

Kimberly 0:04

Welcome to the advancing women podcast. We're ambitious women come together to challenge the status quo, advance their careers and uplevel their lives. The advancing women podcast is hosted by gender equity expert and executive coach. Dr. Kimberly Simo.

Kimberly 0:21

Welcome warriors to the advancing women podcast. Our extreme work culture, the culture of overwork, and the glorification of overwork is problematic. Writer Annie Dillard famously said, how we spend our day is, of course, how we spend our lives. And for most people, we spend our days at work. So that has a big impact on our life, and our quality of life. This constant then can become an exhausting daily experience of having to choose between work and personal life. And even if you love what you do, it's still for many people having to constantly choose between work and family, between work and community. And when we have work with love, we have to be mindful of balance just as much as people who are dissatisfied with their work, especially in a 24 seven technologically connected world, where it's possible to work all the time to be accessible all the time.

Kimberly 1:22

Scholars Hewlett and Luce warned us more than 15 years ago, about what they coined the extreme work model, asserting how the extreme work model threatened to call talented professional women that otherwise could have reached the top. The additional home responsibilities put women at a distinct disadvantage, not because women shirk the pressure or responsibility of extreme work, but because of the many social cultural reasons that women are unlikely to be able to match the hours logged by their male colleagues. We all pay the price of overwork, stress, burnout, health, emotional well being, even when we try to push back against it to a degree because there's backlash anytime we violate cultural norms. So women are violating antiquated cultural norms and stereotypes of women as homemaker and wanting career fulfillment, and men are violating antiquated cultural norms and stereotypes of men as breadwinner in wanting more familial and life fulfillment. So it's challenging for men and women. However, the data show that the extreme work model is especially detrimental for women's advancement, as I've talked about in previous episodes, and is well supported by the literature. Women, even those who work full time, still carry the lion's share of home and familial responsibilities, making that extreme work model that much more difficult for us. Not to mention prove it again bias women carry the emotional labor of not making mistakes or getting it wrong because of the consequences to our professional capital. And the extreme work model is about presenteeism, the ability to travel on demand working many hours each week, high intensity is the norm. Everything is an emergency deadlines, deadlines, deadlines, every problem is critical. That's what we often hear shows our commitment, understanding that level of intensity and stepping up to it. That's what makes an ideal worker. And it's the archetype of the ideal worker that leads to these consequences that are especially negative for women, but aren't at all good for men either. The extreme work model isn't good for anyone. The research supports how selecting an individual for promotion is largely linked to organizational perceptions of the ideal candidate. In the last episode, I discussed statistics on women in

leadership, the current corporate environment, with women representing less than 20% of executive and top earner roles suggests that if there is a perception of an ideal worker or leader in corporate America, women aren't it. And we really have to think about this ideal worker norm and what it means in terms of this extreme work model and this intense work life. So what do I mean by ideal worker norm, the ideal worker norm emerged early in the 20th century with the growth of markets and technology. As we move from industrial work to the more white collar office culture, a culture where work and home became separate and gendered, with men at work and women at home as the norm. And this culture was well established in the media in movies, television programming, books, novels, which often glorified this gendered system of professional work. And although the workforce has evolved since the 1950s, corporate culture requiring total devotion from all employees, combined with those cultural norms that persist, although they're so antiquated of homemaker and breadwinner, ultimately has set the standard for workplace pay.

Kimberly 5:00

you're seen as worthy of reward. And this separate spheres of work and home. This ideology has endured even as women have entered the workforce in large numbers. societal expectations continue to propagate the idea that being a wife and raising a family is a top priority for women. While career advancement and financial independence are secondary, the societal value is aligned with the ideal workers ability to compartmentalize and set aside on interrupted worked on. So that's how this whole model came to be. Somebody is going to be at home taking care of things and somebody is going to be at work taking care of things, we can separate these out, and we don't really have to think about them.

Kimberly 5:40

The ideal worker is often one who is seen as being single mindedly devoted to the organization without personal distractions coming from family or other outside responsibilities. And obviously, this worked well for middle class men in 1950s 1960s, because this group is the most likely to have wives who can pick up the slack. Even today at the highest levels of leadership, and top earner levels. Research shows that men in those top levels often have a stay at home spouse who provides the necessary support, affording men that single minded devotion, and men don't want this anymore. A lot of research is showing that this is shifting, and it adds more pressure on men. It denies them the opportunity for a more holistic life. Many men aren't interested in the 1950s model, and this idea of total devotion to the work. And women of course, in a society where we are confronted with a greater number of additional responsibilities outside the workplace than our male counterparts often can't do it. There are just too many outside of work responsibilities and expectations that tend to fall squarely on women's shoulders. And this can result in a reduction in professional aspirations in an attempt to avoid the consequences of work family conflict, not because women don't want to advance, but this notion of the extreme work model, the 24 seven availability is a real hindrance for a lot of women who truly want to advance but see it as almost an impossible choice. Given all of these additional responsibilities.

