

Go! Reboot Your Career in 90 Days

Lisa Thee

Preface

Long Hauler

In early January 2020, the long-awaited message finally arrived: I had been selected to give a keynote on my anti-human-trafficking work for a TEDx conference. This was a bucket-list dream of mine and far beyond what I ever thought I would achieve. Fewer than one percent of TEDx applicants are ever accepted, and this was my first application. I immediately started the process of preparing for the event, scheduled for August 2020.

Three months later, my dream turned into a nightmare. In late March, the pandemic shut down schools. At the time, I was a management consultant for Microsoft and an elementary school teacher for two children. After several months of this relentless schedule, I was on a countdown to summer break for a chance to recover from the burnout. The TEDx conference was postponed, giving me more time to prepare. But just before school let out, I started to feel *not quite right*.

Through most of June, I was showing symptoms we now know are COVID, but at the time, I didn't meet the criteria for testing, which was in very limited supply. So, I did what working parents do every day: I just got it done. The housework, the cooking, my job, the kids, and trying to find ways to break up the boredom of lockdown—I did it all. Then my husband got a cough and was able to get in for a test, which turned out positive. I was formally diagnosed the week of July 4th.

So early in the pandemic, we didn't know any other families that had tested positive. Making the phone calls to our bubble of friends and family to let them know we may have exposed them was a huge shame trigger. I was relieved when my husband seemed mostly

back to normal seven days later, but my symptoms kept dragging on and on. By January 2021, I could literally no longer hold my head up after an eight-hour workday, and I had chronic fatigue that forced me back to bed by 2:00 p.m. every day. With the lockdown still in place, we were still homeschooling our kids, and my husband worked out of our bedroom. We felt like fish in a barrel, wondering if some sense of normality would return and the kids could go back to school. That March, I was diagnosed with postacute sequelae of COVID, also known as *long COVID*, and was put on medical disability with a reduced schedule while getting treatments to reduce my symptoms. The kids were back in school. Things seemed to finally start looking up.

The new date for my TEDx talk was set for August 2021. That timing felt very achievable, because I already had a good portion of my speech written back in early 2020, before I got sick and the pandemic shut everything down. I was feeling pretty confident going into the summer that I would be prepared . . . right up until the final months, where I transitioned from speechwriting to memorization. I did not have a diagnosis at the time for what I would later learn was neurological impairment from long COVID. My processing speed and ability to learn new things had plummeted to the bottom two percent of the population. ~~when I am fatigued due to COVID-related brain damage.~~ No matter how long I practiced, I was unable to retain my speech and was dropping large chunks of it during my dry runs. TED is very specific about speakers not having a teleprompter or notes on stage and will disqualify you from speaking if they are used. Two days before my talk, I had not successfully delivered the speech from memory even a single time.

I hit full-fledged panic mode. Thinking fast, I recorded my dry run in two-minute increments the day before the event so that, if I got up there and stood like a deer in

headlights in front of the audience, I could at least submit my speech to TEDx for the website instead. I was so scared that I sweated through my blazer during the dress rehearsal and had to find a new outfit the next morning to do the real thing in.

Something about having the video backup just in case helped my brain finally track, and I was extremely relieved to have my speech go off the next day without a hitch. I feel like the universe must have been looking out for me that day, and I am deeply grateful to my speechwriters, coaches, mentors, and allies for helping me deliver the speech of my life.

Despite that win, in 2022, I had a relapse of my long COVID, marked by chronic fatigue and confusion. I realized that management consulting was not a sustainable job for someone with my health condition. For a client-facing consultant, your schedule is often unpredictable, so it did not fit well with the three-days-a-week, no-more-than-four-hours-a-day restriction from my doctors. My best innovation and creativity were only available to me in the morning. When I pushed beyond my energy budget for the day, I would pay a high price the rest of the week for ignoring my body's signals. After COVID, I learned every time I overexerted myself, I had to pay it back with 40 percent interest; so, getting clear on what I was willing to spend my energy on became an urgent priority.

After one particularly long workday in January where everything that could go wrong did at home, at work, and in my medical outlook, something had to give. I found that pushing through had undone the benefit for a year of physical and occupational therapy. I was in so much pain that I was bedridden for three days straight. This was in stark contrast to my LinkedIn profile, which highlighted my recent awards as a 2022 Top 50 Global Thought Leader for AI and privacy and number 1 for health and safety. Ironic, I know.

It was time for me to dust off my old set of tools—coping mechanisms, processes, and attitudes that I had used during my time as an executive coach helping people transition from careers that were causing them burnout to something more sustainable. I relied on low-tech solutions for the unintended consequences of an always-on culture: nature, daily walks, meditation, time with family, and, most importantly, setting boundaries. Once I drowned out the noise of the world, I was able to tune into my own body's wisdom and clarify my values, which allowed me to define a new path forward—one based on the life and legacy I wanted to have, on my own terms, where I invested my time in creating a more sustainable future for myself.

