

Anne-Marie Slaughter on 'a worthy ambition' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Ever since I first wrote an article for The Atlantic called "Why Women Still Can't Have it All," one of the critiques has been that I and others who focus on care are overlooking the problem of women not being encouraged to own their ambition. Fortune assistant managing editor Pattie Sellers, whom I like and admire for her great work on Fortune's Most Powerful Women conference, made exactly this point in her commentary on my new book, *Unfinished Business*. But ambition and making room for family are not either/or. I am as ambitious as anyone and I've always been adamant about encouraging girls to aim high.

That said, I do believe that ambition must be tempered by principle. Bringing children into the world imposes a responsibility to put them first when they need you and when they are facing important life choices. We have that same responsibility to care for our parents, who cared for us, and to our spouses, whom we vow to take in sickness and in health. These obligations have their own rhythms; in my case, as I describe in my book, they became pressing just when I could have put myself up for a big promotion for a job I would have loved. It was a tough choice, but frankly, injecting a little more of that kind of compassion into corporate ambition would not go amiss.

More broadly, I think it's important to ask: ambition for what? Ambition to make it to the top of a corporate hierarchy? Power, money, and influence are undoubtedly both desirable and important. I am certainly not immune to their lure, particularly when you think you can spend that money or wield that power for good ends. But what about the ambition to live a good life—a meaningful, purposeful life—one that we will look back on with pride and satisfaction? I knew, when I looked at my sons two years after I went home, in 2012, that if I put my name back in the hat for foreign policy jobs I would miss the last four years that they were at home. I would miss the chance to guide them and help shape their choices, and I would also miss so many moments that already, as I was driving my older son to college this year, seem too short. I would miss living this phase of life to the fullest. I can still strive to rise in my career, but I cannot be a mother to teenagers again.

And here's the kicker. I can make those choices and get better at my job. The heart of *Unfinished Business* is an argument that care is not only essential to our familial, economic, and social flourishing, but also to our individual growth and prosperity. I am a far better leader and manager because I am a mother. Care teaches patience and the ability to let others make their own mistakes. That restraint is every bit as important for a manager and mentor as it is for a parent. The best managers empower their employees, letting them stretch and grow even as we understand that they will make mistakes along the way.

Indeed, care teaches us adaptability. The definition of care is investing in others, which often means operating on their schedules rather than yours. This is particularly true if you are caring for elders or teenagers, but even toddlers reach developmental milestones on their own time and require you continually to adjust to sick days and snow days. You must turn on a dime, adjust, innovate. Those are the same skills an entrepreneur needs as she invents and iterates; a sales manager needs as she adjusts to rapidly changing markets; a CEO needs as unanticipated problems arise in every direction. After all, the mantra of the information age is that you can no longer predict and plan; you must respond and adapt. The 21st century is a very bad time to be a control freak, and no one teaches you how to cope with the loss of control better than children or aging parents.

Care also teaches you efficiency. Everyone I have ever met who is an actively engaged parent will tell you that having to get home by the end of your child's day makes you ruthlessly efficient. The day no longer stretches before you with the ability simply to extend it if you didn't get your work done. You figure out quickly what tasks need to be completed, what can be delegated, what can be ignored, and suddenly what you used to get done in 12 or 14 hours now takes only eight.

In short, investing in others is also investing in yourself, as counter-intuitive as that may seem. Caregivers are better employees over the long term—if we would only give them the flexibility to compete intensively during some portions of the careers and to pull back or move laterally at others. At the moment, however, far too many caregivers are forced out of their careers due to unnecessary workplace rigidity. These caregivers do not opt out of their jobs; they are shut out by the refusal of their bosses to make it possible for them to fit their family life and their work life together. In her book *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*, sociologist Pamela Stone writes, "Denial of requests to work part-time, layoffs, or relocations" will push even the most ambitious woman out of the workforce.

What's more, even when workplaces do have flexibility arrangements, our antiquated notions about what an "ideal worker" looks like

mean that taking advantage of them can actually harm your career. The real world of current work practices still very much assumes "up or out." If you turn down a promotion, you get left behind.

I am reminded of a presentation I gave that was sponsored by a large oil company. At the reception afterward a number of women talked about the many great policies that management had put in place to make balancing work and family easier. One of the women who raised her hand said that she was working part-time after having her third child. She said that she had been grateful for the company's willingness to allow her to continue working in a way that made sense for her family. After hearing my presentation, however, she said that she realized that she still wanted to be an executive and was going to recommit herself to that goal.

What she was saying was that by taking advantage of these great policies, she had put herself on "the mommy track," the path of fewer hours and lower expectations. In other words, not the executive track. When she made her decision to slow down, she'd known and accepted that consequence, but now she had some questions. The mommy (or daddy) track is the opposite of the leadership track, but why? Working part-time or flexibly or even taking some time out and coming back will understandably put you on a slower track for promotion, but why should it take you off the track entirely? Because the deep assumption in the American workplace is that the fast track is the only track.

In fact, thinking of careers as a single race in which everyone starts at the same point and competes over the same time period is a choice. It tilts the scales in favor of the workers who can compete that way, the ones who have no caregiving responsibilities or who have a full-time caregiver at home. It also means that as a society we lose massive amounts of talent. We lose the distance runners, the athletes with the endurance, patience, fortitude, and resilience to keep going over the long haul. We lose the runners who see a different path to the finish and are willing to take it, even if it is in uncharted territory. We lose the runners who have the temperament and perspective to allow them to see beyond the race.

It doesn't have to be this way. Both women and men will be so much better at so much of what they do if they make time for care. They will not only have relationships with their children, parents, siblings, and spouses that will anchor them for life and support them in tough times, but also be better CEOs, bankers, lawyers, doctors, coders, engineers, scientists, salespeople, managers and anything else they want to be. They may have to slow down at various intervals of their professional lives and speed up at others. But they will be so much richer in the currency of life.

Now that's a worthy ambition.

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