

"Joan Kuhl has written a solid playbook that arms women with real-world strategies for disrupting the corporate world and getting what we deserve."

—Sophia Amoruso, Co-Founder & CEO, *Girlboss*



# DIG YOUR HEELS IN

NAVIGATE  
**CORPORATE BS**  
AND BUILD  
THE COMPANY  
**YOU** DESERVE

**JOAN KUHL**

## Praise for *Dig Your Heels In*

“Joan Kuhl has proven to be an unabashed champion for girls’ leadership and advancing women in the workplace. *Dig Your Heels In* is a solid playbook that arms women with real-world strategies for disrupting the corporate world and getting what we deserve.”

—**Sophia Amoruso, cofounder and CEO, Girlboss**

“An incredibly important book that will change the way we lead, grow, and transform our organizations—and ourselves. *Dig Your Heels In* distills the essence of what it takes to become a significant change agent, guiding us to challenge the status quo and moving us from where we are to where we are called to be.”

—**Frances Hesselbein, Chairman, Frances Hesselbein Leadership Forum; Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient; and former CEO, Girl Scouts of the USA**

“Need a dose of inspiration and career strategy before your next mansplaining? Here it is! As much as *Lean In* charted the course, *Dig Your Heels In* is about staying the course. A very special message to millennial women that will take them through, not just to, the glass ceiling. The stories in this book are as inspiring as they are instructive. Joan Kuhl was among the first thought leaders to focus intently on young leaders and by doing so has inspired me to a lifetime of developing millennials before they assume top leader roles. A profoundly talented writer and speaker, Joan is a standard bearer for women in business. *Dig Your Heels In* is not just about standing firm; it’s about moving ahead.”

—**Tom Kolditz, PhD, retired Brigadier General and Executive Director, The Doerr Institute for New Leaders, Rice University**

“Our girls need advocates like Joan Kuhl to help them grow up to be strong, respected, and valued leaders. *Dig Your Heels In* emphasizes the bold moves that individuals can take to ensure women of all ages, levels, and backgrounds have the time, space, and support to be our authentic selves in a world of social pressures and gender stereotypes.”

—**Kate T. Parker, photographer and author of *Strong Is the New Pretty***

“Women face specific challenges to rise in their careers and oftentimes shrink themselves at the prospect of engaging others around their ambitions. *Dig Your Heels In* gives women permission and courage to go

after what they need and deserve while also strengthening their peer network to empower women around them.”

—**Sally Helgesen, coauthor of *How Women Rise***

“Women deserve to know the real deal so they can power through the obstacles that they will encounter in pursuit of the happy, fulfilling, and successful careers they deserve. *Dig Your Heels In* is a movement based on having the courage to advocate for ourselves and play the long game for our peers and the women to follow.”

—**Annie McKee, author of *How to be Happy at Work* and Senior Fellow, University of Pennsylvania**

“*Dig Your Heels In* delivers relevant and actionable strategies to empower women to lead within their organizations.”

—**Anne Ackerley, Head of BlackRock’s US and Canada Defined Contribution Group and Cofounder of BlackRock’s Women’s Initiative Network**

“Practical solutions, relevant stories, and even scripts for difficult situations make *Dig Your Heels In* a must-read for any woman who wants to advance her career and change her organization for the better.”

