

REVIEWS

Lean In? Run Away!

Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead

by Sheryl Sandberg

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Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will To Lead* is troubling, not so much for the quaint advice she offers young women who may want to join the ranks of the one percent who run Fortune 500 companies, populate the boards of such companies, rake in millions and decide the fates of people like me. What troubles is what's not there: the context of social history, feminism, and economics.

As she embarks, Sandberg wonders why she, as the chief operating officer of Facebook, is one of the few women of her generation still standing. Throughout her book, she presents Larry Summers as the avuncular Harvard economics professor who invited her to intern at the World Bank and later invites her to work at the U.S. Department of Treasury to serve as chief of staff. Sandberg later suggests Jen Holleran, an educational "reformer," to head Mark Zuckerberg's foundation to improve schools in Newark, New Jersey.

Right from the start, Sandberg avoids the question of feminism by answering President of the Rockefeller Foundation Judith Rodin's lament that so many younger women chose to drop out of the workforce after her "generation fought so hard to give all of [them] choices," not with a brief history of the marriage of the neoliberal devotees with the Dixiecrats that won Reagan the White House,

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but with the notion that women could not meet the challenge of family and a grueling career climb.

To that end, Sandberg devotes her book to offering women tips on how they should stay the course without mentioning political and social realities, out of context if you will. In a nutshell, Sandberg advises women to sit at the table when at meetings with high-ranking corporate leaders, raise their hands during questions and answers, take jobs they are 60 percent qualified for, be honest, look for projects that have growth potential and volunteer to do them, acknowledge hurt feelings and move on, find a partner who will not only make money but will help with the children and force corporate leaders to mentor them through brief interactions—in an elevator, in the hallway, or in their offices—without ever asking them to be mentors.

In so advising, Sandburg illustrates her points with some life examples. When discussing being honest, she recalls declining Summers' invitation to work with him at the Treasury Department because she was divorcing a man who lived in Washington, DC. She credits that honest moment with Summers' agreeing to bring her on board a year later.

What a great guy.

In telling that story, does she expect that the smart women she hopes will stay the course won't remember that Summers is the same guy who later was fired from Harvard for making disparaging remarks about African-American scholarship and women's aptitude for math and science? Are these Ivy League B school graduates to forget that Summers bullied Brooksley Born, then chair of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, to stand down from her recommendation that the derivative markets be regulated, which set up the economic crisis of 2008, as William Greider reminds us in the *Nation*?¹

When talking about juggling young children and a career, Sandberg shares how she encouraged a vacillating Holleran to take the job overseeing Zuckerberg's \$100 million foundation to help Newark's school system. That fact, as a good NEA union member, sent me to Google to learn that Zuckerberg donated the money because he likes New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and his policies, and that Holleran is now working to set up charter schools on the public dime.

As I read what was not there, I kept wondering, "To whom is Sandberg writing? Who is her audience?" As I wondered, the image that Virginia Woolf painted in her book *A Room of One's Own* of Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters sitting in their parlors writing with men hovering about their shoulders came to mind—men whose very presence impeded their creativity and self-expression (first published in October 1929 by Hogarth in England and Harcourt Brace & Co in the United States).²

A key tenet of business education, Sandberg recalls, thinking as she flew to a Women's Media Center speech at the behest of Gloria Steinem, is to fit in. Perhaps, she admits, "This might not be the best approach."

Thus, begins her radicalization. For the first time in her life, at that speech Sandberg talked about what it was like to be a woman in business. That opportunity led to her TEDTalk about women as business leaders, which she gave despite the warnings from her friends that not fitting in and noting that women and men are different could cost her credibility and her career. The feedback from her talk was so encouraging that she decided to write the book.

However, like a good general in the businessman's army, Sandberg's lack of context demonstrates that the men are not only in the room but they are in her head. To say anything that might be remotely critical would in fact cost her career. Although understanding the brutality of big business and publishing anyway is an act of courage, it isn't exactly an incentive for women to sell their souls to become captains of industry. 

ENDNOTES

1. William Greider, "Stop Larry Summers," *The Nation*, July 20, 2013. Retrieved from: www.thenation.com/blog/175372/stop-larry-summers-he-messes-again#axzz2b3pbvqA (In this article, Greider calls Summers, "a toxic retreat from the old boys' network and a nettlesome egotist.")
2. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. Connecticut: Martino Fine Books, 2013.