As measures of success go, these were a far cry from the goals I had chased all my life. My family, the workplace, and society prioritized record-setting productivity, one-size-fits-all work processes, and presenteeism (digital or otherwise). But I had learned through lived experience that if you don't have your health, you don't have anything. So, I took the reins of my own life and embarked on a two-year journey of researching my genetics, environment, and lab data to identify the root cause of my illness. Eventually, I was diagnosed with a vascular autoimmune disease (called Behçet's disease), an underlying condition I didn't know I'd had for eleven years until COVID triggered new, diagnosable symptoms, including sleep apnea, aneurysms, sudden hearing loss, GI issues, chronic fatigue, anxiety, and brain fog.

At the same time that I was struggling with the reemergence of my autoimmune symptoms, I noticed that the news cycle was full of stories about people losing their jobs, burning out on their careers, or becoming disabled because of COVID. I realized that I wasn't the only one who'd spent the last few years feeling like their life and career had

been turned upside down by a pandemic that has had unexpected medical, social, and economic consequences for people across the globe.

Even though we were all weathering the same storm, our circumstances were not affecting everyone in the same way. It had been clear since early in the COVID-19 pandemic that our new normal was particularly debilitating for working moms, who were bearing the brunt of the invisible labor at home and at work. The term *she-cession* was making it into the zeitgeist, and within the course of a couple of years, we had set women's representation in the workplace back four decades—to 1980s levels, according to *Forbes*.¹

In the early pandemic of 2020 people seemed to be struggling equally. Although the job market picked up again in 2021, it did so much more for men than for women. During the entire pandemic, women have been disproportionately affected. When omicron hit in 2022, those numbers separated even further: “eight hundred seventy-five thousand new jobs for men and just sixty-two thousand for women.”²

I decided to write this book as a guide for others who, like me, for one reason or another, find themselves in the position of needing to blow up their careers and redefine success on their own terms. That can be a scary place to be, emotionally, but there is also so much potential for change, growth, and transformation. My goal is to help you redesign your life to provide you with the hope, help, and community that you need to flourish instead of chasing the traditional measures of career success that assume you either have a stay-at-home spouse to pick up all the slack or are willing to burn out from a lack of support.

“Women are even more burned out than they were a year ago,” stated *Women in the Workplace 2021*, “and the gap in burnout between women and men has almost doubled.”

According to the report, a third of women were considering quitting or reducing their career focus in 2021, up from a quarter a year earlier.³

The burden of constant unbounded achievement is just too heavy to balance with family, health, and happiness on your own. Every yes you say to the world is a no you say to yourself. Let's free up your discretionary energy for the next few months and create a new way of living, one where when the next emergency rolls around, you have the ability to put your own oxygen mask on first so you can lead those who rely on you.

This book is for career leaders managing in this new environment and stymied by it themselves. Whether you're an executive at a multinational company investing in retention strategies for your top talent, a leader on the edge of burnout, or an aspiring entrepreneur who is looking to bring your own unique vision into the world, this book will guide you to creating a clear roadmap from where you are today to a more fulfilling future. Let me help you step into your power and help ensure that, as leaders, we have enough representation, creativity, and influence to create the next twenty years of products, innovations, and services that will be designed with less bias, more mission, and an inclusive mindset.

Introduction

What Has Worked Is No Longer Working

“Overwhelm is the all-too-common feeling that our lives are somehow unfolding faster than the human nervous system and psyche are able to manage well.”

—Jon Kabat-Zinn

You’re probably already feeling the urge for a change in your life. Perhaps something about your current situation feels untenable or you’ve been yearning for more—more time, autonomy, mission, or impact from your work. Today’s workplace has been optimized for productivity in every aspect, and it can sometimes feel relentless. Setting boundaries and holding to them can feel impossible at times, especially when you are working against a company culture that tolerates toxicity in leadership or where your peers are pushing themselves to burnout. Well, there is more waiting for you on the other side of your predictable, stable career. These yearnings you have are not only good; they are also what will propel you to grow as a leader, a family member, and a human. Only when we are clear on our vision for success can we maximize our full potential and start to live from a place of abundance instead of scarcity.

For the first twenty years of my career, I did all the things I was told you were “supposed” to do for lifelong success: I went to the right schools, studied engineering, took on challenging roles where I expanded my skills, and ultimately achieved an executive position at a global technology company. And I learned that following a path that was laid out for you will only lead to you fulfilling someone else’s dream, whether or not that dream

fulfills you. So today, I am here to amplify the restless feeling inside you, your desire to define success on your own terms and to take the big leap of making that success a reality for yourself. I hope to be your guide on a career transformation journey of your own. Let's start at the beginning, taking a closer look at how I redefined my own career and what it means to be successful in it.

Forging ahead without a compass

From my rustbelt roots in the metropolitan Detroit area, my career took me west to California just months before the dot.com bust in Silicon Valley would hit the industry hard. It only took a week for this recent college graduate to decide that I *never* wanted to be an executive there, because the cost to my quality of life would be way too high. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight twenty years later, I was right. The work world was not accommodating to women, especially once they had a family. The number of microinequities around the office directed toward the people who had to leave early for school pick up or who missed another meeting because of a sick family member was ever present, and it was clear you did not want to be considered in that group come annual review time.

