Eat the Meat and Spit Out the Bones (Part 2):

Why Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*

is Worth Reading

Dr. Thompson's Mentoring Tip for the Week

April 8, 2013

Dear Colleague:

Many years ago, I was sitting in a California beauty salon chatting with another customer, when I mentioned that I'd written a book. Although this woman and I had gone to the same beauty salon and had discussed various topics for years, all of a sudden her demeanor changed. A frown replaced the pleasant look on her face, and in a tone that sounded more like an insult than a question, she asked, "*You* wrote a book?" At that moment, I had to fight the urge to feel like a criminal. Because I admitted that I'd written a book (which was actually my third published one), this acquaintance acted as if I'd committed a crime. Since then, I've often reflected upon the moment when my relationship with this woman changed from easy-going to tense. From that point on, whenever we saw each other in the beauty shop, we said "hi" to each other, but barely anything else.

Unfortunately, over time, I noticed the same pattern with others. After learning of one or more of my professional accomplishments, certain friends and even some of my extended family members reacted in a similar manner. Instead of being proud, they appeared to disapprove of my success, and I spent many years wondering why.

Today however, I no longer have to try to figure out why these unpleasant reactions occurred, for in her new, bestselling book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, Sheryl Sandberg provides the answer. According to Sandberg, research has shown that "when a man is successful, he is liked by both men and women. When a woman is successful, people of both genders like her less" (Sandberg, 2013, p. 40). Consequently, some women choose to hide their accomplishments, and others fear being disliked so much that they decide not to seek professional advancement.

The fact that I found the answer to a problem that has perplexed me for years is only one of the reasons why I like Sandberg's book. In fact, the book contains invaluable information for men and women. For this reason, in this week's mentoring essay, I'm highlighting some of its features. *Lean In . . .* is controversial, has received negative publicity, and has been the target of a backlash from various high-profile groups and individuals. Nevertheless, if you "eat the meat, and spit out the bones," by focusing on what is useful, I believe that you'll benefit from reading it.

Who is Sheryl Sandberg?

Sheryl Sandberg is a wife, mother, and one of the most successful and influential women in the world. She graduated from the Harvard Business School, where her mentor was Larry Summers, who later became chief economist of the World Bank. Sandberg has worked at the U.S.Treasury Department, became a vice president of Google, and is currently the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook. Her credentials, leadership experience, and willingness to share what she's learned through trial and error, are a few

of the reasons why she's qualified to help others succeed in the workplace, and why her book is an excellent resource.

With all of the great books that are "out there," why should I bother to read Sandberg's book?

As a person whose bedside nightstand and numerous bookcases at home and at work are filled with great books, I know that there are many wonderful books that are competing with each other for attention. However, Sandberg's book is a great mentoring guide for anyone inside of and outside of higher education who wants to avoid self-sabotage in the workplace.

What are some of the book's features?

In addition to providing practical relationship-building, communication-improving, and self-advocacy strategies, in *Lean In* . . . Sandberg does a superb job of supporting her theories with research, and illustrating her main points with personal stories. She's candid about mistakes that she's made in the workplace, describes her insecurities, and explains how her own lack of self-confidence has affected her professional life. These factors and her writing style make the book extremely reader friendly.

Additional features of the book are Sandberg's emphases on:

- the need for more women to assume leadership roles,

- specific ways in which women can improve their leadership skills,

- explicit ways in which men can help females strengthen their leadership skills, and

- ways in which men can make the workplace more hospitable to women.

What are some of the most important messages that you learned from this book?

Although I've been in the workforce for decades, this book reaffirmed some of my beliefs, clarified several points for me, and also provided me with several new insights. For example, one of the most surprising insights for me was learning the similarities between the workplace experiences of white women and women of color. Although I'm an African American and Sandberg is white, some of her experiences were identical to my own.

Furthermore, Sandberg's decision to devote an entire chapter to the importance of truth telling and using direct communication in the workplace surprised me. As a person who has often gotten into trouble for telling the truth and for speaking honestly, I was happy to see an influential woman insisting that these characteristics are not only needed in the workplace, but that they should be valued as well. However, in the chapter called "Seek and Speak Your Truth," Sandberg also acknowledges that fear prevents most employees from communicating honestly, especially to their bosses.

Another message that I learned from *Lean In . . .* is that it's important for me to read the works of individuals who specialize in fields that are quite different from my own. Because my work focuses on parent empowerment, the prison pipeline, and education-related issues, I usually read books, reports, and articles about these topics. However, since Sandberg frequently cites research studies that I've never heard of, her

book reminded me that there's a plethora of studies that I need to read. Therefore, one of my goals is to find several of these studies, and incorporate them into my writing projects.

What are your four favorite quotes from the book?

As I was reading *Lean In . . .* I took extensive notes on the main points that I wanted to remember, and my favorite quotes. Among my favorites are:

- What one of Sandberg's former African American supervisors told her-- "Sometimes, those of us who are different . . . need to remind people to treat us appropriately" (pp. 75 & 76).

- "Hard work and results *should* be recognized by others, but when they aren't, advocating for oneself becomes necessary . . . . This must be done with great care. But it must be done" (p. 63).

- "The ability to forge a unique path with occasional dips, detours, and even dead ends presents a better chance for fulfillment" (p. 53).

- "We are so rarely brave enough to tell the truth" (p. 78).

Conclusion

In spite of the controversy surrounding *Lean In . . .* , I hope that you'll "eat the meat and spit out the bones." In other words, I'm urging you to read the book for yourself and take what's useful and disregard what's not. If you do this, I know that the book will enrich you. Furthermore, I'm certain that you'll benefit from reading some of the studies that Sandberg describes, and benefit from incorporating them into your own writing

projects. With this in mind, hang in there, have a great week, **keep writing**, and be on the lookout for next week's mentoring advice.

Blessings and peace,

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