half our homes.”¹

This brand of feminism isn’t in the spirit of its “free to be you and me” predecessors. Rather, its essence is best captured in a quote by Rockefeller president Judith Rodin, used in *Lean In* to reflect Sandberg’s own sentiment: “My generation fought so hard to give all of you choices. We believe in choices. But choosing to leave the workforce was not the choice we thought so many of you would make.”²

In other words, we want you to have the freedom to choose what we think is best.

Today’s feminist leaders define success for women on *their* terms: be just like them and choose the same paths to power. Because the majority of women aren’t like them and don’t define career success the same way, the effort is deemed a failure—of women, of society, of our true potential.

Unlike voting and reproductive rights, solutions for the gender gap can’t be legislated. Women must *decide* they want to work harder for more money and more power, and then make the compromises necessary to go after it. But research shows that the majority of women *don’t* want to be a CEO, and *don’t* aspire to be a corporate executive to the same degree as men.³ How do you close the gender gap and get more female CEOs if the majority of women say they don’t want to be one? One way is to convince them that they can’t possibly know what they want, without someone else’s help.

Enter the leadership ambition gap.

While research consistently shows that men aspire to senior jobs more so than women, the reason why is the subject of much debate. The most popular and widely accepted answer is that leadership roles violate cultural norms for women. *Lean In* was the first to coin this phenomenon as the “leadership ambition gap.”⁴ Serving as the book’s

central thesis, the leadership ambition gap points to many ways that stereotypes and cultural conditioning are to blame for undermining women and their chances for success. For example, professional achievement is expected of men, but for women, it's considered optional at best, and at worst, they're punished for it. While Sandberg acknowledges other factors are at play, she points to culture as the main culprit: "Our desire for leadership is largely a culturally created and reinforced trait."⁵

The essence of the theory is that society rewards women for being warm, polite, compassionate, and nurturing and punishes them for male-dominant behavior, such as aggression, self-aggrandizement, and desire for dominance. The male traits are considered "leadership qualities," and because girls are penalized for exhibiting such qualities, Sandberg argues that they mute their ambition and grow less interested in leadership positions over time.

This cultural conditioning is said to start straight from the womb, where even as babies we treat boys and girls differently. As they grow up, we send our daughters the message that we don't expect much from them in the way of achievement. While we encourage our sons to achieve big things, we don't really care what our daughters do as long as they make us sandwiches and don't interrupt us while we're talking. Or something like that. The theory in short: when you train a nation of young girls to be subservient sheep, don't be surprised when they stay that way as adults.

Sandberg isn't alone in her belief that culture is to blame for the gender gap. The theory has practically defined the prevailing wisdom on the gender gap at companies like Google and Facebook, which developed many women's leadership efforts to ~~beat the crap out of our girl behaviors~~ empower their female employees.

Since many solutions to the gender gap are born from this strain of

conventional wisdom, it's important to examine its validity. Is it true that women lack C-level aspirations because of culturally enforced stereotypes? Is the gender gap really the result of a society that punishes women for acting like leaders?

IT'S SOCIETY'S FAULT WE'RE INFERIOR!

At the heart of the leadership ambition gap is the damaging nature of stereotypes. Men are expected to be providers, to be bold, decisive, competitive, and ambitious, while women are expected to play the role of caregiver, to be nurturing, compassionate, and communal. In *Lean In*, Sandberg argues that this characterization of men and women as opposites leads us to place all aspects of professional achievement in the “male column.”⁶

Women may suffer discrimination for violating a stereotype, but I posit that in the corporate world, we suffer a lot more by conforming to it. In the preceding descriptions of male and female stereotypes, which set of traits moves you up the corporate ladder? The nurturing, compassionate kind, or the decisive, driven kind? How many CEOs, male *or* female, are thought of as nurturing and compassionate? Stereotypical female traits don't get someone to the top of a large corporation—on that we probably all agree. But that means *fitting* the stereotype is far worse for a woman's career than *defying* it. Why is discrimination against nurturing, communal women okay, but discrimination against aggressive women is a national crisis?

Not only is the attempt to change millions of women a bad strategy for solving a problem, but the leadership ambition gap is laced with condescension, an attitude of, “I know what's best for you,” and “It's not your fault you're inferior—we can help.”

Isn't that the exact *opposite* of empowerment?

Perhaps most disturbing of all is what the theory implies about men and women. Namely, that men represent the norm. The benchmark. The standard. That what they have, what they do, what they want is right, and women will never be truly equal to men unless we're exactly the same. In other words, the leadership ambition gap is built on a presumption of female inferiority.

Imagine that we asked women, "Do you aspire to be a corporate executive or CEO?" If the majority of women answered yes, then helping them climb the corporate ladder would make sense and be a worthy endeavor. However, as previously stated, the majority of women have said no, they don't want to be corporate executives. The leadership ambition gap works by disregarding the answers as irrelevant, suggesting that the only reason women say no is because they're culturally conditioned to say that. Taking our thoughts, feelings, and desires into consideration is pointless, I suppose.

This dismissal of what women want is another reason the public discourse on the gender gap lacks honesty. In private, between good friends, we freely admit feeling apathetic or conflicted about our careers. At work, or in public, we wouldn't dare. Admitting ambivalence or being tentative about your ambition is seen as foolish surrender to the culture trying to keep us down. Instead, we repeat the narrative handed to us by the women in charge of the conversation.

The dismissal of women's desires also leaves a question mark in its place, a blank that can be filled by anyone with an agenda. This is precisely why so many women's leadership events feel more like feminist theater than anything else. If all you're expected to do is repeat

rhetoric, anyone with an agenda or interest in self-promotion can take the stage and act as if he or she is truly interested in your well-being.

The second aspect of the leadership ambition gap is captured in the corresponding chapter's subtitle: "What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?"⁷ Sandberg believes that "fear is at the root of so many of the barriers that women face," suggesting that without it, we could pursue success unencumbered.⁸

Instead of me telling you my opinion on this (I'm a girl, so you'll have to excuse me for my reticence), let's ask ourselves the question: "What *would* I do if I weren't afraid? What would my career be like if I could release the fears holding me back?"

Did you think to yourself, *Hmm. If I weren't afraid, I'd become the CEO of a multinational conglomerate! or, I'd finally go after that seat on the executive board of a Wall Street hedge fund I've always dreamed about?* If so, then god bless you and godspeed, sister. I'm just not sure you're reading the right book.

How many of us, if we weren't afraid, would lean into our jobs until we reached our dream of becoming a corporate executive? It's almost laughable. It's not that being a corporate CEO is bad. It's that the assumption that we really deep down aspire toward that kind of role shows how out of touch Sandberg is with the hearts and minds of women.

Furthermore, if Sandberg *is* right, what would be the cure for this CEO-anxiety infecting the country's females? The antidote, she suggests, is for women to face their fears and take risks. Sandberg noted that at Facebook, they work very hard to create an environment that encourages this kind of bold, risk-taking behavior in its female employees.⁹

That's great advice and applies to more than just women. But getting people to face their fears isn't simple or easy. How they accomplish

such a feat holds great promise for the rest of corporate America. If we can learn what the leader of modern feminism is doing to super-size female ambition in her own backyard, surely we can model her approach and make a meaningful impact across other large companies.

So, how *does* Sandberg encourage such a significant behavioral change in the thousands of female Facebookers?

‘We have posters all around the office that reinforce this attitude.’¹⁰

Posters. The leader of modern-day feminism, running one of the largest and most famous public companies in the world, helps solve the leadership ambition gap with *posters*.

If it’s not cultural conditioning, stereotype threat, societal expectations, or fear, then why *don’t* women want to be CEOs as much as men do? Have we ever considered that the answer might be that women simply don’t want to be CEOs? Less than 25 percent of America’s teachers are men.¹¹ Do we treat it as a societal issue that must be fixed? Why, then, do we only judge women’s ambition as good or bad? Why do we create national campaigns urging women to advance up the corporate ladder without taking into consideration whether it’s something they want to do?

