

MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

Sheryl Sandberg Faults ‘Broken Rung’ on Corporate Ladder Over Work Inequities

Facebook’s COO and other executives say leadership gaps for women, people of color won’t narrow unless companies focus on first promotions

By Chip Cutter

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Men and women enter the workplace in nearly equal numbers. Then, something happens: At the time of a first promotion, more men get elevated than women, data show, creating a gender imbalance that persists at every level of work thereafter.

Sheryl Sandberg says it amounts to a “broken rung” on the corporate career ladder.

Speaking before an audience at The Wall Street Journal’s “Women in the Workplace” forum in San Francisco on Tuesday, the Facebook chief operating officer and “Lean In” author noted that inequities in the workplace stemmed, in part, from decisions made in that earliest promotion process.

“There’s no such thing as a magic ticket to equality in top jobs,” Ms. Sandberg said. “But this is about as close as it gets.”

The findings emerge from the fifth annual Women in the Workplace study conducted by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Co., a landmark examination of the state of women and men in U.S. corporations. The survey found that men outnumber women by almost 2 to 1 in first-level manager jobs.

“From that point on, there are significantly fewer women to advance to higher levels,” Ms. Sandberg said, noting that men get more senior manager jobs, more vice-president jobs and more chief-executive jobs. “All of it starts with that one broken rung,” she said.

If the first-promotion gap were closed, a million more women would make it into management ranks within the next five years, the study shows.

Should companies in the U.S. continue to make the same, tiny gains in the numbers of women they promote and hire into management every year, it will be another 30 years before the gap between first-level male and female managers closes, McKinsey estimates.

But fix that broken bottom rung of the corporate ladder, and companies could reach near-parity all the way up to their top leadership roles within a generation.

Ms. Sandberg also stressed the importance of ensuring black women have equal opportunities in the workplace.

“There’s not one story of women at work,” Ms. Sandberg said. “There are many. And our goal, all together, has to be a workplace where all women can succeed. Because if we reach a goal one day where white women have achieved parity with men, but women of color are left far behind, we will have failed.”

Other corporate leaders who attended the Journal’s forum on Tuesday stressed the importance of racial diversity and inclusion, as many companies have primarily focused on gender diversity.

“We still don’t know how to talk about race and the realities of what we have to work on,” said Bernard Tyson, CEO of health-care company Kaiser Permanente. He said he makes it clear that employees can openly speak their mind with him.

Sarah Friar, CEO of social network Nextdoor, said she tries to practice vulnerability, telling employees she may put her foot in her mouth but she wants to have open conversations about difficult issues.

Many argued in discussions at the Journal’s forum that companies still could do far more to ensure all professionals felt respected and supported in their work.

Glenn Kelman, CEO of Redfin Corp., said he thought the company could apply the work they did on hiring and retaining women to other groups. Redfin has made strides in increasing the number of women in its workforce, but the high-tech real-estate company still struggles when it comes to people of color.

“Society is divided on gender lines, but it is much more divided on racial lines,” said Mr. Kelman, adding that he could tap into networks of qualified women through his wife and friends. “I don’t know a lot of Latinx people,” he admitted. “I don’t know a lot of black people.”

Mr. Kelman also emphasized the importance of having a welcoming company culture to retain and attract employees of all backgrounds. Hiring is important, he said, but focusing on who is already there and making sure they are fully engaged, appreciated and have opportunities to speak up and get promoted matters even more.

Reducing bias, gaining a better understanding of what is going on at work and empowering employees up and down the chain to speak up and take action will all help, Ms. Sandberg said.

“I don’t think some of our allies understand the harm that is being done to us,” said Minda Harts, CEO of the Memo LLC, a career-development platform for women of color. “I want us to shift our allyship into action.”

—*Katie Roof and Emily Glazer contributed to this article.*

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