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“Double Down” Debate Draws Kudos and Ire

By Robin Madell (San Francisco)

“Do not lean back; lean in. Put your foot on that gas pedal and keep it there until the day you have to make a decision, and then make a decision. That’s the only way, when that day comes, you’ll even have a decision to make.”

—Sheryl Sandberg, COO, Facebook

There’s increasing polarization on the subject of how to handle work-life’s ever-escalating challenges for women. The friction is visible in the varied media responses to news that incoming Yahoo CEO [Marissa Mayer](#) will be the first female CEO to take the top spot while pregnant, and to Anne-Marie Slaughter’s controversial cover story for *The Atlantic*, [Why Women Still Can’t Have It All](#).

Part of the dilemma and discussion revolves around a concept coined by Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s COO: “leaning in” versus “leaning back.” In last year’s [commencement speech](#) to Barnard College, Sandberg encouraged graduates to “lean way into” their careers. “If all young women start to lean in, we can close the ambition gap right here, right now, if every single one of you leans in,” said Sandberg.

Sandberg describes how failing to “lean in” inadvertently leads many women to leave the workforce:

“Women almost never make one decision to leave the workforce,” said Sandberg. “It doesn’t happen that way. They make small little decisions along the way that eventually lead them there. Maybe it’s the last year of med school when they say, I’ll take a slightly less interesting specialty because I’m going to want more balance one day. Maybe it’s the fifth year in a law firm when they say, I’m not even sure I should go for partner, because I know I’m going to want kids eventually. These women don’t even have relationships, and already they’re finding balance, balance for responsibilities they don’t yet have. And from that moment, they start quietly leaning back. The problem is, often they don’t even realize it.”

In her keynote speech at the [2012 Anita Borg Institute Women of Vision Awards](#), Kara Swisher paid tribute to Sandberg’s concept, as Swisher described her own personal experience on the heels of suffering a minor stroke. Swisher said many suggested to her after her health scare that she should slow

down, relax, and spend more time with her children. In response, Swisher told them that she planned to do the opposite.

“One of the things I did tell them was, ‘I’m going to double down. I’m going to go forward. I’m going to be even more of a workaholic,’ said Swisher. “They say I should slow down. And I say, ‘You know, actually, I’m going to do more. I’m going to push more. I’m going to lean in more.’”

Swisher went on to describe how much Steve Jobs accomplished in the last years of his life, while under pressure and suffering from serious illness. “One of the things I think that happened to him is that he decided he had a very short time left, and instead of wasting it, he pushed on forward,” said Swisher. “During the last years of his life, he created the iPhone, the iPad, he was moving into television. The things we think of him as great, he did when he was very sick, he did in the last years of life when he didn’t have time.”

She continued by saying that while she believed it’s “absolutely true” that women can’t have it all, she believes women can have what they want in life if they’re very careful and spend a lot of time thinking about it. “When you think about being a woman, and you feel like you shouldn’t push forward, you should pull back because of having a baby or anything else, that is exactly the time to turn around and double down,” said Swisher.

Swisher concluded with a friendly jab at Arianna Huffington’s recent installation of [nap rooms](#) at the Huffington Post—a response to having fainted from work-life exhaustion four years ago, hitting her head on her desk and breaking her cheekbone: “And if that means, I’m sorry Arianna, you don’t take as many naps, that’s the way it’s going to have to be.”

While Sandberg and Swisher are in alignment with their views on the value of the “lean in,” not everyone in the business community agrees. In fact, a random poll by The Glass Hammer of women executives and workplace experts drew a nearly even 50/50 split between those for and against the idea. And many of those against it were strongly against it.

Mixed Bag

“Making blanket statements about how overworked female executives should respond to serious work life challenges is unfair to all of us,” says Shelley F. Hall, principal and managing director of [Catalytic Management](#). “None of us are alike nor are our situations the same. We come in all different configurations from single moms, to two-parent households, to households with a grandparent who can help. To tell women that if you want to succeed or get ahead you must ‘double down’ and work harder when you’re challenged is just not realistic for many women, while others will only feel good if they do raise the bar for themselves.”

“I think the advice to ‘double down’ is not only ludicrous, but harmful,” agrees [Teri Johnson](#). “Work-life balance is not some nice idea that isn’t achievable or important. It is important to all of us for sustainable mental and physical health and well-being. The key word is sustainable.”