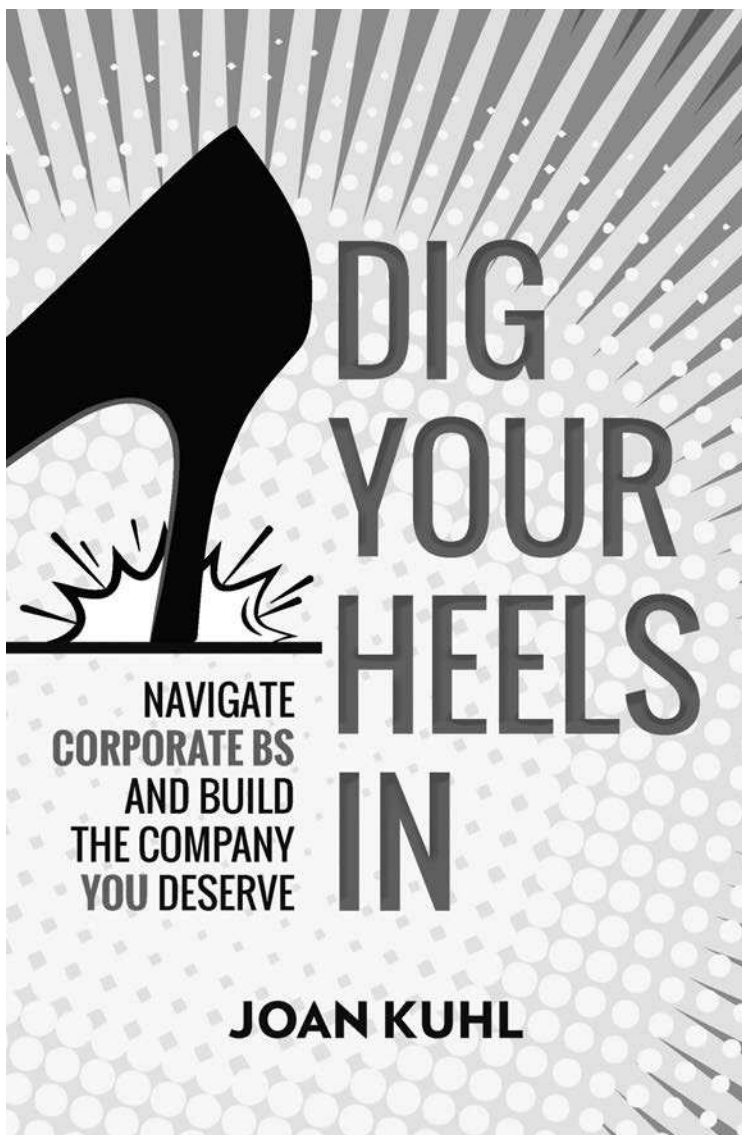
—**Laura Vanderkam, author of *I Know How She Does It***

“The trust and influence that Joan Kuhl has earned through her research-based consulting projects and passion for transforming culture are infectious. We have worked together for the past several years on efforts to engage early career professionals and advance women in sports, so I’m thrilled that her advice and strategies are accessible through her new book, *Dig Your Heels In*, to more leaders in human resources and talent management.”

—**Holly Lindvall, Senior Vice President, Human Resources & Diversity, New York Mets**

“For over a decade, I have witnessed Joan Kuhl’s impact on global organizations and diverse leaders led by her passion for early career development and advancement of women in the workplace. *Dig Your Heels In* pulls together Joan’s expertise with inspiring stories of trail-blazers who provide a realistic pathway for achieving success at work and in life.”

—**Marshall Goldsmith, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Triggers*, *Mojo*, and *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There* and #1 Executive Coach and the only two-time #1 Leadership Thinker in the World, Thinkers50**



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# Dig Your Heels In

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*This book is dedicated to my daughters,  
Addison and Juliette.*

*Dream with your full imagination, hold your ground,  
and go after everything you want and deserve.*



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# Introduction

## *Thriving, Not Just Surviving*

Imagine the effort it must take to wake up every morning with the daunting task of walking into an environment that tests your beliefs about who you can and could be as well as what you truly deserve. Have you ever looked around in disbelief as you observe how much bias shows up in decisions and actions with outcomes that are just not right? Is it that hard to believe that millions of women of all ages feel like this every day? They struggle to move up the ladder or gain fulfillment in their day-to-day work. Some feel underpaid and underappreciated, but it's not just a feeling; it is proven fact. In 2018, women still earned 77 cents for every male dollar over their lifetimes; parity between the sexes begins to drop the minute a woman chooses to have kids, and it never recovers. By the time a woman reaches the age of fifty, she's earning 55 cents on the dollar compared to her male counterpart.<sup>1</sup>

Even our youngest generation in the workplace, millennial women between eighteen and thirty-seven in 2018, say they feel that their gender has held them back in their careers.<sup>2</sup>

Some feel harassed or that they need to compromise their values because they are paralyzed by fear of retaliation. In fact, 20 percent of millennial women “strongly agree” that women are less likely to be considered for senior-level roles in a business or corporate setting than their male counterparts,<sup>3</sup> and over 40 percent of working women have been the victim of sexism in the workplace.<sup>4</sup> Companies that these women had perceived as places where they could grow and advance their careers are deeply disappointing to them.