Kimberly 7:19

The notion of constant accessibility feeds into the corporate culture where the ideal worker can be present 24 seven, and this has become the productivity standard against which all professional workers are measured. Failure to fully embrace this extreme work culture has often been interpreted and described in the research as an explanation or at least a partial explanation as to why women don't advance. But is the standard necessary?

Kimberly 7:47

Is it necessary to be available all the time? And what about the consequences? burnout turnover, just badge of honor, the reverence we as a society often have with the grind and hustle. You know that if you want to get ahead, it's about work, work work, we have to be really careful of that, especially when we see that as the most overt and oftentimes only clear indicator that we are committed to the work, shipment and Kay and their book Womenomics address women's desire for advancement and power, saying, quote, we have the same desire for our work existence. We'd like to spend our time at work engaged in meaningful and fulfilling pursuits, we've had enough of worrying about punching a clock, or ringing some macho bell to the tune of who stays at the office longest slays the biggest mammoth and quote

Kimberly 8:42

that extreme commitment narrative affirms the dominant leadership power that exists in most corporate organizations. Too often expectations of 24 seven availability served the existing power structure and the privilege that is those in power and those who tend to have the support at home. longstanding beliefs in organizations about what makes an ideal employee are examples of institutional myth, where often certain structural characteristics become institutionalized standards that everyone in the organization is judged against, that become appropriate and thus granted legitimacy, regardless of the impact on performance or the necessity. And a part of the institutional myth is that this is a woman problem. That failure to adapt to this extreme work culture is about women wanting or needing accommodations. And to be sure, this is myth that is not worthy of legitimacy. Women being most disadvantaged by an outdated and often unnecessary 24 seven intense extreme work model is not the same as this being a woman problem. These are myths that are grounded in input versus output.

Kimberly 10:00

So it's less about performance and outcomes and more about always being there, always being available taking on as much as asked to view and being willing to deprioritize everything else. And again, this extreme work model, this ideal worker mentality is a real hindrance for women who want to advance. I conducted a study showing how this is the case, I looked at women in fortune 500 companies in middle management. And over and over, they noted the extreme work model of constant availability, ability to relocate on demand, prioritizing work in the company as inevitable at those corporate executive levels. And many women expressing it's a major barrier to advancement and is central to why women often career slow track or put their career kind of on a lesser, aggressive, lesser ambitious track, because they

have to consider this extreme work model within the context of their other responsibilities. And several study participants articulated the presence of this work ethos, or the set of unspoken rules, which need to be followed to be respected, and to advance in corporate America. And many of the unspoken rules or narratives aligned with this idea of an extreme work model and 24 seven availability, that inevitability, if you want to get to that executive level role that you had to take this on. More than half my study, participants acknowledge the extreme work expectations in organizations at the executive level, which meant that no matter how good, flexible or balanced, life could be at the middle, all that would go away. Once you got to the executive level. Most of the women I interviewed said that the men at their level, in their path to executive level management roles enjoy the privilege of wives who did not work, allowing them to pick up the slack at home and make demands easier for them to accommodate.

Kimberly 12:01

It's very clear and participants in my study express this as well. Women are often expected to be the partner in a marriage who subordinates their career if needed. So the results of my study, and many others show that the extreme work model and issues of work life balance are not being addressed to the degree necessary. And this continues to be one of the biggest variables in women's decision to slow track their careers, or decline advancement opportunities. And so we have to ask ourselves, where does the responsibility lie in fixing this? Certainly, women have to address this men have to address this, but it really lies at the top with leadership, because executive leadership drives organizational culture, and values. And those values in turn influenced people's perceptions of organizational fit, and what is necessary to be valued and advanced within the organization. It's important to distinguish and I've talked about this in previous episodes, initiatives that improve the optics for the organization from those that move the needle, and creating real cultural change and real equity and inclusion for women within organizations. Despite many stated formalized diversity priorities and initiative organizations adopt, there still remains a resilient set of unspoken rules, which need to be followed to be respected in advance. All of us and organizational leadership especially must be mindful of those unspoken hidden or invisible rules. In the book, *The Invisible rules*, what's really holding women back in business and how to fix it. The authors found that women wanting to advance to the highest levels are very aware of those informal, unspoken, but nonetheless, prescriptive rules that create an unlevel playing field for women, including talented, highly qualified women. Many of the initiatives organizations implement are sabotaged by subconscious biases and norms that bolster the status quo and perpetuate the value of presenteeism, the extreme work model, the reverence of 24, seven availability. So you hear a lot of talk about policy change, you know, increasing time off after having a child or paternity leave for men. But the thing is, adding more time that people don't take or feel like they can't take is about optics, not real change. So we need to have people feel comfortable to even take the time off, they get already, you can give people a ton of benefits. But if the culture is that people just don't use them, that there's undertones of judgment, even mockery in some cases, then the policies themselves don't really much matter.

