



## *Dear Fellow Female Engineer,*

Maybe you have felt alone.

It could have been already in an engineering class where there weren't many classmates like you.

Or it might have been after starting work, when you realized that you are the only woman in a group.

It took me a while to feel that way. It took more than 15 years of working. But when I did, I felt so alone, defeated, and lost, and wondered who I was and what I should do.

I learned five key lessons during that difficult time. Below, I share them with you, along with ways to explore deeper into each one.

## These are the Five Things I Wish I Would Have Known When I Started Working as an Engineer:

1

Challenge the expectation that toxic masculinity represents good performance and leadership.



2

Find your own purpose, mission and values - don't let others define them for you.



3

Learn who you are, your strengths and weaknesses (by working on or around them). Put effort into the areas of weakness that are essential to carry out your purpose.



4

Find your community. It most likely isn't at work - unless you're lucky.



5

Forget about the perfect woman/mother/wife/colleague/boss/leader/"duktig flicka." No one is or will be, but a team can be. Work to build that team in everything you do.



I have shared my story because I have heard from many women around the world how alone they have felt, and how hearing my story makes them feel less so. I hope you feel this. I hope my lessons and the resources help you avoid some of the pain I have been through.

If you want to connect, you can find me on [Linked In](#), join my [newsletter](#), or explore individual coaching or classes together with me - [book me](#) for an initial free discussion.

I would love to get to know you and hear your story!

With love, from Sarah, an engineering leader



## 1 Challenge the expectation that toxic masculinity represents good performance and leadership.

Unfortunately, some leaders promote and reward behaviors that may be called toxic masculinity. In those environments, good performers and leaders are heralded for being macho, dictatorial, directive, taking the limelight, and winning at any cost. Research has shown that these behaviors are detrimental to teams and companies in terms of attrition, lost revenue, poor quality, and poor customer satisfaction.

Early in my career, I was able to play on strengths that I learned growing up: listening to many opinions, summarizing, and including the input of many, for example. At times, I was considered a sane voice and also one that could get most people on board, as I brought elements of everyone's points into the proposal.

But I also know that some of my early success is attributed to my extreme driving force that would be dictatorial and competitive when necessary to get things done. I felt it was needed, but never really felt comfortable with its human consequence. As I became more comfortable with myself, I have been able to (mostly) leave those behaviors behind.

I have chosen to question positions when I felt that a style of leadership couldn't embrace was the only acceptable option. Interestingly enough, pushing back with my own approach and philosophy has more often been accepted and even emulated as the results in my organizations speak for themselves. For example, I refused to engage in a competitive behavior between my organization and a peer organization in another site. I repeatedly challenged my team members to "kill our colleagues with kindness and understanding." We became much more successful in achieving targets, and I heard my strategy was quoted in senior leadership meetings as a model other teams should follow.



*Be yourself. If you are being held to a standard you can't or won't meet, push back—and then leave, if necessary. There are too many other great opportunities for you.*

Being beaten up day after day for leading by your values isn't worth it. I know. I've been there. I almost destroyed myself because of it, and I will do my best to never be there again.

I hope my message can keep you from being there, too. If you find yourself there, get help. Please. You are worth it, and whatever you are in is not.



## 2 Find your own purpose, mission, and values—don't let others define them, or you, for you.



I was a serious nerd when I was growing up. I was more interested in books, climbing trees, riding bikes, and running model trains than make-up and girly gossip. As my daughter likes to say, I had a seriously questionable sense of style (even for the '80s) and on top of that, I was a bit chubby and very shy.

I didn't like myself. But I wanted others to like me.

So badly.

I spent most of my junior high and high school lunches in the library, reading books of far-away places or writing angst-ridden novels about my future. I'd show up at my high school reunion gorgeous, svelte, sophisticated, flying in from some exotic locale with a gorgeous Frenchman beside me in my Porsche 911 that I kept at the Indianapolis airport just for such occasions.

I'd show them.

In fact, the focus of my life for more than 20 years became my wanting to show them: a bunch of people who really didn't matter. The interesting thing about "showing them" was that I pretty much forgot who "they" were. I definitely lost touch with "them" as my life took me to different places.



But “showing them” was the force that made me want to go to an elite university for undergrad (Northwestern), study a very difficult program that few women chose (Electrical Engineering), and find work that would take me abroad. “Showing them” had me apply for a company fellowship to study at Stanford—another clear achievement—and then take an assignment abroad.

Somewhere early in the journey, my own curiosity and passions—to solve interesting problems, to experience and understand the world, to understand the human mind—kicked in and were a major contributor to my hard work. However, wanting to “show them” was why I set my target to be the first woman CEO of an automotive company. That pushed me to higher places with each new assignment.

Until I was close enough to spend time with the people whose job I wished to have. It wasn't so much the people themselves, as they were good people. But I realized that the problems they liked to solve, the things they liked to talk about, and the life that they lived weren't the things I wanted.

I had a mid-life crisis at 35. I had always told myself that I would be happy, that I would be worth it, when I achieved the next milestone:

“When I go to Northwestern ...”

“When I graduate from Northwestern ...”

“When I get my first job...”

“When I achieve good performance in that first job...”

“When I get the fellowship...”

“When I get in to Stanford...”

... you get the picture.

Instead, with each accomplishment, with each milestone, I felt emptier—not happier. At that point, I was even married to a person who really was (and is) a great match for me ... but all those milestones and achievements weren't enough.

## *They—and I—were never enough.*

I couldn't sleep. My anxiety was high. I was a mess.

I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew it wasn't to be a CEO, or even close to that.

I started to dive into myself. I went back to Northwestern's Career Counselling and took all the assessments. I considered many things that I should have investigated in my teens when I was hyper-focused on milestones and achievements.





