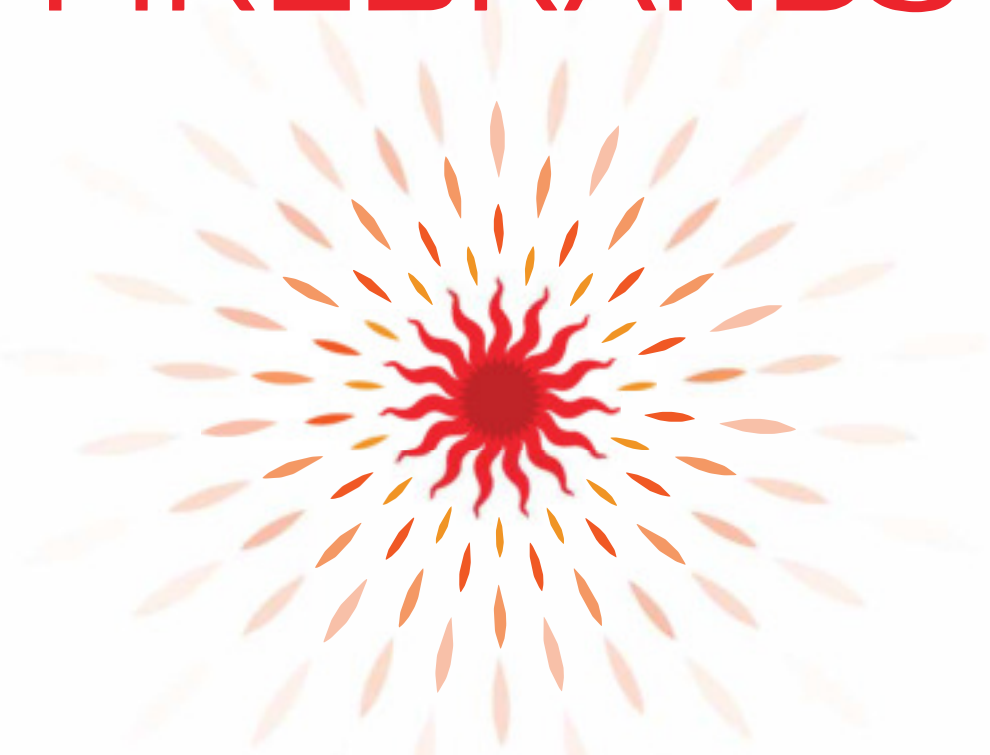


SAMPLE

Stories and Techniques to Ignite Change,
Take Control, and Succeed in the Workplace

FEMALE FIREBRANDS



Mikaela Kiner

PRAISE FOR MIKAELA KINER AND *FEMALE FIREBRANDS*

“Kiner advocates practicing inclusion in the workplace, saying goodbye to outdated norms where women are often sidelined and excluded, and instead turning everyone—women and men both—into advocates and allies. Kiner argues that the old ways of corporate America—one seat at the table, double standards for women, and motherhood penalties—have prevented women from thriving for far too long. Her practical advice, illustrated by candid stories of her own and of the thirteen female firebrands she interviewed, shows readers a new way to create workplaces where everyone has a sense of belonging.”

—**CARA BRENNAN ALLAMANO AND
ROBBY PETERS, Founders, PeopleTech Partners**

“As a seasoned HR veteran, Mikaela Kiner has seen it all. She and the women she interviewed share candid stories about what professional women face every day and how they persevere. Kiner does not hesitate to tackle complex issues of privilege and race. Though these topics will certainly make for some discomfort among readers, the women’s unflagging spirit and resiliency are that much more admirable given the hard truths about how far we still are from attaining equality.”

—**STELLA ASHAOLU, Founder & CEO, WeSolv**

“*Female Firebrands* is a beautiful expression of the desire to be better, to strive for more. This book is a positive disruption for any individual or organization looking to create a new way of being. Mikaela offers a meaningful acknowledgment of systemic barriers while pointing out the negative thought patterns and biased practices that keep us from belonging. Through effective storytelling and expert guidance, she pushes us to think bigger and imagine an equitable future where everyone can thrive. Consider this a powerful call to action and a tangible tool for every leader looking to make a change in the world.”

—**MICHAELA AYERS, Founder, Nourish**

“If you want to be inspired by other women’s stories, look no further than *Female Firebrands*. This candid, modern, practical, and user-friendly book is a great illustration of the obstacles women face and how to overcome them. Few dispute that inclusion and belonging matter, so why does creating environments that include women continue to elude many companies? This much-needed book offers answers, specific tools, and tips on how to advocate for yourself and other women in ways that count.”

—**ELIZABETH BASTONI**, *Independent
Director and Consultant*

“Mikaela Kiner brilliantly tackles one of the most critical issues in today’s society: gender diversity in the workplace. Through an account of her own experience as a longtime Amazon executive and the stories of the women alike, Kiner offers a refreshing and uniquely honest perspective on what it means to be a female in the modern-day workplace. *Female Firebrands* will inspire readers to think critically about the ways in which gender impacts their daily lives and will provide the tools necessary to be advocates for change.”

—**ANISH BATLAW**, *Operating Partner, General Atlantic*

“*Female Firebrands* is a wonderful book that honors the spirit, passion, and commitment women bring to work, the workplace, and leadership. The stories are inspirational and educational for everyone, and I highly recommend this book for men and women in business.”

—**JOSH BERSIN**, *Global Industry Analyst in
Leadership and HR*

“A smartly written book that puts women’s stories at the center of the narrative and will help women (and men) effect positive change in the workplace. I couldn’t get enough of these real-life stories told by women from an incredibly diverse set of industries and backgrounds. Their advice and ideas are remarkably easy to understand and put into action. I plan on giving this book to the potential female firebrands I know, and the men that want to be great advocates.”