Searching for inspiration, I looked to the women in VP and C-suite positions—those leaders I had been trained from birth to emulate. I could not find a single role model whose lifestyle I wanted. The women I did see at the top looked exhausted, weary, and lonely. They were married to their careers. While that's a choice some women might make happily, I wasn't among them. It seemed to me that these women had to sacrifice their boundaries

in order to survive in the executive world, and I was not ready to commit to that path at twenty-one years old.

My experience wasn't unique. Now, I know many women who also had difficulty envisioning what success might look like during their early careers, when no one at the leadership level was living a lifestyle that seemed worth all the blood, sweat, and tears they paid for it. The concept of work-life balance was updated to "you can have it all, just not at once." It was left to women to figure out how to manage that balance; changing the systems that they had to perform in was not part of the conversation. There was no consideration of the social supports required to realize this vision of success in an "up or out" culture. As the responsibilities of life grew outside of the office, the margins for error—and the time for sleep or self-care—diminished quickly even if there was someone else to help at home. This system assumes we will all be able bodied forever, unincumbered with caretaking responsibility, free to travel, and always willing to relocate to rise to the top of an organization.

The last five years have introduced even more challenges to the twenty-first-century working woman. Many of you live them daily. I'm not a fan of shying away from tough topics; I probably wouldn't have tried to tackle the issue of human trafficking if I was. We need to put the challenges women face today on the table and examine whether today's work models have kept pace with reality. Spoiler alert: The data on the retention of women leaders tells us there is more work to do.

This book is part validation of those experiences, part awareness for those who may not know what you face in and outside of work, and part empowerment to help you define modern feminism for yourself and create the career you dream of.

You must change your life

“The rich invest in time; the poor invest in money.”

—Warren Buffett

If you feel like you're on a treadmill going faster than you can keep up with from the moment you wake up until the moment your head hits the pillow at night, you may lack boundaries too. You may already be on the edge of burnout. When you fail to set boundaries for yourself, you also fail to set priorities for yourself. As a result, your boundaries will end up being dictated by the needs of those around you. It's very easy to get lost in the urgency of other people's needs and to lose sight of your vision for your own career and life. I have learned over the years that the key to successful leadership is taking the time to clarify your values and priorities and then ensuring you follow through on them by protecting your time.

Navigating work in a post-pandemic world has created more opportunity for accountability and boundaries in the workplace. With the rise of remote or hybrid work environments, there exists much more flexibility in how we get work done. If you are ready to make a real change in your life, know that you don't need to go all-in to start. Some practices I have adopted over the years to protect my own time include figuring out what I need to work efficiently without burning out and taking the time to make those things happen. For example, I do my innovation-oriented work in the morning, when I have the most energy and before I check text messages, emails, or Slack. I take a daily walk to see the tops of the trees and the blue of the sky and to remember how small we all are in the grand scope of the world. I also turn off my computer at 5:00 p.m. during the week so I can start

again the next day refreshed. You will never get to the end of your to do list; most things can wait.

Once you get a taste of living your own mission and higher purpose, it's really hard to go back to punching a clock just for money. Your journey may keep you on your current career path or may lead you into new arenas. Life circumstances don't allow everyone to be able to quit their current job without a back-up. It is possible to have a mission, financial stability, and time for rest, but some creativity and job-crafting will likely be required to make it possible in the corporate world. The important thing is to focus on what aligns with your mission and to keep doubling down on your strengths in the areas where you can do that work while making money (or else it's a hobby). As a woman playing the game in corporate America, I have found much more satisfaction bringing my whole self as a leader than trying to fit into what was expected of me from someone else's company culture.

I want to help you find that same satisfaction I've found. In this book, I'm going to share with you a process for defining success on your own terms, a guide for how to transition your career in that direction, and inspiring examples of marginalized people who have made a similar change. Success is a team sport, and I am here to help you every step of the way with encouragement, empathy, and community to bring your best self to the world, whether you decide to lead from inside an organization or go out on your own.

Part 1

Employee Headwinds

Chapter 1

The Right Work Ethic

“We’re totally guilty of doing too much at once, all while trying to manage the noise in our heads that says we are not doing enough.”

—Vanessa Autrey

My first summer job was as a production supervisor on the Cadillac engine assembly line in the 1990s. These were the days when taking a job meant choosing a side. You were either management or union. These assembly-line jobs paid well and were provided only to union employees with a high seniority status of twenty-five years or more.

Can you imagine turning the same bolt every minute, eight hours a day for twenty-five years? My father and his father before him were both members of the union, and he worked midnights as a plating chemist when I was young. Eventually, after a twenty-five-year pause before completing his degree; my father finished college and was promoted into management, retiring as the head of environmental engineering and safety at General Motors.