In a McKinsey study titled *Women in the Workplace*, the researchers surveyed thousands of men and women about their attitudes toward being a top executive. The top reasons cited for not wanting to be a senior executive were:

- I wouldn’t be able to balance family and work commitments (42 percent women, 42 percent men);
- Too much politics (39 percent women, 40 percent men); and

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- I am not interested in that type of work (35 percent women, 37 percent men).¹²

Do these reasons seem unreasonable? Culturally conditioned? It's interesting that, for the most part, men don't want to be a corporate executive for the same reasons women don't. Is culture at play for them too? The same study also reports that 36 percent of men desire a C-level position, versus 18 percent of women. That means the majority of the population, men *and* women, don't want to be a CEO. Doesn't it make more sense to look at what might be wrong with the job instead of what's wrong with all the *people* who don't want it?

Even if the leadership ambition gap were true, and women *are* delicate creatures vulnerable to self-deception, I'm still not sure I understand the implications. To figure out what women really want, we should stop listening to society and start listening to Sheryl Sandberg? It's so confusing to be a woman!

To reiterate, am I saying that culture and stereotypes don't affect our choices? No. I'm saying that we have clung so tightly to the notion that our lack of ambition is culturally created, that we dismiss and ignore other valid, and perhaps larger, reasons for the gender gap. Instead of dismissing women's stated desires, we should take them seriously and see if they point to clues about the overall problem. For example, McKinsey reports that one of the reasons women don't want to be a CEO is, "not enough benefits for the personal costs."¹³ This reasonable statement is certainly worthy of further exploration, no? What kinds of benefits *would* make it worth the cost? Is there something broken about rewards and incentives? This kind of inquiry would be far more helpful in solving the problem. Instead, women's concerns are summarily dismissed as a product of cultural oppression.

THE DOMESTIC AMBITION GAP

For two years at Google, I sat across from a guy named Ed. Our area resembled a trading desk more than it did a corporate office—no closed-door offices or cubicle walls—so I had an unfettered view of Ed. And he fascinated me. For those two years I studied Ed the way I imagine Jane Goodall studied chimpanzees in the wild. After arriving every morning at 6:45 a.m., he'd set down his stuff, open his laptop, and get right down to work. Except for meetings and the occasional food break, he stared at his computer, without looking up, then abruptly packed up his things and walked out the door at 7:30 p.m.

Perhaps the reason I found Ed so intriguing was because, like me, he had three kids, about the same age as mine. Unlike me, Ed didn't think about his kids during the hours from 6:45 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. I'm not saying that judgmentally, but as a matter-of-fact observation. Ed's wife, Leslie, (with whom I ended up becoming good friends, and not just for research purposes) was a stay-at-home mom. She spent her days running the household and managing the kids' schoolwork and schedules, and rarely, if ever, bothered Ed with any kid-related stuff during the workweek. The division of labor in their home allowed Ed to put his whole self into his job, every day, for more than twelve hours a day. While I never envied Ed's obsessive work habits, I did envy his arrangement with Leslie. Ed was able to make it to every single meeting in person. He never knew what it was like to miss a half day of work for parent-teacher conferences. Unlike me, he'd never been called in the middle of a presentation by a school nurse. He had the time and the mental space to be present at the office and devoted to business during business hours.

After observing this about Ed, I started to notice the trend among other men at work, particularly the senior executives. It wasn't that

they all had stay-at-home wives—many of them didn't; their wives also worked. But the vast majority of them didn't stretch their mental energy across kids, home life, and work life in the same way that I and many of my female colleagues did. Perhaps the fact that we were pulling more weight, playing double-duty roles, wouldn't have had such an impact on our careers if we also weren't trying to cover it up, pretending that in addition to our jobs, we weren't also responsible for the majority of domestic chores and child-rearing. The expectation was to act as if we had it all under control, and that our time was an endless, inexhaustible resource. Yet if you listened to the private conversations between moms in the hallways, or in bars after work, we'd all confess that what we truly needed, to be more successful at work, was a wife.

It's well understood and widely accepted that a major reason why women don't get higher up the ladder at work is because they're responsible for the majority of chores at home. Even women who work full-time are typically the primary caregiver as well, and still do a disproportionate amount of domestic work.¹⁴ These figures haven't changed much in recent years, despite women entering the workforce en masse. Obviously, *someone* would have to pick up the extra responsibilities if women are spending more time leaning into their careers, but the effort to get men to lean in more at home has been conspicuously absent from the public conversation. While the leadership ambition gap tries to explain why women don't want to be CEO, what is the corollary for men who don't want to assume more responsibility at home or act as the primary caregiver to the children? Is the reason they prefer to spend more time at work purely due to the stereotype of man as breadwinner? Are they victims of cultural conditioning? Or do they simply prefer not to be more involved in domestic pursuits?

Whatever the answers are, it demonstrates another dimension to how the causes and solutions to the gender gap fall on women's

shoulders. Even though we know men must pick up the slack at home and change their behavior to achieve the stated goal of “half our businesses, half our homes,” we never ask them to do anything different in any significant way. Instead, we remain relentlessly focused on the female part of the equation.

Perhaps an even more salient point is that women’s choices are subject to dismissal and condescension in a way men’s are not. We blame stereotypes for the lack of women running big corporations, but we never talk about stereotypes for the lack of men running our homes. Or if this stereotype gets mentioned here and there, no serious efforts are made to break men free of their supposed cultural conditioning. We aren’t as quick to dismiss men’s behavior. I’ve never seen McKinsey do a study on all the reasons men don’t want to participate at home, then explain the results as products of culture.

Throughout history, people have told women how to behave. In the first half of the twentieth century, women’s books and magazines were virtually instruction manuals telling women how to conduct themselves as wives and mothers. For example, in his 1943 book *Sex Today in Wedded Life*, author Edward Podolsky provides a list of commandments women must follow in order to be considered a “good wife,” which includes the following:

- “Don’t bother your husband with petty troubles and complaints when he comes home from work.
- Be a good listener. Let him tell you his troubles; yours will seem trivial in comparison.
- Remember your most important job is to build up and maintain his ego (which gets bruised plenty in business).
Morale is a woman’s business.

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- Let him relax before dinner. Discuss family problems after the inner man has been satisfied.”¹⁵

Almost eighty years later, these instructions seem ridiculous, a relic from a time long gone.

But isn't telling women to speak more assertively and to drop the emotional language a different version of the same instruction? The advice might be aimed at different roles (work vs. family), but we're still offering women prescriptions on how to behave in a way we rarely do with men.

As we'll see in later chapters, some of the most mainstream “feminist” books on the shelves *today* include directives such as “*Don't feed people at the office*” and “*Don't be too nice*.”¹⁶ History is littered with examples of women being told who to be, while men are considered fine the way they are. The leadership ambition gap is a shiny wrapper on the same tradition. It excuses the changes required of men, while providing a detailed guide for how women should behave and a theory on why they're not behaving that way in the first place. If the leadership ambition gap were true, then *Lean In* should have captured men's reticence toward domestic responsibility in a chapter titled “The Domestic Ambition Gap.”

LEADERSHIP THEATER

For a number of years at Google, I was part of what's called a “sales enablement” team. We weren't direct sellers, but we were given the same quota as the sales teams we supported. That meant we had to help them sell: anything we could do to make their job easier or help them bring in more business was considered a success.

A couple of us had tested a new partnership idea that resulted in significant efficiencies in the order process. The sales teams were ecstatic; their clients were happier, and it freed up hours of time to devote to selling-related activities, instead of order processing. Since it was only a test, but a highly promising one, we created a presentation of the results to share with our vice president, Jonathan. We imagined how thrilled he'd be at the results and daydreamed about our next promotion.

In a small conference room, Jonathan looked over the slides and smiled as we presented the details of what we'd done. A hint of amusement was on his face, as if we were his kids coming home from elementary school to share our "All about Me" project from arts and crafts. And like a father, he gave us a "Nice job" and a perfunctory pat on the head. If he could have, I imagine he would've ended the meeting with, "Okay, kids. Run along now."