—**CHRIS CAPOSSELA**, *Chief Marketing Officer, Microsoft*

“I have spent the past 20 years working as a senior human resource leader in the technology industry. Mikaela’s story and the stories of the female firebrands she spotlights are my story and the story of millions of women across the world. These stories provide insight, guidance, and support and are a must-read if you are a woman working in business today, a young woman beginning her career, or anyone who supports women in the workplace. This book will warm your heart, ignite your passion, and foster belief in yourself. Thank you, Mikaela, for sharing these stories and supporting women everywhere.”

—**REBECCA CLEMENTS, VP of HR at Moz**

“Mikaela provides a thought-provoking examination of inequities through tangible, relatable stories that challenge the status quo. Reading this book, I often found myself nodding in agreement and then pausing to question my own privilege and way of thinking.”

—**AHMAD CORNER, Founder and Community Builder, Young Professionals Organization**

“As a Latina and founder of a Circle of Latinas in Seattle, I constantly hear heartbreaking stories about how women of color are discriminated against in the workplace and society. Having someone like Mikaela bringing light to these sorties makes my heart pound faster. So many women who were interviewed for this book have not only been ferocious allies and women’s advocates, but also good friends that I admire. I couldn’t be prouder to see their voices represented in this book. Mikaela is on a mission of seeing more women breaking the glass ceiling, and this book is all about bringing awareness and more allies to make this happen. This book is a must for everyone who wants to get inspired and desires to understand more about the reality that women face in this society.”

—**LAURA ESPRIU, Founder of Latinas in Seattle and Laura Espriu Coaching & Consulting**

“What I loved about this book was the marriage of deeply personal stories from a diverse group of women with actionable advice for not just women but also male advocates, HR, and business leaders. Without an integrated approach to tackling inequities in the workplace, nothing will improve. Mikaela Kiner makes a call for all of us to examine and check our own privileges and then to use those same privileges to help create a more equitable workplace for everyone.”

—**LYDIA FRANK, VP of Content Strategy, PayScale**

“In her new book, Mikaela Kiner provides a fresh, concise, and authoritative account of the challenges women leaders face in today’s corporate and entrepreneurial work environments. She weaves together the stories of 13 inspiring women, who provide unique perspectives on how the modern workplace must evolve to become a more balanced, inclusive, and empowering place. Male managers like me who aspire to be more conscious, curious, and thoughtful about our roles, biases, and team cultures will find practical advice in Kiner’s work for becoming stronger advocates for women and better leaders. Kiner’s interviews are peppered with insightful commentary and data, as well as checklists at the end of each chapter to help put wisdom into action. Kiner’s work is a welcome addition to the literature on women in the workplace and a fun, fascinating read!”

—**DAVEY FRIEDMAN, Consumer Sales Manager, WeWork**

“Women in recent decades have become more powerful and effective advocates—for themselves and for other women. Advocacy takes confidence, commitment, and yes, the attitude of a firebrand—someone who sets off sparks that kindle change. *Female Firebrands* adds something essential to the conversation because it not only profiles women who fearlessly push for change, but it also offers clear and actionable tactics that every woman can use to more powerfully advocate for what she and others need. Women’s engagement will be a key resource for creating a workplace that works for everyone. *Female Firebrands* helps show us how to get there.”

—**SALLY HELGESEN, Author, *How Women Rise, The Female Advantage, and The Female Vision***

“As a leader of a team or organization, whether you are a woman or man, *Female Firebrands* is a practical read of some very complicated topics. It is an honest look at many important issues facing our workforce. Mikaela is one of the highest-judgment people I’ve had the pleasure to work with, and she applies that horsepower to an unflinching dive into traditionally sensitive topics with the goal of making them normalized, accessible, and actionable. At the end of every chapter is a checklist (for women, male advocates, and HR professionals) that is both practical and enormously helpful. Whether you are a longtime leader or a new leader, *Female Firebrands* is a must-read for today’s leaders seeking to understand and do right.”

—**JERRY HUNTER, SVP Engineering, Snap Inc.**

“Kiner’s *Female Firebrands* demonstrates that in the modern workplace, there must be a better way—that Mikaela shows us in an actionable and unapologetic manner. Kiner illustrates her guidance with compelling examples of women in the workplace and follows up with tangible, tactical how-to steps at the end of each chapter. Whether you’re an industry veteran, fresh out of school, or returning after a break, this is a must-have survival handbook for women in the corporate workplace.”

—**NANCY JENSEN, CEO and Co-Founder, The Swing Shift**

“I dare anyone to read the introduction (the author’s story) and not want to immediately dive into this book. It is not easy to sum up an interview, especially with the caliber of women selected. So much happens in that conversation that can hardly be captured. The author does it artfully. Bravo. Tip to all readers: use this book as a great conversation sparker for a group of friends. Read one or two stories and just talk about the impact of that story on you and your personal “take-aways.” I bet one meeting will lead to another. Support for our growth is out there—it just comes in all shapes and sizes. This is one way of getting and giving that support! The author modeled bravery, authenticity, smarts, incisiveness, inclusion, as well as warmth and humor in her story. You can skip many introductions—don’t skip this one! Bravo Mikaela! I loved that the stories shared by the author were so well done. Short, memorable, honest, and authentic. They immediately touched me. There are so many lessons buried in each story and so many moments of learning. Start anywhere and go anywhere . . . you’ll love the journey.”