It piqued my curiosity to understand how people could tolerate the boredom, and I talked with the people on my production team to better understand how they did it. In the early morning hours on the second shift, I learned that everyone had a different reason for showing up and also had a different way of coping with the monotony. The answers ranged from daydreaming about their children being the first in the family to go to college all the

way to figuring out how to read paperback thrillers while waiting for the production line to move a new engine to their station.

The message I was given was that it was my job, as a manager, to keep the line moving, since every minute it was down cost roughly five thousand dollars. Productivity was the measure of the day, with an interesting twist: Because it was a union environment, it was virtually impossible for anyone to be fired or promoted. That's where I learned how to lead when you don't have sticks and carrots to dangle. The key to unlocking people's innate work ethic is simple and hard at the same time. It is treating everyone with dignity and respect. The difference between the line running with seventy-five percent efficiency one night and ninety-nine percent the next was determined by the relationships you formed with your team.

Every single time the line went down, I had to page a skilled tradesperson to push a button to reset it per union contract guidelines. The first week on the job, when I made a suggestion about how to make a task easier, one worker wagged her finger in an inch from my nose and said, "I have underwear older than you. I'm not listening to a f***ing thing you say."

After a couple of months and many hours of getting to know my team on a deeper level, they often would offer to push the button to reset the machine for me themselves. Given that the plant was a twenty-four-hour operation, the resulting difference of me treating everyone according to the golden rule was \$1.5 million in increased productivity per day.

Right then and there is when I cultivated my core tenant: "It doesn't cost a penny to be kind." Although it's not traditionally considered part of a work ethic, being kind and

respectful is the first step in my own. Not only does it help you function by keeping your spirits in a positive place, but it encourages your team to work harder, to focus, and to do their best. Don't get me wrong. There were still times I had to create a paper trail to deal with a problem employee, but because of my reputation as someone from management that was good to people, I was supported in taking the necessary actions in the rare instances they were required. The simple, ethical choice to respect my team members and to treat them like people rather than production assets outperformed any management school motivation tool by far.

"What caused me to reboot my career was a series of moments in time where I asked myself, 'Is this how I want my life to be? Am I happy doing this? What are the things that energize me and bring me joy?'"

—Lakecia

Your work ethic won't beat their bottom line

I started my career forecasting the cellular market in the early 2000s. At that time, we were looking to Asia to see the emerging trends of color displays and integrated cameras in phones. My first exposure to a corporate vice president and his team came when I was twenty-five years old and forecasting demand for products for the next three years. It was the holiday season, and I was in a closed-door meeting with the heads of finance, supply chain, and marketing. We were briefing the leader on the outlook for the business (which we refreshed quarterly) to make investment decisions and to update the outlook for the

shareholders and the board of directors. It was one of my first times with a bird's-eye view of how the levers of the business were pulled and how fast some decisions are made (and how little data they are based on).

One of the scenarios we ran that session was how closing a factory would affect the division's balance sheet. The depreciation for the factory was a large drain on the business unit's books. This factory was less than three years old and employed three thousand people in the local community. On the week of Christmas, we were considering closing it, even though it was making a profit. Growing up in the shadow of the automotive industry, I was likely more sensitive to the topic. I had seen what happens to a community's quality of life when large manufacturing employers pull out of town, and this discussion hit me hard. When I was going through engineering school, I never imagined putting my analytic skills to use to justify a decision I so strongly disagreed with from an ethical lens. Although the factory was a drain on my specific group's profit and loss statement, it was a net positive for the overall company. I grew up a lot in the following couple of years and lost my naive belief that, if you work hard and stay positive, you will automatically succeed in your career.

At the time, I was beginning to feel like my life was following a pattern of missing out: I'd gotten a job at General Motors the year *after* they stopped providing pensions and had joined Intel right before the dot.com bust; I watched the value of my stock options drop by seventy-five percent when they vested four years later. I was frustrated. I had worked my way up the corporate ladder quickly, but I also had a nagging suspicion that my ladder was leaned up against the wrong building. I left a very good boss at a company I loved

because burnout from traveling one hundred thousand miles a year was taking its toll. Quitting was the only way I could think of to regain my humanity.

In the end, I realized that my own work ethic would never beat the company's bottom line. My priorities wouldn't—and couldn't—shift the company toward what I saw as the best way forward. Trying to turn a for-profit company's focus to accomplish a not-for-profit's mission is like swimming against the current. It will eventually wear you down. In order to do that, you either have to find a company whose mission aligns with your own work ethic before you arrive or create the culture yourself by starting your own company.

"I rebooted my career out of pure frustration of having to 1) work for someone else, I wanted to be my own boss 2) watch subpar customer service ruin my clients' lives, and 3) an inner conviction that I was created for so much more than selling payroll and that I was 'playing it safe' and wasting my God-given talents."

— Mary

What does work ethic teach us?

Much of my work ethic was nurtured as an athlete growing up, and it has provided crucial lessons throughout my life. I started figure skating at the age of three, and I grew up in ice rinks. Some of the lessons I learned on the ice have served me well in corporate America without compromising my boundaries.

