

Changing hats

by Stephanie Caunter



LEAN IN, MILLENNIALS. LEAN IN, LEADERS.

I lead our digital marketing team at PwC Malaysia. And every week, my social media managers hunt down content that we hope will reach out to our fans and followers. Recently we were a little hard-pressed for new ideas. Then, I had what I thought was a eureka moment.

Sheryl Sandberg (yes, the COO of Facebook) had just been interviewed on the Lean In movement by Bob Moritz, PwC US chairman. What is Lean In? It's a concept that Sandberg introduces in her book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* where she encourages women to embrace and pursue their ambitions.

We were lucky enough to have the webcast of this chat. I had just watched it and was brimming with excitement at everything she'd said. Sheryl is funny, down-to-earth, totally inspiring. Who didn't want to hear more about what Lean In meant for us? I mean, everyone's talking about it. Right?

Wrong.

My Gen Y colleagues quickly brought me down to earth. Sheryl Sandberg, who? Gender diversity for a crowd of 20-somethings, in Malaysia? No one's going to relate or care.

The sad but unsurprising truth is that gender diversity isn't something that matters to Malaysian Millennials. Not yet anyway. Perhaps 5 to 10 years down the road, when they're trying to juggle a baby with the demands of being people managers and servicing clients, they'd like to talk about gender diversity. More likely, what will happen is that they'll start asking for flexible work arrangements, or extended maternity leave days — which are important things. But truly addressing the gender gap is so much more than that.

What Sheryl said during the webcast dispelled a lot of the criticism that's been flung at her. No, she's not telling women that they have to have it all — career and kids — at the same time. No, she's not saying that the fight for gender diversity belongs to women alone. What she's saying is that women need to lean in: go for their ambitions — and yes, being a stay-at-home mum is fine, if that's what you want — when they can. When the circumstances call for you to take a step back (you've got young kids or a sick family member to take care of), then do so. But don't step back before you get there.

Unfortunately, that's precisely what's happening in the US. Women in their 20s are opting for careers that are less demanding so that when the time comes, they can take their maternity leave and raise their kids, no questions asked, no battles fought.

So what does it mean for us here in Malaysia? Similar things, actually. It's about women at an early age knowing what it is they want in life. It means going all out to attain your goals. Knowing your male and female leaders will support you when the time comes for you to either forge ahead, or take a temporary step back.

I'm rather blessed to be working where I am. Forty per cent of our Partners and Directors are women. We've got all sorts of flexibility built into our systems, and a newly introduced 90-day maternity leave (along with three days paternity and adoption leave!)

But even then, the debate can still be pushed.

I feel that what's lacking in the Malaysian context is the awareness that gender diversity matters not because we pity women, or want to be nice, but because it's a real business issue. If half of your population, talent and consumers are female, then why aren't you making sure they're up there at the top too, helping to drive and lead?

What's lacking is conversations early on in women's careers and lives — to let them know they have a choice to pursue their dreams and still have families, and that there will be support from their employers to do this. As Bob Moritz says, business leaders have a responsibility to lean in as well, because women and [all types of] minorities cannot solve the leadership gap by themselves. Organisations have the clout to be that voice for women. It's a voice that can't afford to be drowned out, not at this critical juncture when talent remains a top priority for most businesses.

What's lacking is recognition that leaders of the future are powerful, assertive, competitive. But they're also compassionate and team players. The sort of qualities you traditionally associate with ... well, both men and women. Which is why having diversity in your workforce and leaders can only be a good thing.

So I will play my small part by encouraging the young women around me to take stock of their ambitions, helping them pursue this where I can. That's the least I can do. And when the day comes for my daughter to lean in, I hope someone will do the same for her. **E**

Stephanie Caunter studied engineering but soon realised it wasn't meant for her. Today she heads PwC Malaysia's marketing & communications team. She counts herself lucky to learn a bit more every day about being a better wife, daughter, sister, friend, mother and teammate.