—**BEVERLY KAYE, 2018 ATD Lifetime Achievement Award Winner and Author, *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go and Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em***

“*#FemaleFirebrands* offers authentic insight into our evolving workplace, as the rules are getting rewritten in real time. It also gives insight into what it takes to simultaneously balance ambition and commitment to your family. It is modern and honest. A must-read for today’s career trailblazer.”

—**JAIME KLEIN, Founder, Inspire HR**

“Mikaela’s book is soothing for the soul. After 35 years in the workplace with feelings that overwhelm with snippets of hope, I think that this book supports understanding today’s issues with an insightful, direct, and compassionate message. As a white woman and a beneficiary of the diversity movement, I particularly appreciate the discussion of my white privilege and what I need to do to be more of an advocate and inclusive of all women. The suggestions in regard to each topic feel completely relevant, and gathered from inspiring ‘firebrands,’ they demonstrate Mikaela’s value for collaboration, inclusivity, and the acknowledgment of the gifts of other women.”

—**JOY LEACH, President of PRI Leadership and Master Certified Coach, Hudson Institute Leadership Team**

“*Female Firebrands* is filled with inspiring stories and practical wisdom about how to be braver in speaking up for ourselves and for others. In the 1980s, one of my early mentors—a man—taught me to have the courage of my convictions. That advice is as important today as it ever was. Mikaela’s book will help all of us have the courage of our convictions and create workplaces that are more whole, inclusive, and vibrant.”

—**SUSAN MANN, Leadership & Career Coach, Facilitator, and Consultant**

“As a woman and a venture capitalist, I’ve been fortunate to find myself in a position to advocate for women, especially female founders. While reading *Female Firebrands* you’ll learn what I know to be true—equity and inclusion at work lead to more collaboration and better business outcomes. What’s groundbreaking about Kiner’s book is how the firebrands candidly share their stories about what’s held them back and how they’ve succeeded. *Female Firebrands* is the new playbook that will encourage and inspire you to improve the future of work for yourself and women everywhere.”

—**AMY MCCULLOUGH, President and Managing Director at Trilogy Equity Partners**

“I can’t imagine a better person than Mikaela Kiner to write a book that positively addresses the reality of what it means to be a woman in corporate America. Reading the brutally honest experiences of women who’ve ‘been there,’ coupled with realistic advice on how to improve not only your own experience at work, but also that of others, is extremely empowering. I’ve been fortunate to have Mikaela as a friend and colleague who has provided valuable guidance and advice as I’ve progressed in my career; I’m thrilled that she has used her expertise to offer similar guidance through this book to working women everywhere!”

—**TERESA MILLER, General Counsel, Rick Steves’ Europe**

“In her book *Female Firebrands*, Mikaela Kiner directly tackles challenges of women in the workplace. By bringing in a diverse set of female firebrand voices and interweaving them with in-depth research and her own wisdom and experience, Mikaela gives us a book that both illuminates our challenges in new ways and provides a pragmatic playbook not just for women, but also HR professionals and men advocates.”

—**SABINA NAWAZ, Global CEO Coach, Keynote Speaker, and
Writer for *Harvard Business Review* and *Forbes***

“We all need to be louder in the fight for gender equity in the workplace, and Kiner keenly provides techniques to do just that. This book thoughtfully rounds up real women’s stories and, most importantly, guides all of us in doing better. A must-read for anyone working toward a better professional future for women.”

—**AMY NELSON, Founder & CEO, The Riveter**

“Reading *Female Firebrands* is like getting to listen to a private conversation among powerful, smart women sharing their war stories about the challenges of being a woman in the workplace. Kiner is personable, authentic, and pragmatic. The book combines inspiration with actionable advice targeted not only to female professionals, but also to men who want to be better advocates and HR and business leaders who want to lead better.”

—**JULIE PHAM, VP of Community Engagement & Marketing,
Washington Technology Industry Association**

“A frank, straightforward examination of what women face in the workplace on a daily basis. Mikaela incorporates stories from a strong cross-section of women, with up-to-the-minute examples that made me ache with empathy, grind my teeth in indignation, and applaud the courage of women everywhere who are choosing to stand up to change the workplace for themselves—and for all of us.”

—**AMY SALLIN, Director at the Buerk Center for Entrepreneurship**

“*Female Firebrands* provides an honest account of women’s experience in corporate America as it has been—and offers a clear, tangible path toward what it must become. Incorporating diverse perspectives from women across the whole spectrum of work, the book discusses ideas and strategies for both men and women to create an empowered, inclusive workplace for all women. Mikaela’s passion, pragmatism, and authenticity shines through, making this a must-have handbook for everyone in the corporate world.”

—**MANMEET SANDHU, Chief People Officer, PhonePe**

“In *Female Firebrands: Stories and Techniques to Ignite Change, Take Control, and Succeed in the Workplace*, CEO and executive coach Mikaela Kiner blends her story with the stories of the female firebrands she interviewed. These mission-driven women ranging from CEOs and founders to diversity experts and nonprofit leaders share their struggles and achievements and talk about the power of women supporting women. With both candor and optimism, Kiner provides the tips—and encouragement—that women and male advocates need so they can work together toward lasting change.”

—**ELIZABETH SCALLON, Head of WeWork Labs Northwest**

“A candid should-read by Michaela Kiner about her story and those of 13 other powerhouse women! *Female Firebrands* is recommended reading for all women and men who want to be change agents for true gender equality for ALL women in the workplace.”