- You fall ninety-nine times before you stick the landing on a new skill, so get up and try again.

- Learning how to fall and get back up without injury is essential; relax into it, and don't fight the momentum.
- Judging is a subjective mix of precision and artistry; sometimes it doesn't feel fair.
- When you stick a landing, you feel like you are flying and truly free; it was worth all the blisters and bruises it took to get there.

These lessons served me well in the first phase of my career, when I was learning how to be an individual contributor, and they helped me to end on the right side of the sink-or-swim culture of tech. But before I got there, I had a year that forced me to draw on all of those ice-skating lessons I'd learned and put them to work.

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"I'll never forget a mentor saying 'Just because I'm good at something doesn't mean I have to do it forever.' It struck me like lightning. I learned that it's okay to be bad at something before you're good at it. In fact, it's a requirement of entrepreneurship. I can figure things out."

—Allison M.

2017 started with a toast to the best year yet. My passion project—using AI to fight online child sexual abuse—was just fully funded by Intel and was announced on a global stage at Open Summit. I was promoted to lead the initiative and was given a team to showcase the power of artificial intelligence (AI) for societal good. Little did I know that it would prove to be the toughest year I have ever faced.

In just a short time, it seemed like everything hit at once. I sustained a debilitating back injury, my boss quit, and then my job was eliminated six weeks after I hurt myself. I also started noticing signs of secondary trauma from the victim stories I had been exposed to through my advocacy work. I couldn't sleep, I was having intrusive thoughts, and I couldn't stop thinking negatively about the world. Unfortunately, without good wellness practices, this is all too common in social justice work.

Although I had moved into a new job at my company, I still had the responsibilities of my old job to complete. With a demanding day job, a passion project, and two kids under the age of six, my self-care was nonexistent. I had a hard time balancing the prioritization of my own pain with trying to prevent the suffering of children.

After testing revealed that I had a herniated disc in my lower back and that the material was sitting on my sciatic nerve, I knew I was not in for a quick recovery. My doctors kept using the term "severe injury" once my MRI came back, and I did not sleep without morphine for months. It would be about a year before I was able to comfortably walk again. Lacking healthy boundaries, I was prepping my SXSW panel while attached to a morphine drip in the hospital. Then I travelled to Austin by myself when I could not walk around my own block.

Pushing my body like this took a toll on my recovery, my family, and my well-being. By the end of the year, the funding for my project had dried up. And while I was seen as a traditionally successful director of a tech company, it was far out of alignment with my own definition of success. I felt like I was surviving but far from thriving.

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I spent months wrestling with the conflict between what I was raised to believe success should be (job security, title, salary) and what lifted my energy (mission, impact, social good). By 2018, my husband had seen me spin my wheels long enough and gave me the nudge I needed to go out and launch a startup.

The amazing people I had collaborated with on my passion project across the tech industry were there to help every step of the way. It felt as if the universe was rising to meet me on this important mission. From funding to talent to partnerships, things kept falling into place for my company, Minor Guard, to be born.

For the first six months of Minor Guard, everything was running smoothly. Then, my technical cofounder was offered an opportunity to return to Apple that was hard to refuse. His career change was a point to reflect on and evaluate my own core values. What was more important to me: impacting a billion lives or making a billion dollars?

After some deep self-reflection, I knew I had to focus on impact. It is a core value of mine. We mutually agreed he could advance our vision of safer platforms for children better from inside a huge international company than by trying to wield influence from outside, in our little startup. We knew we needed additional resources to continue, so we brought in another cofounder and started to explore the competitive landscape for potential collaborators. I took our technology roadmap for the Android market into Bark Technologies. Bark monitors texts, email, YouTube, and more than thirty apps and social media platforms for signs of issues like cyberbullying, sexual content, online predators, depression, suicidal ideation, threats of violence, and more. As of 2021, Bark was a leader in content monitoring for children and was used in over 3,300 school districts. Just like Bark, which gives parents early warning signaling that a child needs help, I would like to help

you recognize your burnout signs sooner and make the leap to a more sustainable and fulfilling mission-based career.

It may seem simple, but the lesson here is profound. Working harder doesn't always mean success. In order to reach my goal of making an impact on children's lives, I couldn't just power through work and life and meaning and parenting and everything else. Those straws very nearly broke this camel's back. Instead, I had to focus on what I truly wanted and abandon the parts of my work life that didn't fit within that purpose. "Success" defined by other people doesn't actually mean anything if it isn't what you need or want. By learning to say no, I was able not just to balance but to align my work and life. Instead of just working hard, I learned to work toward something important.

Navigating forward

- As a leader, the key to unlocking people's innate work ethic is treating everyone with dignity and respect.
- A company won't align with you. If you need something beyond what your current organization can provide, find a new one that provides it—even if you have to create it yourself.
- Working for a purpose will always take less out of you than working for a paycheck.