Jonathan never mentioned the project again. Ever. He didn't approve our request to bring the same solution to other teams that could have equally benefited. What could've been easily replicated for ten times the results died quietly on the vine. What could've made a revenue impact in the millions never saw the light of day. The salespeople continued with a laborious deal process, and life went on. I was dumbfounded.

It wasn't until much later, after I'd gotten to know Jonathan much better and was more fluent in office politics, that I finally understood his reaction. The project, although it achieved massive results, created the image that our team was merely in service of sales. That we were *helpers*. Indentured servants for the teams that did the *real* work. Jonathan's peers were vice presidents of sales. The last thing his ego could tolerate was them viewing him as their bitch.

The fix for our sales problem was simple. But fixing it required

leadership to be interested in solving the problem. Jonathan wasn't a bad guy. He wasn't trying to make things hard for the salespeople. However, his self-worth and image were at stake, and the project threatened his ego.

At the time, I thought Jonathan's behavior was self-defeating—bad for his career and bad for the company. The company saw it otherwise. He was promoted faster than most VPs his level and eventually moved to a large role managing a profit and loss of almost half a billion dollars. Turns out Jonathan knew exactly what he was doing.

I'm not taking the moral high ground here. I don't feel any sort of ethical superiority to the machinations of corporate America. I didn't care *what* game we were playing. I just wanted everyone to be honest about it and stop pretending that what we were doing had some inherent logical sense. We were mostly moving papers from one side of the desk to the other and building castles made of sand. Yet every day, we put on our costumes, entered stage left, and pretended to be building the Sistine Chapel.

When we look at what corporate ambition entails and what it requires of people, it makes you wonder whether the lack of female executives is a positive reflection on women. But the winners of the corporate game are simply the ones who play it best. It doesn't mean they're leaders.

Wanting to be a corporate executive isn't "leadership ambition." It's "executive ambition." Like a man who wants to be a college professor has "academic ambition." Ambition is a big goal, an aspiration, an objective, a purpose, a plan. Ambition can be applied to anything. Motherhood, writing, cleanliness, wealth, fitness. If people don't want to be a corporate CEO, it doesn't mean they don't have ambition. It means they don't have ambition to be a CEO.

And what about leadership, which is a universally positive

aspiration? How could anyone in their right mind not support more women becoming leaders? Opposing the idea appears sexist by default. The problem, however, is that a leader isn't the same thing as a corporate executive. Most people don't follow their CEO (or even their manager) because they believe in that leader's vision and want to join his or her cause. They do it because they have to; the power structure requires it. It's more than a little unwise to disobey people who can destroy your career on a whim.

Let's take one of the most highly respected, widely admired, and celebrated leaders of the twentieth century, Martin Luther King Jr. A master of influence who inspired millions of people to follow his lead, MLK ignited a revolution in social justice. Nobody would argue that aspiring toward that kind of leadership and influence requires enormous ambition, the kind worthy of our encouragement not only for women, but for any human being.

When we hear the term *leadership*, we almost always conjure up images of people such as MLK and Abraham Lincoln, who are worthy of our aspiration. But if you have ambition to become a leader in the spirit of MLK and exert influence on a global scale, corporate executives are last on the list of people you should study. A corporate CEO's power is formal authority over others. The first implies choice, and the second control. The people who followed MLK didn't work for him. He didn't hold any formal power over them. He led with influence. He made people feel heard and understood. He painted a vision of a better future and motivated his followers to act. People *chose* to follow MLK because he commanded respect, engendered trust, and deserved their admiration. Dr. King embodies the cocktail of traits from which true leaders are born.

CEOs, on the other hand, don't arrive at their position by the will of the people. They don't acquire more and more power on their way

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to the top because they possess the same leadership qualities as an MLK. Their subordinates don't listen to and obey their commands out of choice; they don't act out of a personal belief in their manager's mission. They follow a corporate leader because they have to. Their livelihood, and in many cases their self-worth, depends on it.

MLK and a corporate CEO represent two distinct and diametrically opposed forms of leadership. When we say that men want to be CEOs more than women do, that statement doesn't represent women's lack of ambition toward being leaders. It reflects a lack of desire to be a CEO, or to be an executive with lots of authority and control over other people.

Treating the difference as a societal problem implies that C-level status is an inherently worthwhile endeavor. But it's only worthy for those who aspire to that status. For the rest of us, meh. Personally, I've never looked at the top levels of the organizations I worked for and seen that many people I aspired to be. I've seen people I was afraid of. Or who were assholes. Or who were bad at their jobs but amazing at managing up. Yes, there were good eggs too, and some I admired very much. But most of the impressive people, the ones who embodied the leadership ideal, never seemed to make it to the top.

T H R E E

THE CONFIDENCE GAP

If you want anything said, ask a man. If you want anything done, ask a woman.

—MARGARET THATCHER

Another big thread of conventional wisdom on the gender gap is that compared to men, women lack confidence, and therefore, they're not as successful. Consistent with the trend of giving each flavor of female inferiority its own name, this one has been coined "the confidence gap." The theory tells us that confidence is equally important to competence when it comes to success. Because women don't have as much confidence as men, they're less apt to ask for raises, negotiate salaries, and seize opportunities, and are less likely to be seen as "leadership material" in the workplace.

But what is confidence? Is it true that men have more? And if this is true, does this difference contribute to the country's gender and wage gap?

CONFIDENCE AND SUCCESS

A study by David Dunning and Joyce Ehrlinger at Washington University is often cited as damning evidence that not only do women lack confidence compared to men, but the difference plays a central role in women's failure to break the glass ceiling.¹ The study examines two main questions: Do men think more highly of themselves? And if so, do they go after more opportunities as a result? The study uses the "seizing of opportunities" as a proxy for success. In other words, if women fail to pursue opportunities because they don't believe they're well equipped, it can explain a lot about why they don't get ahead as often in business.

To answer these questions, Dunning and Ehrlinger designed the following experiment in two parts. First, a group of college students were asked to rate their skill from 1 to 10 in the area of "scientific reasoning," then take a short quiz on the subject. Despite the fact that on average, women rated their skills in scientific reasoning lower than men (6.5 versus 7.6, respectively²), both genders performed similarly well on the quiz. Based on these results, Dunning and Ehrlinger drew their first conclusion: women suffer from lower levels of confidence than men.

Let's put aside for a moment the fact that confidence in *general* is not at all the same as confidence in *scientific reasoning*. That's an almost unforgivable error of logic for a scientific study, but the magnitude of negligence only gets worse, and we only have so much time.

The second part of the experiment was designed to test whether or not women's purported lack of confidence impacted their willingness to pursue related opportunities. After the self-assessment and the quiz, participants were invited to enter a *Jeopardy!*-style contest on the same

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topic of scientific reasoning. Only 49 percent of the women signed up to compete, versus 71 percent of the men. This difference, coupled with the results from the first part of the experiment, lead Ehrlinger to conclude, “Because [women] are less confident in general in their abilities, that led them not to want to pursue future opportunities.”³

Uh . . . what?

Let’s recap what just happened here. Students were asked if they want to participate in a contest about science. Fewer women said yes. So, the researchers concluded that it was because they lacked confidence.

I’m not an organizational psychologist, but if I were in charge of such a study, I’m pretty sure I’d try to rule out other possible reasons why the women didn’t want to participate in a science competition. For example, I might ask:

- Do you give a shit about science?
- Do you give enough shits about it that you’d choose to spend your free time in a contest on it?

Or how about a simple

- Why don’t you want to participate in the contest?

Lest we forget, these were college students. Had I been given this “opportunity” in college, I absolutely would’ve turned it down. Not because I don’t think I’m good at science, but because I had higher priorities in my life. Like partying.

To demonstrate just how ridiculous this study’s results are, consider a hypothetical. Let’s say the study was replicated, and everything was the same, except the topic was nursing instead of scientific reasoning.

