

Learning from Sheryl Sandberg

On March 8, 2016, we celebrated International Women's Day. On this occasion, what better way to pay a rich tribute to our women colleagues than draw inspiration from one of the most successful women leaders of our time, Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook.

A brief note on Sheryl Sandberg

Before joining Facebook as COO, Sandberg was Vice president of Global Online Sales and Operations at Google. Earlier, Sandberg served as Chief of staff for United States Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence Summers. Sandberg completed her MBA from Harvard Business School in 1995.

In this 21 minute video, Sandberg, who is addressing the Harvard Business School Class of 2012, talks about a range of issues including career planning, leadership and women empowerment. Sandberg is one of the most inspirational communicators of our times. So please do watch the full video. But here are some of the key points, along with some of my own thoughts and reflection.

Here is the video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Db0_RafutM

Connecting with a large audience

Sandberg shows an uncanny ability to connect with the audience in various ways. Despite being a celebrity, she uses self-deprecating humour, a technique which often resonates well with the audience. She is completely focused on the audience and makes the professors and students of Harvard Business School feel exclusive and important. At the same time, she is comfortable with herself. It is clear that she has done her homework well and figured out the simple but profound messages she wants to convey to the HBS students.

Reflection: *As we learnt in a training program, Sandberg is comfortable with the audience, herself and the message she is conveying. Love yourself. Love the audience. Love your message. That indeed is the hallmark of great public speaking.*

On career planning

When Sandberg went to Silicon Valley in 2001 to reboot her career, the time was rather inopportune. After the dotcom bust, many small companies had folded up and jobs in large companies had evaporated. Sandberg was rejected by some companies. One woman leader even mentioned she would not even think of

hiring someone with her background (Sandberg had just finished a stint with the government.)

After some effort, Sandberg did manage to get a few job offers. Like a true MBA, she listed down all the things she was looking for in her dream job and then began to rate the different offers. One of the jobs she had was that of General Manager of Google's business unit. Sandberg ranked Google at the bottom and was not sure about what she could do in a company like that. The future of internet companies looked quite bleak at that time. It was far from clear how they would become profitable.

A meeting with Eric Schmidt, the CEO of Google proved to be one of the defining moments of Sandberg's career. Schmidt offered Sandberg advice that she will never forget in her life. When a rocket ship is taking off, and you get a seat, just board the ship! (Don't start critically examining which seat you are being offered!) What Schmidt meant was that when a company is growing quickly, careers take care of themselves. On the other hand, when companies slow down or their mission statement is no longer that compelling, politics starts to consume more and more of our time and energy! Sandberg took Schmidt's advice seriously and that is how, a few years later, she left Google and joined Facebook (reporting to the much younger Mark Zuckerberg) just as it was about to take off.

How do we get recruited by a great company? Sandberg talks about how she recruited her Head of HR, Lori Goler. A 1997 HBS alumnus, Lori Goler, who was then working in EBay in the marketing function, knew Sandberg a little and reached out to her to express her interest in joining Facebook. But the way she made her pitch was quite different. Sandberg had interviewed many people before Lori. Invariably, they would talk about their experience, what they were good at and so on. But Goler had a refreshingly different approach. She had only one question: What was the most important problem Sandberg faced at Facebook? And could she help tackle that? On the strength of this question, Goler got herself recruited by Facebook! In the process, she changed her line from Marketing to HR, and took up a job at a level lower than her previous job. She then went on to prove herself and rapidly rose up the ranks to become the Vice President of Human Resources at Facebook.

Sandberg mentions in the video, that today, when planning our career, we must look for growth, opportunities, scope to make an impact and the mission of the organization. We should not be looking for a straight climb up the corporate ladder. Indeed, today, the term corporate ladder is sounding more and more anachronistic. We must be flexible and be prepared to move sideways and even

down if required. We must focus on building our skills, not our resume. We must evaluate what we can do in a role rather than ask what title we will be given. And our career plans should not be too rigid.

On Leadership

Leadership needs to evolve and adjust to the needs of the digital world where the traditional hierarchical structure is breaking down rapidly. It is not who we are, what degree we hold, what position we have in the org chart that matters. What really matters is how much we know. We can only become strong by earning the respect of people and by building their trust in us. If we want to be effective leaders, we need to inspire people around us by communicating authentically. We need to be good listeners so that we can keep learning from our colleagues. We must speak and hear the truth.

