



MARISSA ORR

Six years after Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg advocated for women to take charge, assert themselves in the workplace and start “leaning in” to their ambitions, the backlash to her once- celebrated bestselling book “Lean In” is becoming a widespread counter-phenomenon in its own right. A simple Google search of recent articles finds everyone from The Telegraph to Yahoo! Finance and Glamour magazine chronicling the cultural shift. At her recent promotional stop in Brooklyn for her memoir “Becoming,” former First Lady Michelle Obama even said, “It’s not always enough to lean in because that s*** doesn’t work.” The time could not be better for a radical new mindset, and that starts here and now with “Lean Out: The Truth About Women, Power and the Workplace” by Google and Facebook veteran Marissa Orr.

Based in part on The Nature of Compelling Women, a popular lecture series Marissa first launched during her successful 13-year stint at Google, “Lean Out” is not simply a retort to Sandberg’s premise, which the author believes is based on a male worldview. Rather, it’s a revolutionary path forward that has the power to change the lives of women in the corporate world and beyond. Blending poignant and humorous insights from her time ‘playing the game’ in the corporate trenches with in depth research, Marissa – a New Jersey based single mom of three young children – calls for a complete overhaul to the business world’s limited, carefully constructed paradigm of what constitutes a successful leader in today’s day and age.

In her view, our systems of organizing employees, evaluating performance and motivating people, were built by men, from a male worldview, with the intention of making male employees more productive – all built to serve an economic model that no longer exists. She believes conventional approaches to closing the gender gap – i.e. be more like men to “get ahead” – have come at the expense of female well-being. Marissa suggests that overhauling the traditional corporate hierarchy will result in greater diversity in corporate leadership and foster healthier work environments for both genders. As she writes, “To close the gender gap, what makes more sense: rewiring women’s personalities or rewiring the system to better meet their needs?”

Instead of listening to the voices of hierarchy telling women why they need to be more like men to succeed, Marissa suggests finding ways to better value the talent that women already bring to the table. The main issue she is trying to convey is that the entire public conversation and conventional understanding of the gender gap is wrong, predicated on the notion that women are oppressed by patriarchal culture, and that in order for men and women to be equal, we all have to be the same. “Less women at the top is a clear signal that the system is dysfunctional, and it not only results in a lack of diversity, but also crushes creativity and makes organizations slow or unable to adapt,” she says. “People are diverse by nature; the only reason it’s not reflected at the top of corporate America is because the system rewards small subset of human behavior and personality traits.”

For a long time, Marissa admits that she thought something was wrong with her, like she was not good enough or not doing the right thing. She couldn’t understand why she was feeling that way until she had a better grip on how this all works. That’s when she came to the realization that it’s all a game for power, pretending that the winners rise because they are better leaders or more competent, when in reality they are simply better at winning this particular game. “Lean Out” is Marissa’s way of giving women permission to be more open and honest about how they are feeling about these issues. “Like mine, their conflicted ambition should not be seen as a sign of weakness and deficiency,” she says. “I hope they will no longer internalize



things and feel something is wrong with them. I want women to find success on their own terms and be authentic to who they are. If our goal is to empower women, I think the way we have been doing it compromises our well-being. I want to be a catalyst to empower them in a way that harnesses the power they already have.”

One of the most refreshing aspects of “Lean Out” is the fact that unlike Sandberg, Marissa is not a billionaire CEO pontificating from the mountaintop, but a relatable former middle level employee at two of the world’s most successful companies. As she has discovered during her speaking engagements everywhere from Google, Twitter, ChickTech, Pace University and the New School in NYC, women at all levels can relate to her wild roller coaster ride of success and affirmation at Google, followed by the denigration and humiliation she experienced during her year and a half at Facebook. Her message was resonating with women because nobody else out there was giving words to what they were thinking and feeling, things that women traditionally stuffed down and had a hard time articulating. Laying the foundation for “Lean Out,” Marissa’s workshop attendance exploded 1,500 percent over the course of a single year.

Marissa is the first to admit that she was motivated to write the book after feeling broken by her experience at Facebook, which she partially chronicles in the prologue, which she first wrote as an in depth, confessional blog post at medium.com. She was a founding member of Google’s sales operation and strategy team, and early on in her time there, won the company’s highest honor, the Founder’s Award. When the company acquired YouTube, she became head of market intelligence and strategy and helped Google sell competitively for the first time. In 2016, she was courted away to join Facebook as vertical marketing manager, and was beyond thrilled to have a brief one on one with Sandberg, who was once her idol. Shortly after joining the company, however, the exec who recruited her turned on her, shut her out, and relegated her to administrative tasks normally given to entry-level employees.

Ironically, Sandberg and Orr are from the same hometown, attended the same grade schools and grew up in homes less than half a mile apart. The parallels continued into adulthood as both joined Google in its halcyon days, each pursuing their mutual passion for helping women, and eventually, both landing at Facebook. So, how can two women with such similar backgrounds have such polar opposite perspectives (not to mention trajectories) in regards to the national conversation on women and the workplace?

“After my plunge at Facebook, I was reading (“Lean In”) through an entirely different lens, and it led me to a significant realization: ‘Lean In’ was completely antithetical to everything I had taught in my workshops and ran counter to everything I believed as a human being,” she says. “When it came to success, I had been listening to Sandberg’s advice instead of my own. And, I was angry...at myself for buying into someone else’s idea of who I should be and what my career should look like.” Later at a women’s leadership conference, Marissa was in attendance as Sandberg took the stage with the executive at Facebook who’d restricted her role at the company, and Marissa – realizing it was all B.S. - had a fury-fueled epiphany: “In that moment, I made a promise to myself. Instead of getting angry and self-righteous about the theater of feminism, I would continue sharing my truth and telling my story.”

Marissa became laser focused on “Lean Out,” Googling “How to write a narrative non-fiction book,” taking workshops and changing her habit of responding to the needs of others instead of her own. She cultivated a newfound discipline, getting up at 4:30 a.m. every day to write before she left for her job at Facebook in NYC. Yet in some ways, she was merely reconnecting with a powerful talent she always had. Growing up in the



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Miami area, where her dad was an attorney repping the teamsters and her mom was head of Parks and Rec for their small town, Marissa expressed herself so well on paper that one difficult teacher in high school accused her of plagiarism. Later working for Google, Marissa – who earned both her Bachelor’s and Master’s in Decision and Informational Science from the University of Florida – enjoyed the creativity of writing stories for her sales teams.

“Right now,” she says, “we are on the precipice of everything changing. The most fulfilling aspect of the ‘Lean Out’ journey is knowing that I have the opportunity to contribute something significant to the cultural conversation. Everyone I told about this project thought I was crazy to give up working in the corporate world for this bold venture of writing and speaking. Yet, I believed in myself, got scrappy and hustled to get to where I am. I always lived to please other people, so this is a huge turning point in the arc of my life.” A self-proclaimed corporate rebel, Marissa has taken her ‘bumps in the road’ and turned them into transformational experiences. With “Lean Out,” she provides a fresh voice for a new generation of thinkers.