Suppose men rated their ability to nurse and care for patients at

a 6.5 (versus 7.6 for women), and they also declined the competition at a higher rate than women. Can you imagine the headline for the study? “Men Underrepresented in Nursing Profession Due to Lack of Confidence.”

When women aren’t interested in something like science, it’s a societal disease. When men are disinterested in anything, nobody freaking cares.

People might say that STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) careers are the future of the economy, and it’s critical for women to participate. But that’s a value judgment. It reflects the weight our culture puts on money; it’s not a reflection of what role is more valuable to society. Is an engineer inherently more worthy than a nurse? Furthermore, this idea demonstrates our tendency to blame women for “failing” to adopt the same interests, dreams, and careers as men. We declare it a defect that must be fixed. The reverse—fewer men interested or participating in female-dominated fields—is never seen as a deficiency. We accept it as is.

The term “confidence gap” first gained traction in the mainstream when it appeared as the title in an *Atlantic* article by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, based on their book *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance—What Women Should Know*. While Kay and Shipman admit that things like motherhood, culture, and institutional barriers play large roles in women’s failure to break the glass ceiling, they claim we’re missing a much bigger reason: lack of confidence. They explain that compared to men, women underestimate themselves, feel like frauds, predict they’ll fare worse on tests, and believe they’re less deserving of opportunities and credit. Kay and Shipman also blame women’s lack of confidence for the country’s wage and earnings gap, claiming that men ask for raises and negotiate salary more frequently than their female colleagues.

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On its surface, their argument doesn't seem far-fetched. The terms *alpha male* and *male ego* are common acknowledgments of the boldness with which men assert themselves. And it's also not hard to see why such displays are helpful in climbing the corporate ladder. Aggression is almost a prerequisite for winning.

Kay and Shipman open *The Confidence Code* with a plea to their female readers: "Start acting . . . and stop mumbling and apologizing and prevaricating."⁴ They say that this behavior—this fumbling, moronic laziness—which they call "lack of confidence," is the reason we don't earn as much money as men or make it to the top of the nation's largest power structures. If you're trying to increase our confidence, describing us as shady, meek, and inactive isn't how I'd begin. But let's give this idea the benefit of the doubt and move on for now.

Since the entire premise of *The Confidence Code* is that women are less successful than men because we're less confident, it's critical to understand how Kay and Shipman define confidence. The second sentence of the introduction provides a clue, describing confidence as "hard to define but easy to recognize."⁵ I had hoped to get more clarity by the end of chapter 1, but instead of a concrete definition, the authors offer a series of anecdotes to describe what it looks like when women lack confidence:

You'd love to give a thoughtful toast at your best friend's birthday party, but even the prospect of speaking in front of thirty people makes you start to sweat—so you mutter a few words, keep it very short, and nurse a dissatisfied feeling that you haven't done her justice. You always wished you'd run for class president in college, but asking other people to vote for you, well, it just seemed so arrogant. Your brother-in-law is so annoying with his sexist views, but you're worried that if you stand up to him in front of everyone you'll come

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across as strident, and, anyway, he always seems so on top of his facts.⁶

I'm not a psychiatrist, but aren't these like . . . *human* things? Surveys show that the fear of public speaking is the number one fear among everyone in the world. It ranks higher than the fear of death!⁷ Also, is there some national crisis I didn't know about where women are afraid to . . . complain . . . about their families?

To crystalize confidence's elusive nature, Kay and Shipman provide a series of contrasting descriptions of how it shows up, or fails to show up, across gender. I distilled the various anecdotes into their essence, which look something like this:

Confidence in men

- A quality that sets some people apart, which is hard to define but easy to recognize
- Self-belief

Lack of confidence in women

- Mumbling, apologizing, and prevaricating
- Too much humility
- Self-doubt
- Inexplicable feeling that they don't fully own their right to rule the top
- Fear that if they speak out, they will sound either stupid or self-aggrandizing
- The sense that their success is unexpected and undeserved

THE CONFIDENCE GAP

- Anxiety about leaving their comfort zone to try something exciting and hard and possibly risky
- Lack of self-belief

By page 35, I was ashamed to be a woman. Mercifully, the authors arrive at a concrete definition of confidence fifteen pages later. Phew. I was starting to lose hope that we'd capture this mysterious female deficiency in any sort of concrete way. After stating all the ways women are ~~annoying, inept losers~~ less confident, Kay and Shipman define confidence as "the stuff that turns thought into action."⁸

Wait—am I reading *The Secret*?

The notion that women can't turn thoughts into action as well as men is not only wrong; it's insulting. Many of the women I know are virtual heroes—managing their households, doing the majority of child-rearing, and somehow still making it to the office every day and working just as hard as everyone else. When my three kids were babies, I went through a traumatic divorce and was forced to take care of them, the house, a move, a court case, and a full-time, demanding job at Google on my own. Did I get a good score that quarter at work? Hell no. But was anything about me *inactive*?

Without a practical, working definition of confidence, I instead turned my attention to the descriptions and anecdotes of confident behavior in *The Confidence Code*. The book includes dozens of stories in which men are described as commanding the room, projecting an air of certitude, and remaining unwavering in their belief. In the face of such "confidence," women often shut down, become tentative, or only share their opinions when they're 100 percent sure they're right.

One example is the story of David Rodriguez, a VP of human resources at Marriott, and the authors' go-to management guru. After telling us how awesome he is, they turn to Rodriguez for his

perspective on this whole messy female confidence issue. Turns out he agrees that confidence is what makes or breaks someone's rise to the top of the corporate ladder. Rodriguez says that he sees his female colleagues often do something he calls "a hesitation." For example, he has seen more than one woman become tentative during a key point of their presentation. Afterward, when he asks them why they hesitated, they say something along the lines of "I couldn't get a feel for the audience—how they were responding. I couldn't decide whether to go right or left."⁹

When did being uncertain about stuff you're uncertain about become something terrible? If the women on Rodriguez's team want to get promoted, must they lie about what they know and what they believe? Do they have to feign certainty, even when important business matters are at stake? There's another way to look at the hesitation Rodriguez describes. When I read the women's comment "I couldn't get a feel for the room," my first thought wasn't that they lacked confidence, but that they were demonstrating empathy. Most women are naturally skilled in taking the temperature of a room, getting a sense for how others are feeling, and taking these things into account. In the most recent stable of business literature, these so-called soft skills are touted as the necessary leadership skills for today's information economy. With female-dominant strengths such as empathy and consensus-building being the future of business, the headlines forecast that women will dominate the future generations of corporate leaders. But that won't happen until we stop mistaking empathy for weakness.

I'm not suggesting that hesitating mid-presentation is something to strive for per se, nor am I saying it's always a signal of empathy. I'm pointing out that hesitation can be caused by many things, some good, some bad. It's not a clear-cut indication that one lacks confidence. Once a narrative like "women are less confident than men"

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becomes accepted as truth, it's easy for people to interpret any behavior as evidence.

In another story, a man who was a senior partner at a law firm described a junior female associate who rarely spoke up during meetings.¹⁰ He chalked it up to a lack of confidence. Because she didn't talk as much as the others in the room, he assumed she believed she couldn't handle the account. This bothered him, but even more so because he didn't feel he could talk to her about the issue without offending her. Instead of speaking with her directly about it, he made "confidence" a required part of the formal review process, since he thinks it's such an important aspect of doing business.

I find it ironic that when his female colleague didn't speak up in meetings, he assumed she lacked confidence, yet when he didn't speak up about his concern, it was because he was being sensitive to her feelings. Instead of having the confidence to discuss the matter with her directly, this man changed the entire performance review process to prevent anyone from being quiet in meetings, ever again.

On the flip side of girly behavior, there's the story of Maj. Gen. Jessica Wright. General Wright is the picture-perfect vision of female confidence, the precise kind of female role model this book was written to inspire women to be. Kay and Shipman describe her as "resolutely feminine" (her favorite leadership tip is to enjoy getting your hair and nails done), but without all that yucky hesitating stuff. Wright doesn't tolerate that sort of thing. She says she doesn't have time for indecisive or uncertain people, and she appears to have a near disdain for those who admit they don't have all the answers. General Wright is also one of the people the authors turned to for help in defining confidence, and her personality traits helped them arrive at a more solid understanding of the term. Leaving their meeting, Kay and Shipman describe her in their notebooks with words such as *action, bold, honest, and feminine*.¹¹

WHAT IS CONFIDENCE?

