It’s time to lean out: An open letter to men in leadership

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Sheryl Sandberg, wrote a book for woman titled *Lean In*. It delivers an important message to women in business to take the opportunities for advancement and growth. I think it’s time for us men in leadership to take it a step further. We must make opportunities to strategically “lean out.” Let’s allow the amazing women in our organizations the opportunity to take credit, have the spotlight and get the recognition that is well overdue.

I had the privilege and honor of attending the 2019 WomanUP! event in Coronado, California this year. WomanUP! is a movement started by a few brave women in leadership within the California Association of Realtors.

It’s reach has now extended past both the geographic and industry borders. Their message of supporting the journey of women to the very top of their careers is not born out of anger or hate, but out of love and empowerment.

It was beautiful to see successful, smart and sassy women do what they naturally do so well; listen, support and encourage one another to achieve more.

I did have three profound takeaways that I feel compelled to share. First, as I listened to the stories of what woman experienced in the workplace, I was horrified. I felt deeply ashamed by the way they have been treated.

One story shared from a female tech CEO will haunt me for years to come. She had hired a well-known and well respected industry consultant to introduce her and her product to the leaders in the real estate industry.

After months of non-performance, she took initiative and started to reach out to potential clients directly while copying him on the messages. In one message, she had made an incorrect assumption that someone might be going to a conference for a network where the potential client didn’t have an affiliation.

It was a common and innocent mistake. The potential client responded graciously. The consultant’s reaction was far less so. He called to tell her to apologize to the potential client, and while doing so, make sure to let them know that “they had talked and he had put her in her place.” This happened not 100 years ago, but in California in the last year.

I will admit to being in boardroom meetings in the last decade shaking my head in disbelief as topics such as not hiring women of childbearing age were openly discussed.

So was not giving a well-deserved raise to a woman because she was a single mom who “wasn’t going anywhere because she needed the job.” These were not singular events. There were more instances than I care to count at multiple leading companies where equally egregious biases against women and people of other diversities were thematic.

This leads me to a second observation from the speakers. I was struck with the almost universal question of confidence. An illustration of this came from a statistic from which was shared.

When a promotion is posted, woman feel they need to qualify for 100 percent of the prerequisites before they apply. Men will apply when they meet more than 60 percent of them.

As a man, I can testify personally that much of my personal success was the risks I took when my confidence outweighed my skills and abilities.

I had the fortune of growing up with parents who had a love for travel. This afforded me an early look at the beauty in different people, cultures and perspectives. This gave me a deep appreciation of two things:

1. When you have a challenge in a foreign place you can figure out a solution. Not understanding the language, being devoid of local currency, or the lack of having someone you can call to help are impediments. My confidence comes from a place that knows through experience, despite how bad things look, a solution can still be found.
2. Every person has an equal and inherent value. This is true regardless of color, creed, religion, culture, sex, socioeconomic status or any other factor. If we stay trapped behind our fear of differences, we are limited and small. When we learn to look past ourselves, we open ourselves up to unlimited growth by learning from others. As a result, my world got a lot bigger and the globe became smaller.

Confidence is a natural by-product of experience. Experience comes when we are allowed ownership of our outcomes. As leaders, we need to remind those around us to make mistakes. To give them the freedom to explore different ways to solve problems. We can give those we work with the space and freedom to gain the experience which instills self-confidence.

My last observation was the beauty and perspective women bring. Perhaps it was being in the unusual place in business where women vastly outnumbered men. An environment were I was immersed in the power of the feminine without the usual filters of the business environment. Every success and achievement was celebrated by the entire tribe.

There was a tangible lack of the aggressiveness, dominating behavior or competitiveness which are hallmarks in the normal work setting. There was no bashing or posturing. Just beautiful, vulnerable and strong leaders who happened to be women doing it their way, writing their own rules and showing us how it should be done.

Sheryl Sandberg's advice to "Lean In" is much needed in today's society. But after decades of personally advocating for women's voices and perspectives at the boardroom table, we aren't making progress fast enough.

Men, we must take time to strategically "lean out." Let's allow these amazing women the opportunity to take credit, have the spotlight and get the recognition that is well overdue. We need their perspective. We need their voices to be heard. Our world, and our businesses, will be a better place for it.

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