—**TAMA SMITH, Former CEO of The Tyra Banks Company and the leader of Women Living A Richer Life at Brighton Jones**

“If companies want to create workplaces that inspire people to do their best work, then we have to face the hard truths people experience today. Mikaela helps us better understand the systemic factors and history at play in many organizations and punctuates this knowledge with the impact that these factors have had on real individuals at all stages of their career. But instead of just highlighting the challenges, *Female Firebrands* provides actions that leaders, individuals, allies, and HR professionals can take to make their organizations more equitable and more human for everyone. Transforming companies into ones our children will be proud to work for will continue to take intentional work at all levels, and Mikaela provides us all with a great field guide to get started wherever you are today.”

—**DAN SPAULDING, Chief People Officer, Zillow Group**

“As a woman leader in a large organization, *Female Firebrands* helped me identify my own strengths as an advocate and champion for the women around me. It gave me even more courage to speak up, along with new tips and techniques that I can use and share with my team. What I love most about the book is Kiner’s positive message—it’s time for change, and there’s no turning back. She’s achieved her goal of giving women and men the tools we need to increase inclusion and gender equality at work.”

—**DEEPTI VARMA, Country Leader HR - Amazon India and MENA Region (Middle East & North Africa)**

“As an entrepreneur and woman of color, I can relate to Mikaela Kiner’s story and the stories of the women that she highlights in the book. The stories are authentic, heart-warming, and provide so much hope and encouragement for women who continue to become firebrands against all odds.”—

—**MARY-FRANCES WINTERS, President and CEO, The Winters Group, Inc.—a 35-year-old MWBE Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Consulting Firm**

*Stories and Techniques to Ignite Change,
Take Control, and Succeed in the Workplace*

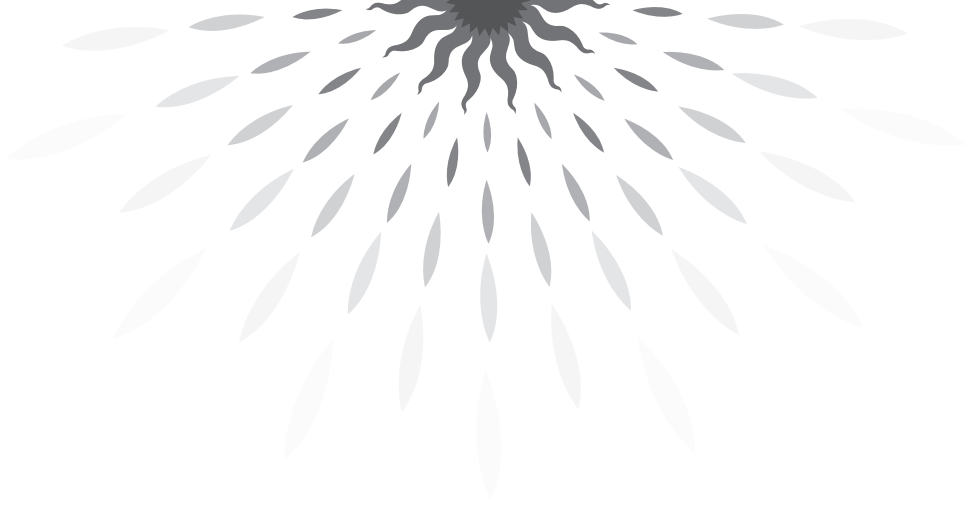
FEMALE FIREBRANDS



Mikaela Kiner



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“The original firebrands were incendiary indeed; they were pieces of wood set burning at the fire, perhaps for use as a light or a weapon . . . But the burning embers of the wooden firebrand quickly sparked figurative uses for the term, too . . . by 1382, English writers were using it for anyone who kindled mischief or inflamed passions.”¹

1 Merriam-Webster, s.v. “firebrand,” accessed February 22, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/firebrand>

“Right now, when we’re hearing so much disturbing and hateful rhetoric, it is so important to remember that our diversity has been—and will always be—our greatest source of strength and pride here in the United States.”

—Michelle Obama

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Aiko, my guide and collaborator regarding privilege, race, and intersectionality—I could not have broached these important topics without your wisdom. Heartfelt thanks to Erin Donley, my original thought partner, for organizing the interviews into meaningful themes that became the basis for this book. Kudos to Christina Watt for her incisive feedback.

I was lucky to have the two most amazing interns: Allison Bunker, who suggested the Next Gen interviews, and Noelle Nightingale, who conducted extensive research. Both of them brought incredible expertise to the project.

Special thanks to my staff at Reverb: Marlyn Chu, Michelle Fink, Lindsay Foley, Sjohn Jepsen, Hanako Olmer, and Sarah Wilkins for supporting me in balancing this book with my day job. I want to recognize Reverb consultant Adrienne Kortas, creator of The Advocacy Spectrum, for helping all of us become more vocal and proactive advocates.

Thanks to the mentors, sponsors, and allies who have been generous with their time and feedback to help me grow over the course of my career: Shannon Anderson, Robin Andrulevich, Anish Batlaw,

Dave Gartenberg, Abilio Gonzalez, Jerry Hunter, Kathy Lindenbaum Susan Mann, Raj Raghavan, Mala Singh, and many others.

Organizations that foster learning and compassion are rare, and I appreciate those that are part of my life: The Hudson Institute, and Brené Brown's Dare to Lead™ facilitator community. Also Franklin High and Billings Middle School, for teaching our kids to be socially aware, inclusive, and empathetic people and giving them a safe space to learn and grow.

To my parents, who raised me to be decisive, principled, and hard-working. My husband Henry, who proved he really would “follow me anywhere” when we moved our family to South India. My son Simon, who is a quiet feminist, and my daughter Sidonie, who is the most vocal feminist I know.

INTRODUCTION

THE CAREER OF A LIFETIME

Early in my career, I dreamt of being sent on an international assignment. Experiencing a variety of people, cultures, landscapes, and foods has always intrigued me. When my assumptions are challenged, and when I can see the world through another person's eyes, is when I flourish—personally and professionally.