It's incredibly hard to examine a theory about confidence without a clear definition of the term. It's a common word that means different things to different people. Kay and Shipman claim confidence is the ability to turn thought into action. But that describes a fundamental process of how human beings navigate the world. If I think, *I need to wash the dishes*, and then proceed to the kitchen to begin washing said dishes, according to *The Confidence Code*, I'm demonstrating confidence. This might seem like quibbling over semantics, but there can't be a thoughtful examination of a theory without first agreeing on what it means.

Over the years I've read dozens of books on psychology, identity, and the nature of the human ego. Throughout the scientific literature, there's a loose consensus on confidence, so I looked to the research for a more workable definition. Psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden, PhD, was a pioneer in the area of self-esteem and confidence, and his groundbreaking work serves as the foundation for modern psychology's understanding of the subject. In his seminal book, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, Branden defines self-esteem as feeling that one is worthy of happiness and competent to face life, with all its requirements and of being worthy of happiness. More specifically, he said, self-esteem is:

1. "confidence in our ability to think, confidence in our ability to cope with the basic challenges of life; and
2. confidence in our right to be successful and happy, the feeling of being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants, achieve our values, and enjoy the fruits of our efforts."¹²

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In this regard, confidence means trusting oneself. It is trusting in one's ability to think, to learn, to make appropriate choices and decisions, and to respond effectively to change. People with a healthy confidence level *act* in the face of uncertainty because they trust the efficacy of their minds. It doesn't mean they *never feel uncertain*, and it doesn't mean they *never appear uncertain*. It's the opposite: Confident people feel *comfortable* hesitating when they're hesitant. They don't feel threatened by not having all the answers.

One of the most important things to understand is that self-trust is predicated on honesty. True confidence requires an *honest* relationship with yourself—a willingness to acknowledge your talents and strengths, and the courage to see and accept the things you lack. It doesn't mean you believe you're the best or have some delusional idea that you can do *anything*. It means you have a realistic understanding of who you are, and you trust in your strength, ability, and fortitude to survive challenges in pursuit of the things you want.

If there's an opposite of confidence, it's ego. Ego is born of self-*deception* and feeds on illusion. Confidence is loyalty to the truth, while ego is loyalty to being right. It's artifice and facade, and it can be measured by how willing we are to lie to ourselves and others about what we know to be true. Ego, in the form of arrogance and bravado, projects the illusion of confidence. But it's a strategy to compensate for the fact that you don't have any.

Like Kay and Shipman, Branden emphasizes the importance of action as it relates to confidence. However, according to Branden, the difference between high and low confidence is what *motivates* the action. When action emerges from self-honesty and acceptance of reality, it's confidence. When it's born of one's refusal of reality, an unwillingness to accept some truth, it's low confidence. Any behavior

in isolation is a meaningless indication of one's confidence. What *really* matters is whether it's born from truth or delusion.¹³

When people don't trust the efficacy of their minds, their ability to think, they often overcompensate by deluding themselves into believing they're good at everything. The workplace is littered with people who need to be right, all the time. Everyone can think of at least one person they've worked with that dominates every meeting with an air of arrogant certainty. Behind the veneer of self-righteousness is someone who's trying to control all elements in his environment and all the people on his team, in a desperate effort to mitigate uncertainty. Not having the right answer to your question or not saying the right thing feels threatening to a person like that. He sees it as confirmation that he's failing in some way. So, the best strategy is to keep talking, dominate the conversation so there's no room for you to see that he might not really know what he's talking about. He's not confident. He's *afraid*. The arrogance is a veneer, a guard he won't let down for fear that people might see through him and know he doesn't have it all together.

When a person has little trust in his or her ability to deal with risk or the day-to-day challenges of living, everything can feel like a threat. Life becomes a treacherous journey, with uncertainty and failure as the enemies. Those with little confidence wear certainty and arrogance like armor, shielding themselves from the abyss of unknowns.

The opposite of false bravado is false modesty. People who see themselves as less than they truly are often undermine themselves, refusing to take action in situations where they're perfectly capable of doing so. We tend to refer to people like this as having an "inferiority complex," and they come off as lacking assertiveness, displaying behaviors such as subservience and timidity.

False bravado and false modesty manifest in opposite behaviors,

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but they spring from the same source: low confidence. Kay and Shipman argue that women need to drop their hesitation and timidity in favor of unwarranted certitude and bravado, seemingly unaware that these traits are caused by the same wellspring of insecurities.

In *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, Branden describes confident behaviors as correlating with rationality, realism, creativity, independence, willingness to admit and correct mistakes, cooperativeness, and flexibility. In contrast, he describes lack of confidence as correlating with irrationality, blindness to reality, rigidity, over-controlling behavior, inappropriate conformity, and fear or hostility toward others.¹⁴ If confidence underpins the first set of behaviors, fear drives the second set.

As such, confidence requires you to trust your mind, think for yourself, ask why, reject dogma, and refuse adherence to blind authority. In that sense, confidence would appear to be a *liability* in the corporate world! It can't thrive in a system entirely defined by a chain of command that requires the overwhelming majority of people to obey authority, lest they compromise their livelihood, financial security, and personal identity. The corporate world's power structures reward bravado and crush confidence. And *that* is the real gap we should be trying to address.

CONFIDENCE MATTERS MOST

One assumption underlying the confidence gap theory is that when it comes to being successful, confidence matters more than talent, intellect, effort, and competence. Because women are purported to have less confidence, this lack takes a devastating toll on their ability to succeed. Furthermore, it's why so many female leadership programs focus on

building confidence. It's believed that closing the confidence gap will, in turn, close the larger gender gap in corporate America.

If we follow the logic of this assumption, that more confidence equals more success, it means that the most successful people—ones with the most money and power in society—have the most confidence. But is that true? I think many of us have met at least one rich, powerful person who also happened to reek of insecurity. There are models who lack confidence in their beauty, and there are Nobel Prize winners who lack confidence in their intellect. Acquiring things, whether power, money, fame, or beauty, isn't a sign of confidence. This isn't to say that confidence isn't a catalyst for success, but it's not such a neat, linear relationship, as the confidence gap theory implies.

Of course, we can't ignore the fact that sometimes a crazy, irrational belief about what one is capable of accomplishing helps someone achieve said accomplishment. For example, to start Microsoft, Bill Gates sold his BASIC software to a company in Albuquerque before he, or anyone else in the world, had created it. Putting himself on the line with no evidence he was capable of such a feat was exactly the kind of chutzpah needed to start his computer empire. Isn't this evidence that outsized confidence or bravado is necessary for success? The confidence Gates had in starting Microsoft was born from a desire to achieve great things and a belief that he could handle any obstacles along the way. It wasn't bred from self-delusion, but from self-belief. It's certitude along the lines of "I will achieve my dreams because I have what it takes to work hard and handle failure"—in contrast to the false and unwarranted certitude of "I need to convince people that I'm the best and that I'm always right, because if they believe it, I won't have to be tested." Although the latter may enable hollow "achievements," these mostly serve as a way to fill a bottomless pit of insecurity. One could hardly call this success.

Am I saying that women shouldn't try practicing self-assertion? Obviously not. I've personally benefited from the endeavor. My point is that the gender gap isn't the result of some mysterious female deficit, like lack of confidence, that can be easily solved by acting more like men.

DO MEN HAVE MORE CONFIDENCE?

Another area that warrants further exploration is the idea that men have more confidence than women. In particular, I was curious about how proponents of the theory arrived at their conclusion. We touched on this in the beginning of the chapter with the study by Dunning and Ehrlinger, but surely other studies, research, or bodies of work must exist. The theory couldn't have been built on the results of one study.