I remember the first time a customer grabbed me inappropriately in his office, in front of his secretary. I jumped and called out while he just laughed and walked away. And I can’t forget the moment when another customer tried to humiliate me about a topic related to our business in front of a huge room of people by taunting me about my looks and intelligence. I was twenty-one years old. That night, I memorized a ten-page study regarding the treatment of schizophrenia (which I can still recite to this day) and marched into his office the next morning to show him I knew my stuff. I wasted so much energy feeling belittled in similar situations, without any outlet for support.

Over time, women’s frustration in dealing with subtle and overt sexism paired with a lack of advancement opportunities and an unsupportive corporate culture is too much to bear. That is why millennial women are quitting in record numbers to embark on the adventure of “doing their ‘own thing.’” They are transferring their energy and passion, derived in many cases from a side hustle, into a full-time entrepreneurial focus. But this self-starter option, though glorified by social media, is not for everyone.

Women at the height of their career are also moving on to bigger and better opportunities outside their current organizations because they can't hold the umbrella any longer. It's becoming way too heavy as they try to be a positive North Star for the next generation while continuing to operate at senior leadership levels as "the only woman." It's lonely at the top, and they also still lack the systemic support needed to transform their company. The costs to their personal lives in having to navigate a male-dominated, monolithic, conservative culture are exhausting. They are as desperate for change as the youngest, most junior women in the workforce.

Some women remain in their corporate jobs because of the time invested or the burden of student loan debt. Others have convinced themselves that things may get better and that the benefits to come are worth the stifling of their true feelings. But in assuming either stance and accepting the status quo, they are surrendering their ambitions and simply going through the motions.

Does this sound like you? Armed with the "Lean In" battle cry, you embarked on your career with greater confidence and higher expectations than did women of previous generations. But you soon discovered that your passion and excitement were quelled under the compounding pressure to behave like a "good girl." You are struggling to find your voice despite your desire to question, challenge, or hold leadership accountable for more equitable conditions.

Faced with these conflicting forces, you are considering giving up on your professional aspirations and walking away from the very company whose door you worked so hard to get through.

So what can you do if you're feeling discouraged and wondering whether leaving is your only (less than ideal) option? How can you navigate through companies whose bad behaviors and systemic challenges were in place over a hundred years ago?

If this is you, I believe you are in a unique position to make your voice—and our collective voice as women—matter . . . by digging your heels in.

## **Dig Your Heels In**

Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* launched a visible and active conversation on gender bias, and the women in my own Lean In Circle have helped me push forward to make some of the boldest moves in my career. What *Dig Your Heels In* is offering is a unique perspective for the next era of change, one that builds on the success of *Lean In* and the many other women empowerment initiatives that have arisen since its launch. But it is also a double click on the systemic changes and processes we need to disrupt within the companies we work for. Changing how we approach our personal goals—and transforming companies to do better by all of us—should not be a burden resting solely on our shoulders but rather a shared mission for men and women.

As talented and valuable as you are, you *could* secure a better title, more responsibility, and more money if you leave today. But, with your relationship currency, enterprise knowledge, and track record of results, you could also cultivate the career you desire right where you are by staying and building the company you deserve. I wrote this book because I want you to hold your ground at your company, stay put, and focus on the long game. I want you to commit to transforming the place that pays your paycheck today.

Sure, you as an individual could take the other route. For some women, maybe enough is enough, and they should leave. (And I wholeheartedly support them and hope this book serves as a mirror with which to evaluate this decision.) But women collectively will not get where we all need to be if we don't make a stand together to drive the necessary changes. We need women at all levels of their professions as well as the men they work with to elevate equality as an urgent priority. Everyone employed today and in the future deserves to work for a company that is fair in pay and opportunity to both genders. Equality is good for people, good for business, and good for society.