In 2009, Amazon gave me a chance to take on that international assignment, and it was one of my most incredible life experiences. Hyderabad, India, became our family home. We stayed for three years—my husband, Henry, and our children, Simon and Sidonie (we call her Sido), who were seven and four at the time. People always commented on what a wonderful learning opportunity it was for the kids to experience a different culture, and it was the same for us as adults.

My biggest challenge was that my job as an HR director involved extensive travel. The jaunt to Amazon HQ in Seattle, Washington, was roughly twenty-four hours door-to-door on a good day. I took trips ranging from a few days to a week, traveling to the United States twenty times in three years, and making shorter trips to Bangalore and Chennai (large technology hubs in South India) monthly. Add the inevitable emergency meeting and quarterly team offsites, and you get the picture—work and travel consumed much of my existence.

Thankfully, Henry stayed at home with the kids. This was unheard of for a man in India, and to be culturally accepted, he created a sort of

alibi about being on sabbatical and teaching music at the international school. Even though this was true, each time he met someone new, he had to tell the story “just so,” in order to avoid confusion. When we explained to locals that my assignment with Amazon brought us to India, many would pause, look at Henry, and say, “But sir, you must also work for Amazon.” It was unthinkable that we would move for my job, and not his. But that is a story for another day.

My Seven-Year-Old and the Tipping Point

When we returned to Seattle in June 2012, the temperature was cool, it was drizzling, and the kids were freezing. Summer days in Hyderabad hit a stifling, dry 109 degrees daily, and the winters provided only a two-week reprieve from the heat. Simon and Sidonie didn't recognize American money, and they didn't realize we knew how to drive a car because in India, it's common to hire a local driver. When we left, the kids begged our driver, Akheel, to come home with us. But in spite of everything, Henry and I merged back into American norms as independent drivers, bundled in sweatshirts to protect us from the Pacific Northwest cold.

Moving 10,000 miles, enrolling the kids in school, and settling into temporary housing was no small feat, but before returning to work, I took off only four business days. It's common for returning expats to feel disconnected, and my first day back at Amazon felt chilly and impersonal since the company had changed and grown so much while I was away. I entered my office to find no phone, no coat hook, and no lock on the door. There wasn't even a chair.

I'll never forget the kindness of my friend Kelly Wolf, who welcomed me with a card and a plant. I didn't take others' aloofness personally: after seven years at Microsoft and nearly six years at Amazon, I understood the heavy demands placed on employees at these

companies. People were busy, and I got it. The old Amazon tagline was still fresh in my mind: “Work long, hard, and smart. You can’t choose two out of three.” To their credit, Amazon has focused increasingly on people’s well-being in the past few years, in some cases even hosting “work-life harmony” discussions between leaders and employees.

In India, the hours were long, including regular calls at night often lasting until 11:00 p.m. Because I had been in a remote location, I was used to a degree of freedom and control over my work. Now that I was back at headquarters, I missed the ability to move quickly and make my own decisions. Getting back that kind of autonomy proved to be impossible. I had no staff and four open positions on the team I inherited. Because of the vacancies, I was responsible for 1,300 clients globally with limited support. As I’d been taught all my life, I worked long and hard—and, hopefully, smart too—to make sure my clients got what they needed.

*“You look like a caged animal.
Why don’t you just go?”*

Some of my reintegration efforts included taking my laptop to Starbucks on the weekends, where I could focus without being distracted by the kids or household chores. One Saturday morning the four of us were having breakfast, and though I was home with my family, I wasn’t truly present. I had loads of work to do before Monday, and my head was exploding. Henry said, “You look like a caged animal. Why don’t you just go?” With his support and encouragement, I was out the door in an instant.

In India, it was normal for me to be gone, but expectations started to shift when we got back to the States. We were all exhausted from the move, and I didn’t recognize the toll it had taken—until the first day of the new school year, a few months after our return. Sido had just started second grade, and she was not happy with our new life in

Seattle. From the back of the car, my daughter did something that changed all of our lives. She read me the riot act:

“Mom, why aren’t you ever home? Why don’t you take me to school? How come only Dad knows my friends’ phone numbers?”

I sat silently in disbelief. My seven-year-old daughter had just clearly and pointedly expressed her needs. Until then, a combination of loving adults (her dad, teachers, grandparents, soccer and gymnastics coaches) had always been enough for her. Now, she needed not just those adults; she needed more of me. Sido was right.

I have always known I’m a good, loving parent, and I’ve never felt guilty about my demanding career. I learned early on, after Simon was born, that sometimes I made sacrifices for work, and other times I made sacrifices for my family. As long as those sacrifices were equally balanced, I had always been able to find a happy medium.

Sido’s questions were a wake-up call. My immediate reaction was *She’s right. This is absurd. Life’s too short. I should take her to school. I should know her friends’ phone numbers. I should be there for her more. I want to be there. Something has to change.*

Laying Down the Law

A few months later, I made the choice to leave Amazon for a senior HR director role at PopCap Games, a smaller company where I could work fewer hours and still be successful. The move freed up space for family—and for me. For the first time in fifteen years, I was able to invest in myself and focus on my own career growth. I took long walks in the Seattle rain, read *The New Yorker* cover to cover, and enrolled in a leadership coaching program at the Hudson Institute in Santa Barbara. Having time to pursue my interests, to branch out, and not be consumed by my work was more than a relief; it was a lifesaver. I felt like a normal person again. I didn’t resent the moms

who had time to meet for coffee after dropping their kids off at school. I began to understand how friends and neighbors went about their days at a more leisurely pace.