Given that the entire premise of *The Confidence Code* is built on the assumption that men do, in fact, have more confidence than women, I started by digging deeper to understand how Kay and Shipman arrived at the conclusion. Did they send out surveys, with a large enough sample size, and find statistically significant results? Perform lab research? Analyze existing studies to look for patterns?

Turns out, they talked to a bunch of people. To clarify, I don't mean they took detailed scientific observations and codified the results into a replicable study. They talked to a bunch of people about the topic of confidence, and the women with whom they spoke admitted a struggle with confidence much more so than the men.

I'm not dismissing their results because of their unscientific approach. I'm dismissing it because it's easy to see how they could validate a claim they already believed to be true. Aren't women usually more open with their thoughts and feelings, more willing to discuss

their insecurities with other women? Just imagine some male executive sitting down across the table from two women writing a book about confidence, and being asked if he ever feels insecure at work. “Oh yes. I have many deep-seated fears about not being good enough.” Said no man, ever.

Throughout the book, Kay and Shipman refer to the frequency with which insecurity came up in conversations with women compared to men. From there, they draw an all-too-linear conclusion: women have less confidence. But maybe it came up more often with women because women are more self-aware. And maybe men brought it up less because they lack self-awareness and aren’t in tune with themselves well enough to see the connection between their aggression and their insecurities.

Basing a theory of this nature on a bunch of people self-reporting their experiences, without a cross section of meaningful research—and without a clear definition of confidence—isn’t exactly the bedrock of evidence necessary to support such an argument.

In pursuit of other research, I was reminded again of the McKinsey study mentioned in chapter 2. Of the most often cited reasons for why both men and women don’t want to be top executives, “I’m not confident that I would be successful” appears last on the list. The percent of women who report they aren’t confident enough? Thirteen. The percent of men who cite the same exact reason? Thirteen.¹⁵

According to McKinsey’s study, men and women admit they lack confidence in equal number. Yet, we’re also told that the reason more women don’t break the glass ceiling is because they lack confidence. Is it any wonder that trying to close the gender gap feels like being on a treadmill to nowhere?

DOES CONFIDENCE MAKE MEN BETTER NEGOTIATORS?

Lack of confidence has also been blamed for women's failure to negotiate promotions and better wages. In their book *Women Don't Ask*, Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever argue that the wage gap in the United States is mainly due to how women approach negotiation. They support their argument with an extensive body of research showing that women initiate negotiations less often, and when they do negotiate, they consistently walk away with less than their male peers do.

One study cited found that among graduating students at Carnegie Mellon University, eight times as many men negotiated their starting salary. Because of this, their starting salaries were 7.6 percent (or \$4,000) higher than the women's in the study. The authors point out that the women's failure to negotiate put them behind from the start. Every subsequent raise will start from a lower baseline, and compounded over time, over their careers they'll earn dramatically less than their equally qualified male peers.¹⁶

If you define negotiation as one party wins and the other loses, then yes, the logical conclusion to draw from these experiments is that men are better negotiators. The problem is that it's only one *type* of negotiation. Over the past decade, the social and economic sciences have changed our understanding of *negotiation*. Its truer, more comprehensive meaning is "a discussion aimed at making an agreement." What used to be thought of as a win-lose or clash of adversaries now includes a variety of other styles. In fact, we now know that the most effective negotiations are those that seek a win-win outcome, a collaboration that results in both parties having their needs met. Win-win

negotiations produce better results and preserve relationships, which are particularly important in conducting business in the long term.

In the introduction of *Women Don't Ask*, Babcock and Laschever admit that women take a collaborative approach more often than men, and that these methods can be superior to the more competitive male approach. However, they quickly dismiss these methods by saying that we live in a male-defined business world, so the female approach, although valuable, can be misinterpreted as weakness.¹⁷ In other words, it's a man's world, so we need to discount the unique value we bring to the table, undermine our own strengths, and play by their rules.

Not everyone downplays the value of collaboration, however. In his book, *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating as If Your Life Depended on It*, former FBI top hostage negotiator Chris Voss explains that there are various styles of negotiation, and each can be equally effective when done well.¹⁸ He points to a study of American lawyer-negotiators, which found that 65 percent used a cooperative style, and when graded for effectiveness, more than 75 percent of the effective group came from the cooperative type; only 12 percent were assertive. "So if you're not assertive, don't despair," Voss wrote. "Blunt assertion is actually counterproductive most of the time."¹⁹

When negotiation is seen through the lens of collaboration, do women *still* fare worse? Are men simply better at reaching agreements across all situational dynamics? Dr. Hilla Dotan of Tel Aviv University's Coller School of Management and Professor Uta Herbst of Potsdam University in Germany claim that the behavioral differences between men and women in the workplace have largely been overlooked regarding research on negotiation. For example, most studies ignore the tendency for women to be more cooperative and men to be more competitive, which means most research on negotiation is studied through a very narrow lens. Taking these differences

into account, Dotan and Herbst's research found that the female disadvantage in negotiations depends on the context. For example, in their experiments, women outperformed men when negotiating on behalf of friends instead of their own interests. The study concludes, "What's important for women is the sense of fighting for others, for their friends, for something bigger than themselves."²⁰

Jens Mazei, a doctoral candidate at Germany's University of Münster, came to a similar conclusion after examining fifty-one studies with a total of 10,888 participants, including businesspeople as well as graduate and undergraduate students. The researchers found that negotiation results depended on the situation and the person involved. When women negotiated on behalf of another person or knew about the bargaining range, they were better at negotiating than men.²¹

Collaborative negotiation is predicated on the ability to compromise, a skill shown to be much stronger in women. In a recent study, Hristina Nikolova, a marketing professor at Boston College, recruited college students with course credit and asked them to pick a grill they'd want to buy. Participants ranked their preference for each grill on a scale of one to seven. The students didn't have a strong preference for any one grill in particular.

Nikolova then split the group into pairs, with each pair selecting a grill for purchase. When the pairs were female or mixed (female/male), roughly 70 percent found a compromise with their partner, agreeing to sacrifice their first choice to better meet their partner's needs. In the male/male pairs however, only 40 percent found middle ground.²²

Can we pause here for a moment? That means more than half of the men refused to give in to their partner's desires for a *fake grill*. One they were never going to purchase. One they never really had a preference for anyway.

The men didn't care which grill they got but nevertheless refused

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to compromise on it. Doesn't that mean they just wanted to win? Doesn't it mean that their goal was to win for the sake of winning and not because they wanted the prize? More on this in later chapters.

When we define negotiation from the male point of view, as a win-lose clash between opponents, women do indeed fall short. But when we expand our understanding of what negotiation truly entails, suddenly things look different. Defining it from the female, collaborative point of view, *men* fare worse. The conventional wisdom that women lack the confidence to negotiate isn't rooted in objective truth. It's born out of a limited perspective, seeing the world through a male lens.

In other words, women aren't worse at negotiating. We only think they are because they don't do it the same way men do.

I'm not claiming that women don't lack confidence or that many of us wouldn't benefit from improving in this area. I'm saying that in the workplace, male-dominant behaviors such as arrogance, certainty, and one-upmanship are often mistaken for confidence, when they reflect the opposite. If companies reward such behavior, then it's the rewards system that is dysfunctional, not the women who are unfairly penalized.

F O U R

PUTTING THE *MEN* IN *MENTOR*

Women helped each other in ways small and large every day, without thinking, and that was what kept them going even when the world came up with new and exciting ways to crush them.

—ALYSSA COLE, *LET US DREAM*

It's often said that success in business is in large part due to relationships. This is why women are encouraged to seek mentors and pursue professional relationships with more senior people. It's why LeanIn.org created the campaign #mentorher; their website explains that people with mentors are more likely to get promoted and that women have fewer than men.¹ It seems straightforward enough, a logical conclusion to draw and sensible action to take in response.

