

MINNESOTA LAWYER

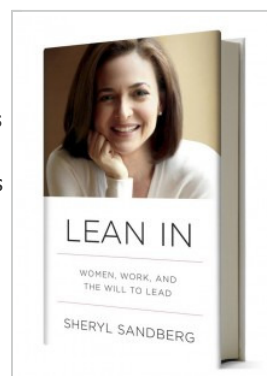
Kate Baxter-Kauf reviews "Lean In," and finds an excellent primer on career ambition and tactical strategy for young lawyers, especially but not only female lawyers.

Lean In: A Review for Young Lawyers

By: Kate Baxter-Kauf April 22, 2013 4 Comments

Unless you've been living under a rock, it's fairly likely you've heard of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's book "Lean In." There have been countless reviews (though I'd caution you only to read the ones that have actually read the book), not to mention backlash and then backlash to the backlash, but whenever I talk to my friends who are young or newly-admitted lawyers, they tell me the same thing: I've heard of it, I intend to read it, I know a lot about it from the Internet, but I'm not really sure it's for me. As a rising lawyer who ordered the book to be delivered the day it came out but took nearly a month to read it, let me tell you: it's for you and you should read it.

"Lean In" is an excellent primer on career ambition and tactical strategy for young lawyers, especially but not only female lawyers. We read a ton of advice on marketing, branding, building a client base and thinking long-term about career ambition, but oftentimes it feels (to me at least) that there is not a lot of practical advice on how to do that. "Lean In" contains 11 digestible chapters (read the footnotes!) on topics such as negotiating, family planning, career planning and relationships. Each chapter had anecdotes and statistical data that provided a good jump start for me to think personally about my own career.



The messages I got from the book that I really appreciated were these:

- It's good to be ambitious.
- It's good to be intentional and plan where you want your career to go.
- It's good to have short-term and long-term goals, and to figure out how to best achieve them.
- It's good to think in terms of 'and' instead of 'or.'

Not all of the chapters were immediately personally relevant to me—my partner is an equal partner and it never occurred to me to do anything other than charge full steam ahead while pregnant (hence how I ended up with an almost 4-month-old baby on the first day of law school orientation)—but were fascinating to read regardless. Alana Bassin, a prominent Minneapolis attorney, echoed the importance of the book for women in these situations, and it read true to me as well. But each chapter gave me something to think about: sitting at the table, negotiating, mentorship, household and family planning, long-term career trajectories.

Sandberg characterizes "Lean In" as the beginning of a discussion, and has set up a website and circles to continue the conversation. This is where "Lean In" seems to me to have the most practical potential for young lawyers. Like many newly-graduated attorneys, I have a ton of friends and colleagues in similar career positions, and I love hearing about where they're at or what their goals are or how work is going. I also have actual work to do on a daily basis, and the occasional happy hour doesn't always provide peer networking as much as I'd like. I love the idea of starting a "Lean In Circle," or joining an existing one, to give me a group of peers to share tips and work through problems together. I've already begun the process of starting my own, and look forward to using the expert advice and materials provided to be intentional and thoughtful about my career.

The book is not without its drawbacks. From my perspective, there are three big ones.

1) I'm skeptical of the big-picture social revolution claims she makes in Chapter 11, where she argues that if there are more women in the top echelons of their respective professions both men and women will be convinced of the necessity of total professional equality for women. For one thing, I doubt that trickle-down feminism is any more effective than trickle-down economics. For another, one reason why privilege remains entrenched is because there

are very real benefits to being privileged, and part of me really doubts that people with privilege (in the context of the book, men) will give that up without a fight. I think the book is read better as individual advice for career planning rather than as a social revolution in and of itself. In that vein, I highly enjoy that the book seems to be sparking salary negotiation because “Sheryl Sandberg Wants Me to Ask You for a Raise.”

2) The book is not for everyone. I counted, and there are exactly two references to same-sex partnerships or people in the entire book, and it’s unclear how a lot of her advice would necessarily apply in that circumstance. All forms of discrimination (racial, gender, sexual orientation) are somewhat conflated as “challenges” to be faced rather than overlapping and intersectional but sometimes distinct structural issues. The book also presumes that the C-suite or the partnership track is what everyone should want, when perhaps we should be reassessing overall whether that type of work culture is really helpful. Sandberg herself would caution that the book is designed to be read alongside calls for structural changes, and others have chimed in there as well.

3) I am planning on discussing this more in a future article, but Sandberg’s employment law advice—which is that employers should be less afraid of discussing family planning with their employees—seems potentially dangerous. I am not an employment lawyer, but there are reasons why asking those types of questions can be problematic; i.e., that they can be used as cover for discrimination.

That being said, the book is worth reading. “Lean In” has so much more to add than the now-countless articles written about it (many of which I believe are worth reading as well). It gave me a list of other books to read, pointed me toward additional online resources, and was an excellent way, as a lawyer at the beginning of her career, to think about advancement and intentional goal setting. Is it perfect? No. But as a way to get started thinking about an intentional career, it’s a great one.

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4 COMMENTS



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April 23, 2013 at 12:11 pm

Would you recommend for men, too? I’ve actually been meaning to read “Lean In,” hearing it mentioned time and time again on the radio, web, etc. Seems like an important book out right now.



Kate Baxter-Kauf

April 23, 2013 at 2:34 pm

I would. I’m not sure all parts would be as relevant, but the Harvard Business Review article I cited above (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2013/03/three_reasons_men_should_read.html) gives a pretty compelling case for it.



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May 2, 2013 at 11:20 am

Ah, thanks for re-emphasizing the Harvard Business review’s article. Great points made on awareness and the call to action for men to change their thinking and get on board.

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