My last corporate job after leaving PopCap was as VP Human Resources at Redfin. Attaining that job title was a big milestone in a corporate world where people care about such things.

The title was important to me simply because it signified that I was a peer to other executives on the leadership team. By then,

“I wished someone had warned me in my twenties that not all companies require intense juggling acts and so much sacrifice to make career, life, and family work well together.”

I’d also become clear about my personal values and boundaries. I shared these when I was being recruited into Redfin, knowing that if our values didn’t align, I was prepared to walk away. Point by point, I told my future boss:

- I’m a committed and hard worker, but I don’t work every day, night, and weekend.
- I have an executive coaching practice that I’ll be maintaining on the side.
- I show up late on Fridays because I drive my daughter to school.

Redfin graciously accepted my terms, and I remained there for a year. By this time, I was a fifteen-year veteran in human resources who’d spent an extraordinary amount of time “making things work” at various companies. I wished someone had warned me in my twenties that not all companies require intense juggling acts and so much sacrifice to make career, life, and family work well together.

I want to acknowledge here and now that I *chose* these hard-charging

companies, and I chose to work as hard as I knew how. I did everything in my power to perform well and not let anyone down. I was driven, and the choices were my own. At the same time, I couldn't help but feel that there was about 25% too much work required in each of the big corporate jobs I had. I reached a breaking point at each company when I felt forced to make a choice. Each time—though the choice was not necessarily easy or obvious—I chose family.

Why Wasn't I Invited?

As someone who believed in the myth of meritocracy, I wish I'd been more prepared for the *microaggressions* and exclusion that can happen at work, especially to women. Being an optimist, I've often felt naive and even blindsided by how underrepresented people are treated. I like to say that I came by my role as an HR professional (now often referred to as "People Operations") honestly.

Both of my parents are employment attorneys on the plaintiff's side, which means they sue companies when people have been harassed or discriminated against at work. I grew up hearing dinner table conversations about sexual harassment, pregnancy discrimination, and other issues that left me thinking there had to be a better way to work together and handle these situations without things getting so out of hand that an attorney was needed. Even today, when I witness inappropriate behavior at work, I wonder why people behave the way they do. Working in HR has given me a unique, up-close view of what goes on in corporate America, and it's not always pretty.

Like others in my generation, I grew up with TV shows, music, and movies that portrayed women through negative stereotypes. At the same time, my mom taught me that becoming Miss Universe was not an appropriate life goal, and we never had a Barbie in our house. The extent to which women and other groups were minimized in

eighties media and entertainment might have seemed like a humorous exaggeration at the time, but thirty-five years later, gender discrimination still exists. The current #MeToo and #TimesUp movements offer glimpses of behavior that is no longer tolerated but has been pervasive for decades.

As my career progressed, I found myself questioning companies whose work hours and reward structures were designed long ago—by and for men. I wondered why I wasn't invited to executive dinners or drinks with the guys, and why I was told to refrain from asking questions in meetings. Even though my questions were relevant, I was told they were disruptive. Frequently the only woman on the executive team, I watched men form what seemed like instant camaraderie while keeping me at arm's length. I saw male peers and executives repeatedly let off the hook for missing meetings, yelling, and name calling, yet I was shut down when all I wanted was to participate and do my job.

Both men and women have been my advocates at times. Over the years, there were also managers who left me angry and confused by their feedback. Surprisingly, some of the most personal and unclear feedback I heard came from female bosses. Many of their critical statements were contradictory and not constructive, like the ones below.

- “You are like a dog with a bone when you have a goal.” My boss gave me this feedback in a company culture that was very results oriented. Men all around me were praised and promoted when they stopped at nothing to achieve their goals.
- “You're arrogant.” This felt extremely personal, especially when I asked for context and my manager could not provide it. She told me this was the opinion of one of her peers, so I promptly contacted her asking how I could improve. She dismissed it, saying I had been quite direct with one of her team members, but that the person had poor follow-through, so it was understandable. In a

culture known for being direct, my drive for results was criticized. Yet when I saw male executives point fingers, yell, and publicly attack people, it was repeatedly excused as “that’s just so-and-so,” as if the frequency of this behavior made it OK, for men.

- “You’re so strategic, people can’t understand you,” and “You’re too tactical to interact with senior leaders.” Either of these comments might have been constructive; however, in combination and coming from the same boss at roughly the same time, they were contradictory. I’m not certain what it means to be too strategic, and without specific examples these remarks left me not understanding the problem or how I could work toward a solution.
- “You don’t think big enough.” I value the idea of thinking big picture and long term. At the same time, it’s always possible to think bigger. Without examples of what this looks like in action, who’s doing it well, or how to improve, it was too ambiguous to act on.
- “You’re not hands-on enough,” and “You’re too hands-on.” Again, both of these remarks could be valid at different times and on different projects. At times I felt I might wake up to one or the other, never knowing which it would be. When the same boss alternates between two extremes, it creates a moving target.

Some people say women simply need to “get over it” and learn to be tough. Don’t take things so personally. But when women receive feedback that is not helpful or actionable, it’s difficult to move forward. The *double standard* that requires women to be nice but assertive, direct but not aggressive, passionate but not emotional, and so on, has a direct impact on women’s ability to succeed. Women are often told to demonstrate opposing behaviors, which only leads to increased confusion about how to grow and which skills they need to focus on.