What is a mentor? In a corporate context, a mentorship is defined

as a relationship where one participant has more experience, skill, and knowledge than the other. The mentor, then, is the more knowledgeable party in the relationship. “Many strong mentoring relationships provide an opportunity for both parties to learn from each other through the development of a caring and respectful partnership.”²

Or more simply, a mentor is a kind of friend.

Have we considered how odd it is that an entire campaign was created to help women make friends? To encourage them to seek out support?

Think about it: when we become mothers, we reach out to other mom friends for advice, or we turn to one of the countless online forums dedicated to extending this kind of support. When we’re having marital issues or relationship problems, what do we do? We call our friends and talk about it.

Juxtapose this with the way men typically handle the need for help and emotional support. If they’re down in the dumps, do they reach out to their buddies to talk through their *feelings*? When men are sick, are they known to run to the doctor for help? When they’re lost, do they stop and ask for directions?

Yet we’re supposed to believe that a primary reason that men dominate 96 percent of the corporate C-suite is that they’re better at making friends. Apparently, when trying to reach the top, men are finally okay with asking for directions on how to get there.

Compelling evidence indicates that women are better at forming connections and building stronger social networks than men.³ For many of us, friendships are the central anchor of our lives. We take girls trips, form book clubs, and keep in touch with childhood friends. Without the wife acting as social director, the majority of couples would be neighborhood recluses.

So why does the finesse of female friendships fail to translate into

mentorship at work? Why do men seem better at building relationships and support networks in business?

About five months into my first pregnancy, my doctor called with the news that I had gestational diabetes. It didn't endanger either me or the baby; I just had to keep my carbs under twenty grams and check my blood sugar four times a day, and the thought of giving up my thrice-daily dessert habit felt overwhelming. I hung up the phone with the doctor's office and whined to Carol, who was also pregnant, about it. Not having any knowledge or advice on the matter, she suggested I join `expectant_new_moms`, an internal email group at Google made up of women who were pregnant or recently gave birth.

I was hesitant at first because email groups at Google were notorious for being wastelands of pedantic arguments about whether people should be allowed to wear shoes in the café. But after many failed attempts at going cold turkey on dessert, I took Carol's advice and joined `expectant_new_moms`.

Two things set this email community apart from all the others at Google: it was open only to women, and it was anonymous. They'd used an engineering hack that allowed emails to be submitted and replies to be sent without anyone's name attached. Upon joining, I browsed the group's archive and was nothing short of transfixed by what I was reading. There were questions about *everything*. One woman wrote at length about her son's habit of humping the large stuffed Mickey Mouse in his crib. Others shared their fear of giving birth, tales of depression once the baby arrived, repulsion at the new shape of their bodies, and all the shame these painful feelings often invoked. There were deeply intimate matters about relationships too, such as growing

distances from partners and pregnancy hormones causing voracious sexual appetites (or a complete lack thereof).

It was the furthest thing from a cesspool of anonymous internet trolls. Women from all over the world came to each other's rescue through this invisible community of two thousand plus. Smart, professional women would sometimes spend an hour on an email thread to coach a new mom who was panicking over a lumpy breast, or would rush to another woman's aid when she forgot her key card to the office mother's room (for those who pumped breast milk). These women became an indispensable part of my survival through the two-year period when I gave birth to all three of my children. It was a community of profound, anonymous friendship and support, and the closest thing to the "sisterhood" in which I've ever taken part.

I was reminded of the new moms group while reading an article about a similarly supportive community of women in an entirely different industry: romance novels. Most people don't know that romance novels are a billion-dollar juggernaut. The size of the mystery and science fiction/fantasy genres *combined*, romance outperforms every other category of books. More intriguing to me than the revenue numbers was the description of its author community. Unsurprisingly, the majority of writers in this genre are women, and the strength of their network is unparalleled in publishing. Sociologists Jennifer Lois at Western Washington University and Joanna Gregson at Pacific Lutheran University spent five years studying the world of romance novels. Gregson told the *New York Times*, "This community of authors is all about being egalitarian and inclusive. You see *New York Times* bestselling authors teaching brand-new authors how to write a query letter, how to get an agent." Their group emails and listservs are peppered with "all kinds of smiley face emoticons."⁴

Laurie Kahn, in her article "10 Surprising Facts About Romance

Novels,” also describes the unique support between authors in the community. When she asked experienced romance writers why so many of them were willing to devote their time and attention to help newer authors, almost all of them spoke about having been a newbie to the genre and the spate of senior mentors who helped them through. Kahn describes the kind of support and mentorship in her article:

At a Romance Writers of America (RWA) national conference, unpublished writers are always welcome (something that does not happen at other writer conferences), and there are dozens of workshops taught by established writers about everything from plot structure and writing knife-fights, to social networking and negotiating contracts. You will see bestselling novelists sitting down for coffee with unpublished newbies, critiquing their work and giving them business advice.⁵

In the case of romance novelists and new moms at Google, women coalesced almost effortlessly around a common goal and without personal agenda, created a support network to help one another. Considering this, it’s strange that the opposite seems to happen with women helping each other climb the ladder at work.

In 2013, shortly after *Lean In* was published, Google prioritized addressing the gender gap among its female employees. A wealth of learning and development programs sprang up, and it seemed as if every other day a group of senior female leaders held a panel discussion. Women@Google became a popular employee resource group, and we formed our own chapter in New York. The day it was launched, more than one hundred women crowded into a large conference room, as a panel with three female executives addressed the crowd. The energy and optimism were palpable. Despite my usual skepticism about organized cheerleading, I couldn’t help but be swept away in the excitement.

Toward the end of the session, they announced that we were going

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to create Lean In Circles as part of the Women@Google effort, and that everyone would be randomly assigned to a group. I left the conference room to check the list with the names of my new Lean In Circle, which included eight of us from all different parts of Google and at all levels in the organization. We met in a makeshift conference room down the hall and sat down with smiles on our faces as we went around the table, introducing ourselves. We discussed our goals, decided when our first official meeting would be, and assigned an owner to the meeting agenda. We were taking things into our own hands. We were on the precipice of real change. And it felt invigorating. For about an hour. Because that was the first and last time our circle ever met. Despite the date scheduled in our calendars, nobody showed up for the next meeting. Some of us had work fires to put out. Others had conflicts with more important meetings. One had a personal emergency. And a handful had no reason at all.

We straight-up ghosted on our own Lean In Circle.

Three months later, at the next New York Women@Google meeting, I learned we weren't alone. This time there were about half as many of us in the audience. Seated next to our friends, we quietly admitted that *most* of our Lean In Circles had died on the vine. As far as I know, none of the Lean In Circles met more than a handful of times. Women@Google abandoned the effort and moved on to a more structured, learning style of programs that still exists today.

When I moved over to Facebook, surprisingly, it wasn't much different. At a women's leadership event in Menlo Park, a woman who worked for LeanIn.org spoke to us about why Circles are important: we need a place where women can be unapologetically ambitious, share advice, and help each other succeed. Everyone in the audience nodded, and once again, a palpable energy filled the room. *Yeah! We need to get together and help each other! Let's do this!*

And yet, as far as I know, not one person in that room ever followed up on the call to action. During my eighteen months at Facebook, I never heard of a single Circle, nor met anyone who'd participated in one. Despite being the birthplace of *Lean In*, and despite the constant encouragement, Circles were conspicuously absent.

Why did the women at Google spend hours of their time, out of their own volition, to help other moms, but quickly bow out of the Lean In Circles? Why does the romance novel industry have such a tight community of authors who help each other succeed, but similar networks are conspicuously absent in the corporate world?

To thoroughly answer this question, we must start with a detour into the animal kingdom.

Among the many primate species, our closest animal relatives, chimpanzees have been studied most extensively. Historically, they've served as our model for understanding evolution and human behavior. Even in the cultural mainstream, concepts of "alpha male" and "beating one's chest" are based on primatologists' observations of chimpanzees.

Chimps form male-dominated societies characterized by hierarchical power structures, with the alpha male at the top. The alpha chimp secures his position and rules his domain with physical aggression, violence, and force. For decades, scientists considered this kind of male dominance "natural," and the inevitable consequence of their larger physical size. It was believed that the females' smaller size meant they couldn't compete with, or overpower, the males in the group.