The key point to note is that the workplace is a very difficult environment to tell the truth. The fundamental reason for this is the way companies are structured. How much ever we might try to keep the organization flat, there will always be a hierarchy. And in such a hierarchy, our performance is often judged by the perception of another senior person. So we have to be careful about what we say! Sandberg narrates an incident where Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg persuaded a younger colleague (This was a lady of Chinese origin from whom he was learning Mandarin. Zuckerberg sets himself one challenging personal goal each year.) to use simpler and more direct language and come out with the truth however bitter it might sound.

Reflection: *Indeed, in the workplace, we nod our head when there is no need to, we smile when we should be crying and we look serious when we should be laughing. We are anything but ourselves. We modify our behaviour to look good in front of others, especially senior people. In the DISC literature, we call this desired behaviour.*

As we become more senior, people will speak less and less frankly with us. If we want people to be open with us, we have to be first open with them. If we talk openly about our strengths and weaknesses, our hopes and fears, people will be more forthcoming. People find it much easier to agree with us when we talk about our vulnerabilities. But, on their own, it would be simply impossible for them to tell us where we are not so good, need to change and do better.

Reflection: *It is also much easier for us to change when we ourselves admit there is an area of improvement rather than have someone point it out to us. Feedback is a powerful learning tool. But it doesn't happen on its own. How much ever we ask for*

feedback, it doesn't often come. Feedback from people around us has to be seeded by authentic behaviours that reassure other people that it is ok to be open with us.

Sandberg narrates a personal experience from which we can all learn. In the early days of Google, Sandberg would interview every single candidate who joined her team. But as the team grew in size, it took more and more time for her to schedule the interviews. Once she asked her team whether she was really needed in all the interviews. Even as she asked this question, she secretly hoped they would say that her interview was a critical part of the recruitment process. But when people enthusiastically jumped at the idea and started talking about how things would now move faster, it became clear to Sandberg that she had indeed been the bottleneck. Sandberg was embarrassed and angry that people had never approached her and instead allowed themselves to be slowed down due to her non availability for the interviews. But on deeper reflection, she realized that if people had not come to her to talk about the problem, it only meant she had not made it easy for them to do so.

As we become more senior, people may also overreact to what we say. Sandberg had once gently requested colleagues not to come with PPTs but with a list of discussion points in meetings with her. Despite her occasional reminders, people did not listen to her. So she formally communicated that PPTs would not be used in meetings with her. But many people including the sales staff reinterpreted this to mean that PPTs had been banned in Facebook and stopped using them altogether! When Sandberg came to know about this during an interaction with Facebook's global sales team, she was truly disappointed. Her message to all: *Next time, if you hear something which is stupid, have the courage to ignore it or question it. Don't just accept it.*

On women empowerment

In the concluding part of the video, Sandberg talks passionately about a much higher level and a far more sophisticated form of women empowerment, than what we usually think about. She dreams of a day when 50% of our homes will be run by men and 50% of companies will be headed by women.

Despite so many initiatives to grow women leaders, women occupy only about 15% of CSuite jobs. And that percentage is not really growing. Gender remains an issue in the corporate workplace and cannot be wished away. Sandberg emphasizes that women should be encouraged to nurture their professional ambition. Women also need to be mentored, supported and sponsored differently. Research has conclusively established that the correlation between

career success and personal likability is much less for women compared to men. So it is quite possible that many women hold themselves back in their careers, just to be liked by people around them. (Recall the old Hindi movie, Abhiman, featuring Jaya Bhaduri and Amitabh Bachchan. This movie was a rage when we were in school.)

Currently, there are relatively few women leaders at the top to act as mentors. So the men have to do their bit and be mentors to emerging women leaders and support them in various ways. For example, if women are more productive in the workplace, do their job sincerely and choose to go home early to spend time with their family, we should not hold it against them. Sandberg mentions that her leaving for home at 5:30 pm made headline news and attracted quite a bit of adverse publicity!

Reflection: *How much ever we may pretend otherwise, the number of hours we spend in the office definitely shapes the perception of how serious we are about our job and career. When I started my career in the mid-1980s, we would hear stories of senior leaders being role models, managing their time in the office well and not carrying any work home. At least in some organizations, people who would hang around till late in the evening were made fun of! And efficient bosses would tick them off. But today, in a world of the internet, emails, smart phones, and above all clients, we have to be around and online all the time! This kind of scenario probably makes it even tougher for women.*

Sincere greetings to all our women leaders on the occasion of International Women's Day!