An important note here: My goal in this book is not to convince women in toxic work situations to “grin and bear it” for the greater good. If you are facing discrimination or harassment that is eating away at your soul, your only job is to do what's best for you in your individual situation. Digging your heels in is a personal decision and is not for everybody. But for those for whom it may be the right option, consider this: The more time you spend at one particular organization, the more valuable your perspective, the more you know how it operates and who is calling the shots, and the more power you have to identify where and how to make change happen. This is how we evolve outdated, inequitable practices that reward the wrong behaviors and stifle the right ones—with you blazing the trail, creating the company that you and all the women behind you want to work for. A place that honors the right people and enforces the just practices that will ensure its success and yours over the long term. This is what happens when you dig your heels in.

## **What Digging Your Heels In Means to Me**

I have always believed that investing time in our youngest employees should be core to every business. That's why I launched *Why Millennials Matter*, which helps companies understand, engage, and retain the next generation of global workers and consumers. Since an early age, I had always been enrolled in youth leadership programs across Philadelphia and the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania. Those experiences shaped my values and developed my confidence in pursuing leadership in my personal and professional life.

During my thirteen-year corporate career, I stayed actively involved on college campuses as a speaker, mentor, and career coach, so I knew firsthand how much power and potential this next generation possessed. But soon after the global recession, I watched companies pull back on the investments—in internship programs, leadership development opportunities, global rotations, and apprenticeship models—that engage and develop early-career professionals and expose them to new pathways and people who can be mentors and role models. I had two options. The first was to stay and accept as my new reality the challenges we faced as leaders managing more responsibility with fewer and fewer resources. Or I could do something unconventional—serve as an ally to both sides: early-career talent and the companies who need them in their workforce.

The biggest questions on my mind were, “How can I gain access to the broadest and most diverse groups of students? Who relies on recruiting off campus and needs to evolve to be the company most desired by millennials and generations to follow?” And finally, “How do I get the word out to change

the message that millennials are entitled, lazy, and unworthy of investment to one that is more accurate and encouraging?” This is why I launched my company with several key clients and partners, including Barnes and Noble College, which managed over 750 college bookstores where I could be connected as their career expert and research partner to millions of students; Eli Lilly and Company; Goldman Sachs; the New York Mets, who were struggling to retain young professionals as fast as they recruited them; and *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the number-one magazine globally for millennials.

We’ve had some incredible assignments that have given me and my team tremendous insight across diverse industries, including health care, finance, retail, higher education, and sports. We have had the opportunity to be involved in a wide range of projects, including a multilevel generation-, gender-, and race-based engagement and retention strategy for a US pharmaceutical giant; a global HR culture initiative for both a leading media organization and one of the most prestigious investment banks; a comprehensive research, training, and talent strategy for a national retailer; a culture- and leadership-focused initiative in the sports industry; and an executive leadership development program for a major consumer goods company. We have partnered with organizations and executives who shared our mission of leading positive culture change and empowering the next-generation workforce to achieve their potential.

The engagement that had the greatest impact on me was a transformative project for Eli Lilly and Company (Lilly) called the Women’s Employee Journey. This 2015 research initiative<sup>5</sup> explored the factors contributing to the decline in representation



of women at senior levels of leadership and to better understand their overall experience as employees. It was a journey involving hundreds of women around the globe who participated in a series of focus groups to share their experiences at Lilly. As the project lead for the external research team, I conducted interviews with the executive committee and key senior leaders to frame and understand the company's top priorities and culture. Carolyn Buck Luce, a retired partner at Ernst and Young (EY) and cofounder for the Center for Talent Innovation, served as the project advisor and my mentor in working with Lilly and the Center for Talent Innovation on this research initiative.