That presumption all changed in the 1990s, when renowned primatologist Amy Parish and other researchers studied another group of primates, called bonobos. Bonobos, which have a reputation for being

on the randy side, are as closely related to human beings as chimps are.⁶ Female bonobos are smaller than males, and the size difference is similar in proportion to that of humans. Yet bonobos are female-dominated matriarchies, with males at the very bottom. The same is true for other primate cousins, such as lemurs, macaques, and squirrel monkeys. In all cases, the males are physically larger, but the females rule.

The intriguing question is: How can females rise to dominance in the group when they're not as physically strong? Is it a David-and-Goliath situation, where the females devise scrappier ways to inflict harm, or savvier tools to kill with more precision? An even more illuminating question is: Do the females dominate by imitating male displays of power and copy the aggressive tactics?

In short, the answer is no. In bonobo societies, the females don't dominate by acting more like males, and they don't garner power in any way resembling that of the alpha chimp. In these primate matriarchies, power is defined not by physicality and aggression, but by relationships.⁷

One on one, a male bonobo can overpower a female, but when females unite as a group, a male has no shot. Therefore, it is the relationships the females form that protect them from being overpowered, and the strength of these female connections inevitably controls the group's males. If the male bonobos banded together, they could easily overpower the females. But they don't, because male bonobos have relatively weak bonds with each other.

The idea of strength in numbers holds up on both sides: in male-dominated primate groups, like chimpanzees, bonds between females are weak, and those between males are strong. As it turns out, the strength of connection within gender, rather than physical size and strength, predicts dominance.

While male-dominant chimp societies are characterized by

aggression and physical force, female-dominant bonobo societies are better described as a commune of horny hippies. In a bonobo matriarchy, sex is the substitute for aggression.⁸ Although females can and do become violent against the males in the group, overall, they're less aggressive, and they rely more on the power of cooperation than on physical force.

According to Amy Parish, the natural solidarity of female bonobos gives them power. Of their relationships Parish said, "Females had these really intense and enduring friendships with each other, and that was even more rare among mammals." Males, on the other hand, had weaker bonds. "The males can be friendly. They have sex with each other. But it's nothing like the intensity or the scope that we see in the females." She also noted that these relationships translate to power in bonobo society, saying, "Females can be in charge. They can control the resources. They don't need to go through males to get them. They don't have to be subjected to sexual violence."⁹

In the primate world, males and females build and exert power in very different ways: relationship and connection versus aggression and physical force. Although the analogy to humans isn't precise, this information provides important takeaways about the concept of power, namely, that in our culture, we've defined power against a male template. We conceptualize it in a narrow way, through a male lens, and have failed to see the larger picture. A female-dominated world wouldn't entail a switch in the ratio of male to female CEOs and politicians. Our attempts to amass power in the same way as men is misguided, not only because this strategy has failed, but because it undermines the power we already have.

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I once worked for a great guy at Google named Scott. One of his best qualities was that he understood his employees as individuals. He knew each of our unique strengths and the areas where we needed to grow. Unlike many other performance reviews I've received in my career, Scott's was genuinely insightful, and his advice was spot-on. I still have a copy of one of his old reviews, and one sentence in particular has always stuck with me. It provided guidance on how to improve my client relationships:

Transition from "we love Marissa" to "we love Marissa and she helps us grow our business."

At the time, my clients were the advertising executives across different ad agencies in New York. I wasn't a salesperson, as I wasn't selling them anything. Rather, my job was to be the friendly face of Google, so they would consider us a great, helpful partner rather than a competitor (which made it easier for the sales teams to close deals). The whole point of my job was to get my clients to love me. So, when they did, and Scott felt it wasn't enough, I was a confused.

When I asked Scott about it in our formal review, he explained that our clients' love for me was great and all, but on its own it held no currency. Relationships, he told me, were only as good as what they bring you, and mine weren't bringing in anything tangible.

I understood Scott's point, and I didn't think he was necessarily wrong. But it has always been hard for me to think about my relationships in that way. For me, the relationships I build hold currency in that I derive enjoyment from the feelings of connection they bring. Trying to leverage them for some business advantage feels compromising, threatening the strong connections I take great care to build.

In this scenario, neither way is right or wrong. Scott and I simply

don't experience relationships the same way. For people like me, connection to others is its own reward. For people like Scott, relationships for their own sake aren't as rewarding, and these types of people derive less enjoyment from connection. It's not necessarily that the Scotts of the world see all their relationships as a means to an end. It's that they're more willing to put those relationships at risk to gain something in return. It's not a binary, good/bad black/white kind of thing, where you're either a hippie or Gordon Gekko. It's a continuum with many shades, on which you index more toward one side than the other in most, but not all, parts of your life.

Let's overgeneralize for a moment and pretend that Scott represents all men, and I represent all women. I would be better than Scott at nurturing a strong circle of girlfriends in my personal life, and Scott would be better at doing so in business, where these relationships yield more tangible outcomes. When men like Scott select "mentors" and form boys' clubs at work, the outcome can be defined more as an *alliance* than as a close circle of friendship. Men like competition, and the corporate world is a political cesspool, where trading favors can help you succeed. If you're like me, however, doing this is uncomfortable because it threatens the connection and trust in the relationship.

Neither I nor Scott are superior to each other in this regard. We simply derive different emotional rewards from our relationships. The problem is that most corporations run a zero-sum competition, and that means the Scotts of the world will fare better. Not because they're more suited for success, but because they're more suited for competition. If you change the rules of the game, and success is predicated on a win-win dynamic, people like me, who are more suited for collaboration and more adept at building relationships, will rise to the top.

The inherent power in female relationships is what we see

manifested in the romance novel industry, the new moms group, and the female-dominated matriarchies of the animal world.

In light of this, we can better understand why women easily come together in certain areas and fail to do so in others. Amassing power and success in the corporate world comes at the expense of one's relationships. Because of its nature as a competitive, zero-sum game, for someone to succeed, another person must lose. At Facebook and Google, employees are graded on a curve. No two people on the same team can be equally amazing or equally terrible; you must be more amazing or more terrible than your closest peer. Similarly, to "win" a promotion, your peer must lose. Spots are scarce, and competition is fierce, intensifying the higher on the ladder you climb. This competitive, win-lose system discourages cooperative behavior and destroys the fabric of female relationships.

Romance novelists are in a win-win environment. The genre's readership is in the millions, and they buy more books all the time. If they love one author, and a new one comes on the scene, a reader doesn't have to choose between them when buying a book. She can buy both. Therefore, if one author helps another succeed, this doesn't threaten her livelihood.

The threat to relationships isn't just an abstract concept, as evidence shows that women derive much of their satisfaction in life from relationships and connection.¹⁰ When given the opportunity to forge these connections for mutual gain, women are unstoppable. But the zero-sum competitive games of the corporate world pit us against each other, and in this competition to nowhere, our relationships are the first casualties.

For women, competitions erode more than just relationships; they reduce our creativity and work performance. Researchers from Washington University in St. Louis studied the strengths and

weaknesses of men and women working in groups. Their results show that women are more creative in groups built on collaboration. Throw a competitive component into the picture, and they begin to falter. Men are the exact opposite. As the study's authors state, "If teams work side by side, women tend to perform better and even outperform men—they're more creative. As soon as you add the element of competition though, the picture changes. Men under those circumstances gel together. They become more interdependent and more collaborative, and women just do the opposite."¹¹

The effects of competitive versus cooperative systems will be addressed in more detail in chapter 7. For now, though, the point is this: women derive satisfaction, reward, and power from building and sustaining relationships. The win-lose games of a corporate hierarchy erode the very thing that makes women strong. Corporations aren't structured as competitions because they're superior to all other arrangements, but because they were created by men, through a male worldview, at a time when virtually no women were in the workforce. Women are under the microscope for their failure to play by men's rules, instead of everyone stepping back and recognizing that the world has changed, and the rules are no longer working.