



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

by Sheryl Sandberg
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This book explores women’s achievement in the workforce and what holds women back from reaching for jobs at the top.

Girls and women are well-represented in education and often have high achievement in our classrooms. Popular media states that women are taking over job markets that have been traditionally held by men. In opposition to this, Sandberg claims women “have ceased making real progress at the top of any industry” (p.5-6). Why is that? Is there an understanding that teachers and educational leaders can glean from Sheryl Sandberg’s experiences, observations and research to support the girls we teach and help them embrace their power?

Sheryl Sandberg’s stories illustrate differences of self-concept that exist between men and women and how they affect overall achievement. She argues that compliance is rewarded in education, but risk-taking is valued in career building. She highlights that when boys call out answers they are usually listened to, but when girls do they are scolded “for breaking the rules” (p. 20). How many bold girls are described as bossy or abrasive? Do you think of these terms used in the context of the boys in your class? Many of these responses are unconscious and built through stereotypical images created in the media. An awareness piece is needed to help teachers understand these cycles and reinforce the enabling of girls’ voices in our classrooms.

A lack of self-concept also creates barriers to achievement. We need to teach our girls to say thank you when recognized for their accomplishments versus explaining their success away as luck or a misconception of their worthiness. Sheryl Sandberg explains how this results in a phenomenon that most women experience as “impostor syndrome” which limits women because they will only take on jobs when they perceive they have all the skills required versus taking a risk. It can make women take back seats during important meetings and limits women’s ability to advance in the workplace. What can we do to help girls overcome the distorted perceptions of ability that live in their brains?

She believes in teaching “faking it until you make it” and the power that comes from this trick. As well, she explains how the reflective process is a powerful tool that allows our students, female and male, to acknowledge their perception of an upcoming situation and the realities that surround it.

Other insights relate to more adult situations, but Sandberg’s stories can highlight the unconscious biases that minimize successes for our female students. Reading is always a personal journey and insights gained depend on individual experiences. What can you learn from Sandberg? How can her experiences support your students and how might they support your personal growth in the educational field?

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