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What Women Leaders Really Want

Women's leadership is more about 'walking through' than 'leaning in.'

By Libby Gill

In 2000 -- the same year I founded my executive coaching and consulting firm -- a movie called *What Women Want* premiered. It starred Mel Gibson as a misogynistic ad exec who develops the ability to read women's minds after getting zapped by a hairdryer. Bombarded by female voices he's apparently hearing for the first time (albeit telepathically), he is desperate for someone to just tell him what women want.

Today, it seems like corporate America is in pretty much the same boat. Not only about the *what*, but also about the *how*. Sheryl Sandberg, the deservedly famous COO of Facebook, tells us to "lean in." Former State Department policy planning director Anne-Marie Slaughter states "women still can't have it all." And Rosa Brooks, Georgetown University law professor, contends that women should cut themselves a break and "recline."

Though Gibson's *What Women Want* character was crafting a female-friendly sneaker campaign in the film - alongside his confidence-bereft boss Helen Hunt - perhaps he should have been working on the Burger King spot that compelled consumers to "have it your way." Because the only way I can see the workplace working for women is if we figure out what we want as individuals and then demonstrate our value so definitively that it's impossible not to give it to us.

I've keynoted at many women's leadership conferences including Intel, Kellogg's, and Microsoft, and while I secretly hope that the need for these types of forums goes away someday, I don't see that happening anytime soon. At least, not until we see the number of women in leadership and management roles increase significantly.

Yet, while the number of women at the top hasn't shifted much in the past two decades, the corporate mindset has. Even in fields traditionally led by men (though often staffed by women) like technology and manufacturing, doors are opening for us. And while it's a nice notion that simply *leaning in* could get us on the other side, it requires more than that. It requires *walking through*. Forcefully. Graciously. And immediately.

Here are some strategies so you can stop banging your head against brick walls and start walking through open doors:

Be so great at what you do it's hard to turn you down. When you make it worth the company's time to support your needs, they'll be a lot more inclined to help you create a balance that works for you. It's a two-way street and when you provide ongoing excellence, you're in the driver's seat.

Invite the guys into the women's leadership clubhouse. The sooner you bring men into the process, the sooner we'll all benefit. Request feedback so often that it becomes routine. Ramp up your confidence and have the courage to share tough truths. And for heaven's sake, invite the guys to your women's events.

Take a team approach. Research suggests that women leaders who advocate for their teams - rather than themselves - are viewed far more positively in the workplace. You'll get much further saying "we" than "me."

Recognize that plenty of men face the same issues as women. We haven't cornered the market on the need for work-life balance. Men may not vent as much as we do, but they also struggle with challenges related to their children, aging parents, and health concerns.

Share your passions and plans with others. Once you decide what's right for you, your family (however you define it), and your future, have the courage to share your strategies on how to get there. If there's one thing that women want, it's companions on the path to leadership!

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