

‘Lean In’: Five Years Later...Lean In Latina

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For some, Sheryl Sandberg’s book has been a powerful manifesto. Others have dismissed it as naïve and irrelevant. What is its actual legacy?

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People ask why I started [Lean In Latinas](#). Well, I grew up in East San Jose in an environment where people were living on welfare checks. There were drugs, gangs, guns, and a lot of dysfunction in my own family. I never heard the word “college” come out of my parents’ mouth; I didn’t know anyone who went. I was lost. I dropped out of high school when I was 17. But I got a job in health care. I was smart, I had hustle, and I had mentors at work, and it wasn’t too many years before I had people with college degrees and masters reporting to me.

I wanted to go back to college, though, and got to Stanford in my late 20s (and later, I went for my master’s). I knew I was smart, but it was so uncomfortable. One of the issues with Latino culture is that at work, people don’t question authority; you don’t make waves. I was often the only brown girl in the room, and I’d be thinking: *What is wrong with me? Why are the Caucasian girls fine with speaking up?*

Over time, I became more comfortable, of course. I graduated, went on to get a master’s degree and became one of the most decorated people in my field. About two and a half years ago, I read “Lean In” when a friend recommended it. It was very exciting to me, its ideas about leadership, and when I went to the website, I saw the possibility of starting a circle. And when I turned 50, I did a self-assessment. I had checked a bunch of “success” boxes, but I hadn’t checked the “giving back” box. I needed a sense of success in that way, too. I had the intention of helping others, but I didn’t know how. “Lean In” provided me that platform. When Sheryl Sandberg’s [“Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead”](#) — a 228-page manifesto on what women need to do to triumph in the male-dominated workplace — was published five years ago this month, it became a cultural phenomenon.

.....Backstory

It rode the New York Times best-seller list for more than a year, has sold 4.2 million copies worldwide (and still sells roughly 12,500 copies a month, in all formats), landed Ms. Sandberg on the covers of Time and Fortune and on TV shows like “60 Minutes” and “Nightline,” and led to the creation of hundreds of [“Lean In” circles](#), groups of women who meet on a regular basis to discuss and debate the principles of Ms. Sandberg’s book. Circles, said Rachel Thomas,

president of LeanIn.org, “are one of the few places in the world where women can be overtly, unapologetically ambitious.”

For its legions of readers and circle attendees, “Lean In” has been a powerful mentor, one that has helped shape the arc of their careers. Senior executives, both male and female, say they have noticed a shift in attitude in recent years, particularly among their younger employees.

“Five or six years ago, younger job candidates would accept the first offer given to them,” said Eliot Kaplan, a former vice president of talent acquisition at Hearst Publishing and now a career coach. “Since then, 90 percent want to negotiate — usually money, but also vacation time, responsibilities and so forth. Some would actually say, ‘Sheryl Sandberg says I have to.’”

Others have dismissed “Lean In” as overly naïve in its assumptions and advice, [and a flawed manifesto](#) that ignored realities like family and aging parents (the responsibilities for which still largely fall on female shoulders).

“I can’t speak for all corporate women, but I thought it was written by someone who’s never suffered financially or endured true fear about her job or finances,” said Jillian Medoff, a management consultant and novelist whose latest work, “*This Could Hurt*,” is about the drama of corporate culture. “Secretaries, middle managers, assistants and people who are up against the wall can’t lean in, particularly if they’ve had some of the managers I’ve had in the past. There is real fear when it comes to money and speaking up.”

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Sunny Bates, 62

Chief executive officer of Sunny Bates Associates, a management consulting firm

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Here are the crucial things I think Sheryl Sandberg did. First, she made women question not just what’s wrong with the corporate structure, but ask themselves, “How are you holding yourself back?” Because structural change in the work environment is critical — but nothing makes a difference if you’re holding *yourself* back. Many people said, “Oh, she was telling women to blame themselves,” but that’s not it at all. (And the onus isn’t only on women; she talks about men leaning in, too.)

What’s powerful about Sheryl’s writing is that she’s honest. It’s easy to dump on her because of her privilege. But she is self-effacing and self-questioning; she was always asking herself, whenever there was a problem, “What’s my role in this?” And that’s what she gave us, too: She put language to some workplace issues we all know exist but don’t always know how to talk about. The idea of “leaning in” is extremely useful. For example, when we’re feeling excluded at work, when someone isn’t including us in a discussion or a project, we’re all so

uncomfortable. That's when we want to lean back and just ignore it. And that's exactly the time to lean in.

Sheryl makes it very clear how we all grow through discomfort. Think about this as a parent. When I had fights with my one of my daughters when she was younger, my thoughts would drift toward sending her to boarding school. If we both went into our rooms and shut the door, nothing happened. It's when I leaned into the conflict and forced more discussion, painful as it was, that's when things got resolved.

And you know where she *was* really right, even if this part of the movement got her a lot of flak? Choosing your partner, insisting on that person being supportive and participating in the home 50 percent of the time. She was so deliberate about this part of her life. And lots of people took her to task for this, because we aren't comfortable thinking so strategically about love and romance. The truth is, when a marriage is bad, work is a great refuge. I have to admit, I put my husband at the center of everything, and it was a very bad marriage, and my career took off when I got divorced.