Johnson suggests an analogy of the situation is like the difference between a long distance runner versus a relay racer. “Any of us can push hard in a relay, but the distance runner knows to pace herself, to make rest days as important as training days and to take excellent care of herself to avoid injury. She saves the real push for the race, when it is important.”

Rebekah Iliff, co-founder and CEO of [talkTECH Communications](#), says the concept of double down “couldn’t be further from accurate.” “Women tend to carry around a stronger sense of guilt about things, and the voices inside our heads—for whatever reason—lead us to believe that if we just keep going, keep adding more stuff, multi-tasking, and carrying the load of those around us that we will be more successful; we will then get the credit that we deserve because when work is tough it must mean we are doing something wrong,” says Iliff. “The thought leaders may be right, but the perception, as seen through our lens, often creates a problem.”

[Paul Heagen](#) says in his work with senior executives, he has seen the “collateral damage” from the double-down theory. “No one—male or female—can double down for long in areas that command so much of their intellectual, emotional and physical energy,” says Heagan. “We very often can have greater capacity than we realize, but it is also rarely sustainable, and it comes at a cost that is insidious.”

Hit It Harder

On the other side of the aisle, there were as many passionate proponents of women “hitting it harder” instead of pulling back. Kathy Gersch, executive vice president at [Kotter International](#), raises four children with her husband while traveling extensively for her work. “For women leaders that are passionate about the things that they invest their time in—whether it is a work project or a family project—I’ve found that it’s common to put your hand up again and again to do more, even when your plate is full,” says Gersch. “That’s how you achieve success.”

“I agree with the double-down concept,” says leadership expert [Susan Steinbrecher](#). “It takes a great deal of perseverance to run a company today and there will always be times when ‘all hands on deck’ are required. You simply cannot be successful if you don’t have the willingness to do what it takes during challenging times.” Strategic partnerships manager Jaime Catmull of [ConsumerTrack, Inc.](#) says she “totally agrees” with doubling down as well. “In my experience the best revenge is success, and when things get tough you have to double down and try harder.”

Another advocate of the idea is financial expert Neale Godfrey, who started her career in the 1970s as one of the first female executives in banking. Godfrey worked at The Chase Manhattan Bank, where she spearheaded one of the largest mergers (Du Pont/Conoco) in U.S. history.

“It is a perfect opportunity to shine when time are tough,” says Godfrey. “I agree that you have to push even harder in those moments. It gives you the opportunity to really demonstrate that you are the type of person who can not only perform under pressure, but can also be counted on in times of stress. You have to ask yourself, which person do you want to be? The one who retreats or the one who leads the charge?”

Attorney Linda Jackson, co-founder and partner at [Salazar Jackson](#), is also in the “doubling down” camp. “I agree wholeheartedly with the idea that women need to push harder instead of pulling back during times of pressure when managing work-life challenges,” says Jackson. “In today’s economy, clients want their money’s worth more than ever. And clients have consistently said that the two things they deem top priority are responsiveness and results. Like their male counterparts, female attorneys must deliver or the client will look elsewhere.”

Happy Medium?

As an alternative to the either/or approach, a few respondents advocated a middle ground focused on neither the push nor the pull. A better way is to work smarter, not harder, this group says. Women should spend time identifying their high-value goals and pushing hard in those areas only, while pulling back in other areas.

“The answer to this is...neither,” says [Roxana Hewertson](#). “It’s not a question of pulling back or doubling down. Anyone trying to generalize or advise the masses on this topic is walking into quicksand.” Hewertson emphasizes that factors such as values, life cycle, timing, family, goals, and the situation at hand all play a large role in the dilemma and cannot be lumped together as if the only factor to consider is “how to get ahead in my career.” “It is *all* about choices and decisions,” says Hewertson. “Women (and men) executives need to make thoughtful choices about work and life issues.”

“It’s not a matter of ‘doing more’ or ‘doing less,’” agrees Sue Podbielski, [Cigna](#) president and general manager for Midwest markets. “I do not believe you have to choose. It is a matter of knowing where to focus your time.” Podbielski recommends taking an honest assessment of your longer-term priorities to ensure that you’re only focusing on what matters. “It’s about balance—you can do both if you know where to spend your time.”