

Jessica Wang on Sheryl Sandberg

Sheryl Sandberg is currently the COO of Facebook, one of the first employees at Google, and was ranked in 2011 by Forbes as the 5th Most Powerful Woman in the World. Born in 1969, Sandberg grew up in North Miami Beach and attended Harvard where she majored in Economics. During her time at Harvard, she caught the attention of one of her professors, Larry Summers, who volunteered to serve as her thesis adviser. Sandberg graduated first in the economics department, and eventually went on to work for Summers at the World Bank. After two years there, she went to Harvard Business School, worked at McKinsey for a year, then went back to work as chief of staff for Summers, who was now Deputy Treasury Secretary under the Clinton Administration.

In 2001, Sandberg joined Google after being convinced by Eric Schmidt to get on the “rocket ship”. While there, she took over AdWords and AdSense and made both products wildly profitable. She also oversaw AOL’s deal with Google in 2002 to make it AOL’s primary search engine. Eventually, Sandberg tried for the COO position at Google but couldn’t get it, and began talking to Mark Zuckerberg about Facebook. She joined Facebook as COO in 2008.

One of the cornerstones of Sandberg’s life and advice to her mentees is Acting with Authenticity when it comes to choosing a profession – doing something you truly love. If this is not in place, then all domains of one’s life will suffer. Sandberg left her job at McKinsey, and then later at Google, when she felt that she was no longer passionate about her work or making an impact. In both those cases, she followed her passion to companies and roles where she could utilize her full potential and have maximum impact. As Sandberg says in her Barnard commencement speech, “It is the ultimate luxury to combine passion and contribution. It’s also a very clear path to happiness.”

Sandberg also incorporates the principle of Being Real by being the same person wherever she is, whether it’s in her personal or professional life, despite conventional wisdom that developing relationships employees can compromise objectivity and the ability to make tough management decisions. Sandberg says: “I believe in bringing your whole self to work. We are who we are. When you try to have this division between your personal self and your professional self, what you really are is stiff. . . . That doesn’t mean people have to tell me everything about their personal lives. But I’m pretty sharing of mine.” By removing the barriers between the Work domain and the other three domains through being authentic, Sandberg has removed frictions and potential inner conflicts.

Another one of Sandberg’s main ideas in a TED talk she gave is that women leave the workforce before they actually leave the workforce, an idea that relates to the concept of Acting with Integrity. Once a woman even thinks about having a child, she starts “leaning back” in her career. Once you start quietly leaning back, you won’t be promoted to a job that’s interesting enough to go back to once you do actually have a baby and are thinking about returning. “If two years ago, you didn’t take a promotion and some guy next to you did, if three years ago, you stopped looking for new opportunities, you’re going to be bored, because you should have kept your foot on the gas pedal... keep your foot on the gas pedal until the very day you need leave for a child, then make your decisions. Don’t make your decisions too far in advance, particularly the ones you’re not even conscious you’re making.” Instead of leaning back, Sandberg encourages women to lean into their work so that they have more options later on.

Sandberg’s more underlying point is that women need to be cognizant of how they are managing their domains, and not sandbagging when it comes to their expectations for themselves in a domain as a result of future expectations. Many women early in their careers do not put enough focus on their Work domain because they’re mentally preparing for expanding their Family domain, even when that need is not yet there. By focusing

on the Work domain to their full potential – acting with authenticity and integrity – women can give themselves more options and opportunities once they're prepared to re-enter the workforce after having a baby.

In the Family domain, Sandberg advocates to women to “make sure your partner is a real partner.” She pointed out that there is a societal stigma around men doing housework and taking care of kids, but really if we are to live in an equal society, that burden should be shared. In families where the “homemaking” duties are shared, married couples are actually happier than when one person shoulders more of the burden. Sandberg has been innovating by coming up with creative solutions to fulfilling multiple domains – she has made a pact with her husband (CEO of SurveyMonkey): if one of them is travelling, the other will be home for dinner each night with their six-year-old son and three-year-old daughter; weekends are exclusively family time. “We have a fifty-fifty marriage,” Sandberg says. If women can outsource some of their Family domain duties to their husbands (or even to third parties like housekeepers or nannies), it allows them to create four-way wins by freeing up time to enrich non-Family domains.

Sandberg has also taken a very low-ego approach throughout her career, helping others to advance and succeed, especially women. Mark Zuckerberg said of her: “She could go be the C.E.O. of any company that she wanted to, but I think the fact that she really wants to get her hands dirty and work, and doesn’t need to be the front person all the time, is the amazing thing about her. It’s that low-ego element, where you can help the people around you and not need to be the face of all the stuff.” One example of Sandberg putting this to action is the mostly dinners she hosts at her home, where she invites top women leaders to network with each other – connecting people in the process and increasing her own power in the process.

While there are controversies surrounding Sandberg’s success, overall she has integrated the principles of Total Leadership into the four main domains of her life and found success in doing so. I think there is a great deal to be learned from her, especially as a businesswoman that is seeking a career in Tech in Silicon Valley. What particularly resonates with me is her advice to “lean in” while I still can -- my goal should be to advance to a point where I am motivated to want to come back to the workforce after starting a family. Achieving wins in all domains doesn't necessarily mean I have to sacrifice achieving my full potential.

Bibliography:

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"Why we have too few women leaders," Sheryl Sandberg, TED Talks.

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