Lilly wanted the opportunity to truly understand—through its own data and with real stories from Lilly employees—what women of all ages and levels in its workplace were experiencing. After analyzing the insights from the women across different levels and business functions, we mapped the findings back to millennial women to illustrate the impact on early-career professionals in terms of its influence on their perception about women's advancement opportunities and their personal engagement. We wanted to highlight the consequences and influence on millennial women resulting from what they were seeing and hearing from experienced women at tenured and senior levels in the company. One of the questions that continues to inform my work was the following:

**Do you feel the need to change yourself to become a senior leader at your company?**

In the Women's Employee Journey study, we found that the majority of female employees included in the research felt they needed to change to advance. Luckily, from the

moment we presented the cumulative research findings to Lilly's executive committee, leadership was all in and firm in its commitment to move toward enterprise-wide solutions that would increase representation of women and diverse employees across all business functions.

The challenges women face are quite often systemic and controlled by leadership actions and imperatives. Enterprise-wide transformation must be a priority for CEOs and their executive committees. There is also tremendous power that can be driven by women themselves. The women's network at Lilly evolved to become a proactive movement on a mission to achieve gender parity at every level of leadership with extensive support from their CEO, Dave Ricks.

As a result, we were able to move from research to solutions by supporting Lilly's newly transformed women's network, the Women's Initiative for Leading at Lilly (WILL), and partnering with the network on several work streams in the areas of learning, development, advocacy, and advancement.

This project struck a significant chord with me personally, as Lilly was the first company I worked for out of college. I was recruited off campus and had an extraordinary experience working there for the first decade of my career. In approaching this work, I couldn't help but think about all of my friends, former colleagues, previous managers, mentors, and role models, and the leaders whom I truly respected and admired. This is also why the stories and findings haunted me for some time, compelling me to want to play a greater role in making a difference for these women and all women.

In my initial interviews with women at the executive level, I had a very naïve mind-set regarding their experiences. I had prepared my questions with excitement and awe as I memorized

their resumes and imagined the allure that must surround their lifestyles, so I was emotionally unprepared to hear their pain. Each heartbreaking story of struggle to stay in the workforce through life-stage changes and battles for pay and credit was like a punch in the stomach. I admired these women, but they were not thriving in their power; they were barely surviving. Knowing the people behind the research data had a profound impact on my appreciation of the complexities and challenges in achieving equality and inclusion, and on my dedication in seeing this work through.

Yes, this work at first glance did feel like turning around the *Titanic*. But that was almost four years ago. Since then, new research has surfaced, and we have found many organizations invested in building more inclusive, equitable workplaces. Moving from research to action, I've been energized by the women and men I've worked with who are leading real-world strategies that are transforming global companies. I've also had the opportunity to experiment with my own vision for training and business initiatives that substantiate where and how women can gain traction in even the most traditional and monolithic cultures. I can't wait to share all that I've learned and connect you to the people ready to show you the way.

I have a long history of volunteering and serving on boards that support girls, such as Girls Hope of Pittsburgh, Girl Scouts of the USA, Step Up for Women, and Girls on the Run, and I'm now serving as a board member of Girls Inc. of New York City. And, more important, I am the mother of two daughters. I'm determined to do what I can because our daughters deserve a brighter future *much, much* sooner than

what studies predict as our slow trajectory to equality. In many cases, “seeing is believing,” and young women are judging and watching companies more closely than ever before. This is why I am determined to work with companies to help them become better.

The only way for young women and girls to achieve their dreams is to ensure that the women in the prime of their careers, like those I interviewed years ago, are thriving, *not* just surviving. We can’t afford to wait the 217 years the World Economic Forum predicts it will take to achieve global workplace equality for men and women.<sup>6</sup> That is why I wrote this book: to empower women early in their journey to become the leaders of their companies and to make their companies the places where they thrive with their eyes wide open. I lay out the real deal about what you’re up against, and I help you get ready to turn it all around in your favor.

I have been lucky to have some extraordinary mentors throughout my career journey. I had sponsors who helped me navigate my toughest decisions so that I could position myself for the success I desired personally and professionally. I want to play this role for you on a larger scale. To the women working right now who need inspiration, some air cover, empowering and practical advice, and the knowledge and know-how to move the needle in their favor, this book is dedicated to you.

## **In This Book**

Every day there are inspiring stories of bravery and record achievements by women speaking their minds, advocating for equality, and leading transformative change across every