Kimberly 14:46

Many years ago, when I was working in corporate America, I had a boss who used to walk around at 6pm or later just to say hi, and we all knew it was to see who was still there. He was a nice guy, but you just knew that

Kimberly 15:00

He saw you being there after hours is the ultimate cue of your commitment to the organization. Those subtle, nuanced interactions, comments and behaviors like this happen every day and they send very clear messages. It does not require formality, but it has the same outcome. It reinforces input versus output. It's old school button, the chair prioritize work Above all, to truly prove that you value the organization are willing to do what it takes. And it's to some degree, it's almost subtly a workplace bullying that happens all the time, where people feel like they're going to be excluded from the end crowd mocked, or seen kind of negatively, if they simply utilize the resources or take the time off. That is part of the benefits package, that somehow that will be interpreted with not being the ideal employee.

Kimberly 15:59

I don't know if you remember, it must have been about 20 years ago in the early 2000s, when the New York Times published an article including an internal email from a CEO to his leadership team. The article was titled a stinging office memo boomerangs chief executive officer is criticized after upgrading workers by email. So long story short, a memo was sent by email by the CEO. And originally the memo was intended only for 400 or so company managers. But of course, it quickly took on a life of its own. Unsurprisingly, the email was leaked and posted onto the internet. Apparently, it was shocking to 1000s of readers, including analysts and investors, because it resulted in the valuation of the company plummeting 22% in three days, but I always find it so interesting when attitudes that are so present, informally, that are so entrenched received such incredulity when they come to the forefront.

Kimberly 16:59

I can't paraphrase the memo to do it justice. So I found it and I'm going to read it here, I won't include the name of the person or the details or location of the organization, you can find that if you want to. But I don't want to derail the importance of the example by focusing on one person or one organization. Because this type of ideology is indicative of a mindset that many organizations, institutions and leaders have and continue to have. Here's what he sent hundreds of his managers and whenever the word is bolded, and capitalized, I'll just give it a little emphasis to let you understand where the author meant to have emphasis. Okay, quote,

Kimberly 17:37

we are getting less than 40 hours of work from a large number of our employees. The parking lot is sparsely used at 8am. Like why is it 5pm. As managers, you either do not know what your employees are doing, or you do not care. You have created expectations on the work effort, which allowed this to

happen, creating a very unhealthy environment. In either case, you have a problem and you will fix it or I will replace you. Never in my career, have I allowed a team which worked for me to think they had a 40 hour job, I have allowed you to create a culture which is permitting this no longer. The CEO then decided now was the time for specificity. Although up to this point he had just simply said the problem is there's not enough cars in the parking lot. There's not enough people in the building. He didn't really talk about any specific work problem. But he led people know that there were six potential punishments including laying off 5% of the staff. Hell will freeze over he vowed before he would dole out more employee benefits. The parking lot would be his yardstick of success. He said it should be quote, substantially full at 7:30am and 6:30pm on weekdays and half full on Saturdays and ended with quote, you have two weeks Tick Tock and quote,

Kimberly 19:02

please hold your incredulity if you think this is an isolated mindset or something that would never happen today. I assure you it is not.

Kimberly 19:12

We might be more careful today. But that doesn't mean that this sentiment, this extreme work ethos is not still alive and well. And of course, this memo caused a shitstorm because it was bad PR, but not because it is some unique departure from what many organizations and leaders still feel in think he may not have been as PR savvy about the message or as smart about what the fallout would be. But other organizations send this message just as clear. Yes, even today, it's just hidden better. It's more subtle, so it's not as easy to notice, and it's more difficult to call out and in some ways that makes it more dangerous. Notably missing from this nasty bullying email was the specificity of what if anything, was

