
Help Women Take the Stage

By [Herminia Ibarra](#)

Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, has been speaking out a lot lately about subtle dynamics that hold women back from reaching senior roles in business. Her TED talk and Barnard commencement speech went viral. Lean in, she says to women, take your place at the table, seize the stage.

I never suspected she had a personal message for me, but sitting in on a recent panel on [“Women as the Way Forward”](#) that included Sandberg, I learned otherwise.

When the panel moderator, NYT’s [Nicholas Kristof](#), opened for questions from the audience, my husband whispered to me, “Go, ask a question.” No, I shook my head. He insisted: “If ever there was a good time for you to make a comment, this is it.” With the second nudge, I just went blank.

Why didn’t I speak up? I agree wholeheartedly with everything Sheryl Sandberg says about the ways in which women are held back and hold themselves back, including not speaking up.

Defensively, I told myself, I’m tired, the happy victim of too many Davos panels and parties. I’m not going to raise my hand just to say something. Leave me alone, I said to my husband.

But my silence nagged me. Of course, when a question occurs to me, I don’t hesitate to ask it. I am not shy about speaking in a large room. A professor for 23 years, first at Harvard Business School and then at INSEAD, I do this for a living. In fact, I teach business school students about how issues of image and visibility can hold back even the most technically competent — male or female — from moving up into bigger leadership roles. And here I am, not doing what my husband, as most men I know, finds the most natural and obvious thing to do: ask a question that contributes to the debate, and incidentally, positions the speaker as someone who has something to add.

When I attend a conference, I realized, my mindset is, “What will I learn?” not “What will I teach them?” This is the case for most women I know. We say, “I will speak up if I have something to say, not just for the sake of speaking.” As a result, we don’t plan ahead; we don’t walk in with a strategy about what kind of comment to place and how to make sure it has impact.

After the panel I bumped into an old friend who leads a well-known organization. He’s learned how small differences in seemingly trivial things like how fast we raise our hands lead to very different outcomes for similarly prepared and credentialed men and women. Sandberg told him, for example, that she noticed that when she says, “We only have time for one more question,” most of the women put their hands down, as if their question couldn’t be important enough to be the last one. So Sandberg has stopped saying that, and she is speaking to women about what she sees, encouraging them to take the stage.

I shared my experience with a colleague who, like me, applauds Sandberg’s stance and agrees we must continue to raise awareness. But she also qualified what we should do about it: “Please, let’s not tell women to do that awful thing men are more prone to do — and to get away with doing without being criticized. It’s one thing to claim recognition for our accomplishments so that we can get important and meaningful things done; it’s another to speak up just to prove that we are smart.”

Sandberg herself, in the Barnard speech, says, “I know I need to believe in myself and raise my hand, because I’m sitting next to some guy and he thinks he’s awesome.” She then adds, “I’m not suggesting you be boastful. No one likes that in men or women.” Step up, we tell women, but don’t overdo it. And many don’t — or at least, like me, not often enough. So what can we do, my friend asked?

Ask questions, I said, about why women are holding back, and encourage other men do so as well. As much as we as women need to be made aware of how we play into the gender stereotypes that our society feeds us daily, men also need to see, understand, and intervene to change the dynamics that keep women from raising their hands more often and more forcefully.

For example, women are less likely than men to be sponsored for promotion. [In a study of the career paths](#) of over 700 MBA graduates of top business schools, Nancy Carter, Christine Silva, and I found that having a mentor in 2008 predicted getting promoted in 2010 — but only for men.

Women's mentors were helping the women become more self-aware and strategize their careers, giving pointers, for example, about speaking up; men's mentors were placing them at the next level.

So, yes, women, absolutely, lean in, raise your hand, ask a question, but men (and senior women), let's us too ask the hard questions about what's going on and what we can do to pull the next layer of women in and up.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/help-women-take-stage>

About the author(s)

Herminia Ibarra Herminia Ibarra is a professor at London Business School. She was the Cora Chaired Professor of Leadership and Learning at INSEAD.