The Intangibles

As I was, many women are plagued by feedback that is unclear, not actionable, and creates a moving target. They may get conflicting feedback as I did when I was told I was both “too strategic” and “too tactical.” If that sounds familiar, you are not alone. A *Thrive Global* article by Jena Booher titled “Too Edgy, Too Nice, Too Much!!” describes this phenomenon:

“Inevitably, at the end of every year during my year-end review, my managers would report I was ‘too edgy’ and I needed to pull it back. What did this even mean? Frankly, I never found out because anytime I asked (which was many times) my managers were not able to put into words why being edgy was an area for improvement. Or at least they couldn’t put it in a way that was politically correct enough for HR to give the green light.” Jena describes reflecting back on what this feedback really meant. She later determined that “too edgy” meant not conforming—she just didn’t fit in with the in-crowd, even though she did good work.

She later polled hundreds of women who had been told they were too (fill in the blank) at some point in their careers. The list included the following:

- Too Ambitious
- Too Intense
- Too Direct
- Too Feisty
- Too Focused
- Too Sexy
- Too Smiley
- Too Nice

- Too Quiet
- Too Loud
- Too Excited
- Too Strong
- Too Quirky
- Too Sincere
- Too Young
- Too Much
- Too Redhead (yes, this is real)

Jena then asked the women to translate what was “too” about themselves by viewing it as a unique strength. Interpretations included “a female founder who reported being called ‘Too Much.’ Her interpretation of ‘Too Much’ is her presence, energy, and appetite for life is all TOO intimidating.” One of my own, *too quiet*, was reimagined as reflective. What’s your “too”?

In a favorite episode of the *I Hate My Boss* podcast, the manager did not even try to make his reasons HR-appropriate when telling a female direct report that she was not up for promotion. He simply told her that she was not promoted “due to intangibles.”¹ During her “interesting performance review that lasted for nearly two hours,” this young woman was instructed to get more experience and become more assertive before she would be eligible for a promotion. She knew that in any of the company’s other locations she would already be at a higher level based on her work quality and responsibilities. The fact that her leaders were looking for “intangibles” and wanted her to “command

1 <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/wonderly/i-hate-my-boss/e/50774084>

the room” led her to the realization that no woman had ever held that position. Maybe no woman ever will.

Her boss also admitted that men were promoted to “unsuitable or made-up positions” because they made a lot of noise about it. Host Liz Dolan has seen this situation more than once. “Intangibles, right there, red flag...be more assertive, second red flag, and the ultimate catch-22 for women. They tell you to be more assertive, and then the moment you are, they fire you.” Basically, leadership wants you to command the room but without being commanding. This is a classic *double bind* for women. Sadly, it can be very challenging for women to get clear goals and measures so they can be held to those and not the so-called intangibles.

Making the Leap

Just one year after joining Redfin, in 2015 I made the leap. I left corporate work behind and started my own business, Reverb. Based in Seattle, we help fast-growing companies of all sizes foster a healthy culture, engage their employees, and develop their leaders. My company is growing faster than I had imagined, and I’m working harder than ever, but it’s not an exhausting time in my life. In fact, it’s less stressful than anything I’ve done in the previous fifteen years.

“I get to choose family and take care of my team, my clients, and myself.”

When I started the business, my goals included taking my daughter to school, choosing whom I worked with and for, and having fun. I purposely work with clients in the Seattle area, so I don’t have to travel. Having control over my schedule lets me work when I’m most productive, whether that means getting up at 5:00 a.m. to catch up when things are quiet or taking Friday afternoon off to drive my daughter to a climbing competition. I get to choose family *and* take care of my

team, my clients, and myself. These are the terms and conditions I've always wanted. I just needed time and experience to get here.

I wrote this book because I know countless women who want and deserve the same, but they are unsure if it's truly possible.

HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

In 2017, my client Jackie Haggerty at ExtraHop asked me to participate on a Ladies in Seattle Tech panel during a Women's Day celebration. Each of the speakers gave a five-minute lightning talk in response to the question "What career advice do you wish you were given years ago?" It was a diverse panel, and our answers revolved around the challenges each of us had personally navigated. While there were some commonalities, there were also stark differences based on our personalities, career paths, and the industries we'd chosen. Afterward, groups of women congregated around each of us. It was as if everyone in the audience had found someone they resonated with, someone who was telling *their* story. The sense of validation in the room was palpable, and I knew right then that telling women's stories is powerful!

To begin the book, I contacted thirteen successful, mission-driven women I knew and admired. My questions to them were about family, kindness, competition, money, and privilege. Their answers were not what I'd expected: They were more inspiring, eye-opening, and provocative than I could have ever imagined. These women oozed with authenticity and no-holds-barred honesty.

In nearly thirty hours of interviews, I heard in detail how these women—

- Pursued their goals without worrying if they'd fit in or not

- Were driven by collaboration rather than competition with others
- Were held back and championed by both women and men
- Became their own bosses to create better cultures
- Emerged as advocates for other women and underrepresented groups

Their experiences demonstrated how much we can learn from women's stories, and they were a timely reminder that so much change is still needed before women can truly be themselves.

Their stories also serve as a powerful confirmation to the rest of us that our own choices and actions matter. Each of us can effect positive change at work and in our own lives.

* * *

I also took the pulse of the younger generation, referred to throughout the book as Next Gen. My team talked to ten dynamic women, ages seventeen to thirty-three. They helped provide clarity on which issues are still a problem in the workplace, what they're doing about it, and what kind of support they need from their colleagues. These up-and-coming professional women made one thing clear—this book had to look at what's tough and include topics such as—

- The hierarchy of privilege in business
- The challenges of motherhood at work
- The unnecessary competition between women
- The realities of the #MeToo movement

It's Been Going on Forever

On a recent visit to New York City, my ninety-two-year-old grandmother Beatrice told me about walking out on jobs twice back in the 1940s. While sitting at her desk as an accountant for a New York City retailer, she said the owner touched her from behind in an inappropriate way. She got up from her chair, walked out the door, and never went back. Later, in another job, again, a male boss went beyond what she described as the standard flirting that in her day any attractive, young woman expected at work. "There was pressure, and things got complicated." She acknowledged that not every woman could simply cut bait, because often a paycheck is too important to walk away from. But she was grateful she had the means to leave when she did.