Kimberly 20:00

actually going wrong in the company? What is the actual problem? numbers of cars in a parking lot at 6pm is not directly correlated with positive outcomes. So what is it he was not seeing? And why not address this? That's a basic tenet of good communication, which is also a basic tenet of good leadership, talk about the actual issue and problems with precision and data to back it up, dare I say, not with emotion, because I shudder to imagine what this whole scenario might have looked like, if that memo had come from a woman CEO, how much the incredulity would have shifted from the treatment and devaluation of employees, to the emotional characteristics, stereotypes of women leaders, nonetheless, this example and the Fallout, the media backlash, the financial consequences brought attention to a very real problem. It's funny, though, that because we've gotten culturally better at the nothing the message, making it less overt, that we tend to think that many are not still heavily invested in this ideology of presenteeism 24, seven availability, but it just manifests more subtly. And I talked about when I talked about the four Ps advancement model. Part of this is identifying the real problem and patterns that are perpetuating the problem, which is the first two PS and my four Ps advancement model. So if this is about productivity, or specific employees falling short, or specific goals not being

reached, talk about that and address that and talk with the specific persons. Don't call everyone out and don't make it about presenteeism. We need to identify and fix the actual problem. What are the patterns leading to the problem versus this lazy generalization that often negatively impacts and motivates the best and most trustworthy employees, the ones not causing the problem? If indeed, there even is a problem. Sometimes it just annoys people when they defy the ideal worker, extreme work model standards that have existed for so long failure to adhere to some unwritten or unspoken rules that don't necessarily have any correlation with the problems that you're concerned with if in fact, there are any problems.

Kimberly 22:25

We also need to pivot in times of change. And this is at its core change leadership. We need to consider the shifts in the workplace. If you think about COVID-19 and the quarantines and how the workforce shifted to an unprecedented work from home model. It really highlights some of the resiliency of the presenteeism model. And I know what you're thinking, Oh, no companies are like, super woke now and they really get how much value there is to allowing people to work from home. Not really, again, hold your applause. Because this fallacy that a lot of companies feel this way and that it's the case across domains is just not accurate. I read a recent article titled just because you can work from home doesn't mean you'll be allowed to the author discusses which jobs are heading back to the office and which can stay home. And it widely varies. Even among industries well suited to online work. There's a range of who's allowed to work remotely or not. Unsurprisingly, the industries I often note in this podcast, law, business finance are the ones where this is really a no go. This is where that 24 seven availability, presenteeism is so entrenched in ideal worker norms that despite Boston Consulting Group research showing that the majority of employees so around 89% say they want to be allowed to work remotely somewhere all the time, that organizations are just not having it. And this will continue to have negative impacts in organizations. It not only hinders Advancement of Women, but it perpetuates this antiquated model and makes people feel as though they are not trusted or valued. Where burnout and employee dissatisfaction continues to increase because you're doubling down on the status quo. And this needs to be interrupted challenge, called out and pushed back on. Getting everyone's bought back in the chairs is not about productivity or camaraderie the way it's often positioned. It is pure and simple lack of trust, control, and maintaining the existing power, structure and dynamic, plain and simple. We need to reconceptualize outdated and unnecessary attributes of the ideal worker as one willing to sacrifice everything, to prioritize their job to be available all the time and be in the office all the time. We need to reconceptualize productivity as an outcome of being motivated, having purpose, feeling valued and appreciated. Not

Kimberly 25:00

As an outcome of presenteeism and being micromanaged, and importantly, we have to continue to shift the narrative and messaging about extreme work. I love some of the means and posts that I keep seeing on social media recently, relative to this almost movement to stop glamourizing. overworking, please, let's stop glamorizing the grind.

Kimberly 25:24

So each week I share a manifest statement, a key takeaway, and this week, my manifest statement is this. The absence of sleep, good diet, exercise, relaxation, time with family and friends, time to just be is not something to be applauded. To many people were there burnout as a badge of honor, and it needs to change. We need to reject that notion and narrative and continue to demand that change and to be a part of that change.

Kimberly 25:58

For all you warriors listening who want to continue to transcend barriers and thrive, you won't want to miss next week's episodes, make sure to hit that subscribe button. For more resources, you can visit my website, [www dot advancing women podcast.com](http://www.advancingwomenpodcast.com) and connect on Instagram at [advancing women podcast](https://www.instagram.com/advancingwomenpodcast). I love getting your feedback and ideas on topics you'd like to hear me cover in more depth or new topics you'd like me to explore. So please email me at Dr. De Simone at [advancing women podcast.com](mailto:Dr.DeSimone@advancingwomenpodcast.com) with your ideas and feedback. That's dr. D S i m o n e at [advancing women podcast.com](mailto:Dr.DeSimone@advancingwomenpodcast.com) I just want to thank my producer Joe Jacobs, the audio warrior who wrote the music for this podcast. It's totally badass and I love it. And a huge thanks to Heather Harris, the creative warrior who designed the advancing woman podcast logo. And thanks to all of you for joining me here today.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>