Career reboot action: Build community

Work challenges can be overwhelming. Find different ways to connect, learn, and share with others outside the office. Join a book club, volunteer, or connect with a religious community group.

Chapter 2

Vicarious Trauma

The notice came in on a Friday in March: “School is not safe for children. We will pivot to distance learning starting on Monday.”

I did not panic but instead went into cruise director mode. Okay, I didn’t plan on having the kids home for the next week or two, but we can make it fun. With both my husband and I working from home, we could share parenting and teaching duties in addition to our sales jobs. I printed the charts for activity schedules for school-age kids, ordered lots of air-dry clay and other crafts, and set out to create some structure so that I could get at least half a day of work in during normal business hours. When I was tucking my seven-year-old son into bed that Sunday night, he looked me in the eye and said, “Mommy, my dream has come true!”

I replied, “What is that honey?”

He said, “I get you to teach me every day for school.”

And I realized his dream was my nightmare.

I really respect and admire teachers and their seemingly endless patient, caring, and giving nature. At the same time, I have never been told “You know what you would be great at? Elementary school teacher!” But now I found myself homeschooling a second grader and a third grader for the next three months. The first week or so was fun, and we had some awesome quality time together, but that didn’t last.

I remember a day where my daughter was supposed to do a flipchart video reading a five-minute passage to her teacher. My daughter was struggling with reading at the time,

and what the teacher thought would be a fifteen-minute activity was stretching out to two hours with many breaks, crying, pump-up speeches from mom, and even a dance party to try to push past anxiety and fear and finish the assignment.

Once the assignment was finished and submitted, I got a message from the teacher indicating that my daughter “seemed sad” in the video. The teacher wanted to make sure everything was okay at home.

I wanted to scream, “We are all sad” after losing hours of our lives to this.

I felt ashamed that I could not make learning fun for my child. By the end of the school year, it was clear something had to give. We were all restless, burned out, and frustrated. But my children would not return to a brick-and-mortar school for fourteen months, and my husband and I would not have a break from round-the-clock work and child care until the kids’ grandparents were vaccinated twelve months later.

Today, schools are back open and vaccines are widely available, so it is tempting to go back to business as usual. But, for marginalized groups in the workplace, that is simply not tenable. The flexibility required of working parents before 2020 was different—that was an hour, scheduled weeks in advance, to take a child to the orthodontist or attend a once-a-semester parent conference. Now, it’s take over teaching and daytime care for a week—starting tomorrow morning—while the school is closed again. Working parents today may need to shift to caregiving on a moment’s notice, and they have to be able to respond without fear or shame. The weakness in the social infrastructure that supports working parents has been exposed, and employers who want to retain top talent will need to fill the gap.

In November of 2022, according to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, the number of people missing work due to childcare problems exceeded one hundred thousand for the first time.¹ This is greater than the number of parents missing work during the height of the pandemic, likely due to the simultaneous surge in COVID-19, the flu, and RSV in 2022.

My point is: The old business routine doesn't work anymore for some or even most people. The cookie-cutter approach—everyone in a company living in the same area, sitting in a car potentially for several hours every day to drive to an office—doesn't work for most people anymore. Companies would have better employees and less turnover with more flexibility now. But your own health is certainly better off if your work situation reflects your life needs.

This radical flexibility is facilitated by technology innovation, but there are also many dangers to mental health of constant virtual connection. Our children are also now threatened in their schools—from bullies, exploitative adults, and even gunmen. It's crucial that we are all aware of these additional stressors for today's parents and that we balance addressing them with the rest of our lives and work.

"I knew my previous status wasn't sustainable. I wanted to be the best parent, spouse, and professional and it was my responsibility to figure out how to make that feasible. I had to recalibrate my priorities. I wanted to give my own children the depth of attention and engagement I had been giving to my child clients. My kids deserve(d) that."

—Heather

Digital savvy and safe teens and tweens

During the lockdown, many young people turned toward technology to stay connected to their friends and restore some sense of normalcy to their lives. With school being fully virtual, being on devices for hours on end became normalized. And with most sports and extracurriculars on hold, there was not much of an alternative for peer connection. We now know that this has had a significant impact on the mental health of a generation. The problem is, Pandora's box has been opened. Even schools rely more heavily on ubiquitous technology. We can't shove the genie of screen time and being constantly online back in the bottle overnight. There are strategies for maintaining a healthy balance, but no one size fits all; you'll need to find what works best for your family.

When the pandemic hit, needless to say all my rules about screens went out the window by month two. I tried to hold the line for online gaming, but by the next school year, my kids were feeling more and more isolated not being able to play with their friends. I eventually gave in, first on *Roblox*, then on *Fortnite*. Even experts on online safety are human, and I can only manage so much.