Before exiting the corporate world, I had been questioning my choices, my strength, my tolerance, and my resiliency. I could see how feeling overworked and underappreciated had become status quo for many of my friends and colleagues. I thought: *How can others put up with this and I can't?* I saw being able to manage the pressure as a strength and juggling everything without dropping the ball as an achievement. *If others could handle it, why did my threshold keep getting lower? Why couldn't I hang in there and not let little things get under my skin?*

The truth is, if it weren't for my daughter's intervention, I might still be grappling with these questions and trying to make it work, just as women since my grandmother's time have done.

Becoming Better Advocates: No Turning Back

Today, with Time's Up, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and LGBTQIA+ empowerment, there's pressure to change the way we relate at work and to build healthy, inclusive cultures that are better for everyone. There's much that we, as women, managers, and leaders, are still trying to decipher. And now, men are filled with questions too, about

their power, roles, and unconscious biases. There's a collective drive to become better advocates. How do we create modern workplaces where everyone can thrive? How can people with demands and interests outside of work grow their careers? What will it take for everyone to feel a sense of belonging? The women I spoke to offer us some remarkable ideas.

You'll notice, we don't wallow in anger or blame in this book. I subscribe to Ruth Bader Ginsburg's philosophy: "Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you." This is not "just another book about women's empowerment" or how to succeed in your career. This book is designed to help you reclaim your power, improve your situation, and become an advocate for yourself and others. #MeToo has opened the doors for conversation, education, and a new way of working together. There's no turning back. The thirteen women featured here will provide the bulk of the wisdom.

I've also included some experiences of my own. As a female business owner, I'm honored to have received recognition by being quoted in *The Wall Street Journal* and *Fast Company*. Recently I was added to the Forbes HR Council, and even crowned as a "Boss Tactician" by Seattle's own KUOW podcast, *Battle Tactics for Your Sexist Workplace*. These milestones gave me a shot in the arm when I needed them and let me know that I'm making a difference for my women colleagues. Being a leader takes resilience, tenacity, and the willingness to be both humble and bold. And there's always a learning edge that keeps me on my toes.

Until now, I hadn't examined the unique challenges for professional women of color. I saw us all as "women" in the same fight against the same stereotypes. My ignorance of their struggles

"Being a leader takes resilience,
tenacity, and the willingness to be
both humble and bold."

as black, brown, and indigenous women meant I didn't know how to advocate for them effectively. I'm honored that several women of color shared their stories with me, so that I can share them with you. No matter your race or gender, as you read this book you might see how your own unrecognized privilege has opened doors for you that are not open to others. I'd like to invite you to embrace what you don't know and let it inform who you become. Challenge your privilege by creating a standard that is more inclusive and brings others along.

What You'll Need to Survive, Lead, and Thrive

We're going to dive into a rich combination of women's stories that are explained by societal context and backed by data. It's a lot to take in, and their experiences may be new to you. *Female Firebrands* invites you to take a realistic look at what it means to be a woman in the workplace, so you can do what you need to do to thrive. As you read, you will—

- Develop tools and techniques to stand up and speak up on behalf of yourself and others when it's both difficult and necessary
- Get better at recognizing “little indignities” you don't have to tolerate
- Learn what it means to be an informed, empowered advocate for women
- Increase awareness of your own blind spots and biases so you can learn from them
- Recognize the role of privilege at work and how it can be used for positive change

I've included a checklist at the end of each chapter about standing up for yourself, advocating for others, and influencing change in your organization—so you can put to use what you're learning. I've also included suggestions for male allies and advocates, as well as HR, Diversity, and other business leaders. People who want to bring these concepts into their organizations can find research, checklists, automated tools, and consulting services online at <https://reverbpeople.com/femalefire-brands/>.

One last thing: you will notice that certain words throughout the text are presented in italics. If you run across a word that's unfamiliar to you, we've got you covered in the glossary at the end of the book.

So, let's get started!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MIKAELA KINER is an experienced HR/people operations professional, founder/CEO, and executive coach. In 2015, Mikaela founded Reverb, a leading provider of flexible People Operations services for startups and fast-growing companies in the Pacific Northwest. Reverb's purpose is to help companies create healthy, inclusive culture that engages and inspires employees. The firm works with companies such as Juno Therapeutics, Wizards of the Coast, and Microsoft, as well as many early stage startups.

Mikaela believes that people can have fun and be productive at work every day, as long as they're happy, challenged, and feel a sense of belonging. Craving balance in her own life, Mikaela created Reverb to work with companies who need just-in-time HR help. In line with her mission, the Reverb team has the flexibility to do meaningful work while enjoying time outside of work for themselves and their families.

Prior to founding Reverb, Mikaela held HR leadership roles at Northwest companies including Microsoft, Starbucks, Amazon, PopCap Games, and Redfin. In addition to living for three years in India, she's worked with leaders throughout Europe and Asia. Mikaela enjoys coaching leaders at all levels and working with mission-driven organizations.

Mikaela holds a master's degree in HR with a Certificate in Organizational Development from the New School for Social Research. She's a certified executive coach with a credential from the International

Coaching Federation, and a certified practitioner of Brené Brown's Dare to Lead™ curriculum. A native Seattleite who grew up on Capitol Hill, Mikaela is married to Henry, a musician, artist, and teacher. Their two children, Simon and Sidonie, are good at challenging the status quo and are a constant source of learning and laughter.

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