My empathy for what the kids had already gone through outweighed my concern from pediatricians that "most kids meet their first stranger in online game rooms; that is where the worst threats from pedophiles start." We practiced our online safety drills on what to do when they are exposed to something that makes them feel uncomfortable, we set up parent controls on their accounts, and we have had them play in common spaces in our home ever since. Isn't it interesting that we all grew up with safety drills in schools, but schools don't prepare our kids for what to do when someone crosses a boundary with them online? I have never had to use my tornado drill training, but I guarantee that every child

will have some kind of unsolicited inappropriate content sent to them while online before they turn eighteen.

In 2017, my company, Minor Guard, conducted focus groups with teens and tweens across the country and learned that many girls don't make it through junior high without being asked for a naked photo from their peers. Human traffickers prey on this "new normal." Here is a sampling of what we heard from kids across the country who you wouldn't consider high-risk:

"I think about what I wear. I don't go anywhere unescorted. I don't date because boys scare me, and I'm falling behind in my online school, which is reducing my potential to fulfill my dream of being a doctor." (age sixteen)

"I received my first dick pic from a boy at school at age thirteen on my Kindle." (age fourteen)

"You don't make it through the first week of your freshman year of high school without one of your peers sending you a naked photo." (age sixteen)

"I turned down admission to my dream school to opt for community college because after being sextorted at fourteen, I wasn't convinced I could stay safe on a big campus." (age seventeen)

This behavior the teens experienced is unacceptable, period. But it also normalizes this awful behavior, making it hard for kids to recognize when adults are crossing boundaries or grooming them. Pedophiles are also taking advantage of the Internet's anonymity to infiltrate online friend groups. This is not the threat we expect from *Unsolved Mysteries* or the nightly news; the threat isn't from some stranger in a van but from the

screen in your child's own room down the hall. There is a big difference between adolescent curiosity and coordinated criminal behavior of adults to groom children for human trafficking or child sexual abuse imagery.

We also interviewed pediatricians, school administrators, and church leaders to get a better understanding of what they are seeing on the front lines for tweens today. What we learned from our focus groups is that, across the United States, the adults in our children's daily lives are in denial about the risks their children face online:

"It's becoming harder for girls to distinguish what is pornography because of celebrities, and they are copying it."

—pediatrician

"Sexting is the new first base."

—school administrator

"This behavior spans all socioeconomic levels."

—church leader

What many don't appreciate is a statistic that John Shehan, vice president of the Exploited Children Division of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children shares: "Forty percent of child pornography reports to law enforcement are generated by children themselves."²

It's the split second that a kid decides to make a seemingly innocent decision to send a nude photo to someone they trust but who they shouldn't. We are expecting kids to have the judgement of adults, while predators are weaponizing their phones against them. It's not a fair fight. It can set off a chain of events, including felony charges for creating and

distributing child pornography, sextortion, or being registered as a sex offender for life from a small bad decision.

To help educate more guardians of tweens and teens about their roles as a gatekeeper for the digital lives of young people, here are my top five tips about what to say to a child when they are given access to the digital world:

- It is my device, not yours: Write up a contract on how each device is to be used that you both agree to.
- Teach your kids that they should never expect anything to be private on their phones or online. Bark Technologies provides a free technology contract template that parents may find helpful.
- Tell them, “I am not concerned about the choices you will make online. I am concerned about the access I give to others to make bad choices that affect you.”
- Remind them that, if they come to you, you will not panic and take their device away. You are here to support them. Secrets can only live in the dark, and they need you alongside them for teachable moments online just like in analog life.
- Teach your kids technology emergency drills: When they feel uncomfortable with something they see, experience, or do online, teach them to *stop, walk, and talk*: Stop what they are doing, walk away from their device, and talk to a trusted adult.

No decisions you have made about apps, usage, and privacy up to today need to be final. As the wise Maya Angelo says, “When you know better, you do better.” Phones are not diaries, and children should not expect for you to be hands-off with their device until they are eighteen. It gives them an excuse to set boundaries with their friends on what they are sent by putting the blame on you. It also gives them a safe space to process what they learn

about the adult world with a trusted adult. If parents are not able to provide context for challenges, a stranger on the Internet is more than willing to step in.

“My children needed me to be braver than I was; I needed make a change in my career.”

—Deanna

So what does this all mean for working parents? When we were growing up, kids were at school, and problems that happened during school were handled at school. Today, in a 24/7 digitally connected world, schools cannot know what’s going on, and it falls to parents to be engaged whenever needed. That need often surfaces during working hours. There are some affordable mistakes that can wait. But there are some digital challenges that are life altering—suicidal ideation or sextortion, for example—and you, as the adult, the parent, need to have the flexibility to address them immediately.

From aloha to trauma

In 2015, I was selling laptops to education institutions and got to see how the public sector worked as a system. We were in an elementary school in Hawaii during a sales call when the principal received an emergency alert from law enforcement to go into a lockdown due to an armed gunman on campus. For three hours, we sat in the dark, waiting for the shooter to get to our area of the building. I remember seeing teachers exuding calm for the children; meanwhile, I was in a conference room in the fetal position, panicking and writing goodbye letters to my family. That experience changed my perspective on the resources and compensation for this traditionally female-dominated field often led by male administrators.

While in the lockdown, I saw a stream of teachers leading their classes to the designated area for these types of emergencies. They were the ones on the front lines keeping the kids calm by singing, hugging, and nurturing with their leadership. It dawned on me for the first time that these teachers should be receiving hazard pay similar to many first responders. They were the ones in the line of danger, with little to no training and at the mercy of policies decided by administrators who were often not present when these emergencies arise. By the grace of god, the shooter that day did not make it past the parking lot, but we did not know that for the hours we spent cowering in the dark.

Three months later, it was time for me to send my oldest child to kindergarten, which I did not realize at the time was going to be a post-traumatic stress disorder trigger for me. On the second week of school, my sweet five-year-old came home and shared how they practiced hiding under desks in case “bad dogs or bad people” came into the classrooms. Being a technology insider, I knew there were many software solutions on the market that could assist schools in early detection of issues. The ability to engage intervention early can often help to avoid a crisis before it happens.

Seventy-five percent of school shootings are discussed in private channels on social media up to two weeks before the event. It was not the lack of a signal we are dealing with, but the ability to detect the moments that matter and that are going to go from talk to a credible threat to something that will spread trauma for the rest of people’s lives.

As I brought this information to my public school’s administration, I was met with strong resistance from the administration on monitoring the technology tools they were providing my children for threats of violence, suicidal ideation, and bullying. I spent two years trying to get the district to adopt free and commercially available software that could

do just that. In a unionized system, where the district administrators are often trying to maintain the status quo, I was not able to make any progress toward protecting any of the thousands of children in the district. The school superintendent said, "I already don't have enough councilors to deal with the problems I know about. Why would I want to know about more?" No progress was ever made.

School systems, which are traditionally staffed by women, are not being funded for basic needs and supplies, are not offering a livable wage, and do not meet minimum safety requirements we expect out of most work environments. I don't think this is an accident. It is an outcome of not valuing the invisible labor that is traditionally supported in society by women. Working for years inside that system to change it wore me down emotionally and physically. I finally moved my children to a public charter school that used school safety monitoring technology already. It was not the outcome I had hoped for, but working against a system that was allergic to innovation made it impossible to make progress for the well-being and safety of the public school's staff and students. We must not wait for our school to be in the news to take a more proactive approach to protecting our students and teachers.

"I was in a senior leadership position for the world's largest organization and had asked for the ability to work from home, just one day a week. I was told no. They said they needed my energy at work. I realized I was working at a place where I wasn't heard. Each and every one of us deserves to have our needs met, at work and at home. If they're not getting met, it's time to make a change."

—Amy

In order to stay on top of the evolving threat landscape for children, parents need the space and time to be present for moments that matter when their children are exposed to toxic content, relationships, or environments, including cyberbullying, sextortion, human trafficking, suicidal ideation, and school shootings. Children are resilient, but there is no replacement for the role of trusted adults in their lives when moments of crisis happen. We can't outsource processing the complex world we live in to technology, and these issues can arise anytime in a 24/7, always-connected world. Giving parents the space to address issues as they arise without shame will allow situations to be put in perspective and long-term damage to be minimized.

We need to start treating employees like the adults they are and to give them the space to navigate when and how they accomplish their work in order to accommodate the demands on them outside of the office. If we focus more on the business impact and results, and less on perceptions and politics in the office to measure someone's annual performance, we are well on our way to create a better workplace for everyone.

Navigating forward

- Demands on today's working parents have increased as their children enter the "always on" connected world. Working parents need the flexibility to parent when needed and be trusted to manage their time.
- You have to operate technology in certain environments, or they will not perform as advertised; the same goes with humans. If you are starting to feel glitchy, it may be time for a reboot.

- The school itself is now a potential source of danger. Make sure your children—and their school’s leadership—are prepared.

Career reboot action: Start an energy log

It only takes five minutes a day to create a data log of your energy fluctuations. Write down how your energy level changes throughout the day. Be sure to notice what activities and interactions drain you and which energize you. This distinction is crucial to creating a life with more of what builds you up.

Preface

¹ Margie Warrell, “Women Are Quitting: How We Can Curb the ‘She-Cession’ and Support Working Women,” *Forbes*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/margiewarrell/2021/01/06/does-a-she-cession-loom-how-to-better-support-women-through-this-pandemic/?sh=71b2638f3ece>.

² Liz Elting, “The She-Cession by the Numbers,” *Forbes*, February 12, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizelting/2022/02/12/the-she-cession-by-the-numbers/?sh=2fe7cd2a1053>.

³ Rachel Thomas et al., *Women in the Workplace 2021*, McKinsey & Company, 2021, https://wiw-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women_in_the_Workplace_2021.pdf.

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¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey,” Data extracted on December 1, 2022, <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNU02096055>.

² *Preventing Crimes against Children: Assessing the Legal Landscape: Hearing before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, Homeland Security, and Investigations of the Committee on the Judiciary* (March 16, 2017) (testimony of John Shehan, The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children).