I started working a lot with my own mission and purpose, using Stephen Covey's "7 Habits" as a base. I also worked with a coach who helped me see the tipping point that drove me to make concrete changes in my life.

The interesting thing was that I really wasn't too far off track. Engineering, or problem solving, was still something very important to me. Motivating people, inspiring people, were clearly the aspects of leadership that I found fulfilling and engaging. I recognized that somewhere at the point where we start calling employees in a company "heads" instead of "engineers," "people," "colleagues," or by their own name was the limit of where I wanted to be.

It was my achievement and status accumulation that was driving my emptiness, not the work itself.

At that point, life, and my career, became more about solving interesting problems by bringing diverse people together.

My curiosity and interest in other cultures and countries had been a major differentiating factor in an American company. I was the crazy woman who signed up for all the foreign projects, because I couldn't wait to get on a plane and try to figure out how things worked somewhere else.



I tried any food (turtle, jellyfish, and durian, to name just a few) and would always learn at least a few words of the language ("thank you" is usually the first). My ability to listen, combined with my curiosity and interest in other cultures, made me a great cultural bridge. Whether it was the country's top manager or an assembly line worker, they usually recognized my enthusiasm for working with them and my respect for their input and opinion.

My work became more about helping others than proving myself—and it became a whole lot more enjoyable. Over the last 15 years, I have had titles ranging from Component Engineer to Module Team Director.

Both had similar challenges: a lot of good people, wanting to do good work, broken trust, miscommunication, misunderstandings, and tremendous potential for influence, helping out, and solving problems (some of them technical, but most of them interpersonal).

This is what I look for now in my work.

A chance to help, a chance to influence (inspire), and a chance to solve problems. I'm actually even kind of averse to titles and status symbols (as I often say, I am both CEO and janitor in my own company). And I'm pretty far along in my progress of not letting "them" influence me any more.



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Some people, like me, were outsiders and trying to prove their value to people they may no longer remember outside of a nameless, faceless “them.” Together with my coach, we renamed them “The Army of Little Girls,” and I have a wonderful mental image of perfectly sized and groomed blonde girls with pastel Lacoste clothes. Every time I start going into the dark place of questioning my worth and value, I picture them and ask ...

## *“Why are they still making decisions for me?”*

Others might have had their work chosen by another. Parents are common, particularly in some cultures. Sometimes it is a spouse or partner, who decides what you can or cannot, or at least should or should not, be and do.

The thing is, I believe that we really only have this one life. Whose life do you want to live? If you want to live and fulfill your own unique purpose, but aren't sure how to get there, I have options from private coaching to low-cost video classes (particularly the Guided Interpretation to the 7 Habits is great for this) that can help you explore options. Feel free to book an introduction session with me to see if I can be helpful in your journey.



### 3 Learn who you are, your strengths and weaknesses. Play to your strengths and mitigate your weaknesses (by working on, or working around, them). Put effort into the areas of weakness that are essential to carry out your purpose.

With my achievement mindset, I measured myself by my successes, and hated each imperfection, as I saw them as an indication I wasn't good enough. I worked hard on any weakness that was identified and I was very competitive and hyper-sensitive in any area someone else was better than me. I compared myself to everyone in everything.

The reality is, someone was always better than me in something. And in trying to be good at everything, I was losing who I was and the work I enjoyed, and not letting my own strengths shine through.

With this, I had several paradigm shifts.

*The first was realizing that by spending too much time on weaknesses, I was losing my strengths.*



Trying to show I could master everything was an exercise in frustration and insecurity. Time, if nothing else, limits the things we can reasonably master. Through work by the Gallup organization on Strengths and the Belbin Team Role tool on Preferred and Least-Preferred Team Roles, I became more comfortable letting go of some areas. Rather than competing with colleagues to be better than them in things I really didn't like (budgeting, for example), I learned to embrace their strength and interest to divide up work so that we could all focus on our own areas of strength. This led both to better results in the work—someone really thrived was driven to give the extra effort in that area—and better happiness overall. I was no longer threatened and insecure, competing in something that I really didn't like, wasn't good at, and took tremendous energy.

I struggle to ask for help, but I am getting a lot better at it. I realize that getting help from someone who has different strengths and focus allows us both to work in our best space. I don't need to build my own webpage, for example, to prove my intrinsic value—especially if someone else does it all the time, knows how to do it efficiently, and has the aesthetic abilities that I lack, I win by leveraging someone else's strength.

The second was Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hour rule, which basically says that to really master something, you need 10,000 hours in it. Like many other females, at least in the United States, I had grown up with what Carol Dweck calls a "talent mindset." I had either had talent for something or didn't, and I believed that not being good at something was a measure of how good I was as a person, rather than how much work I put into something. But by understanding the 10,000 hour rule, and the difference between growth and talent mindsets.



I realized being really good at something was a result of work and effort—not my inherent value or talent. Recognizing this gave me the ability to think about the things that I really wanted to put time towards and master, rather than trying to protect my inherent value.

An example of this for me is public speaking. Most people who meet me now, who attend one of my classes, refer to me as a natural speaker. I always correct them in that assumption, because it exactly illustrates the power of a talent mindset. Viewing my speaking skills as talent, as something I was born with and have naturally, they are also likely thinking, “I could never do this myself. I’m not comfortable in front of a group. I just don’t have the talent for it, but she does.” In fact, I was once in a facilitator class where someone said that to me, a bit longingly.



I responded with “No, I’m not. Actually, the first times I would speak when I was around 8-12, my mom would have to come get me from school because I would run off to the bathroom and throw up. I absolutely was not a natural speaker. But my dad saw the value of being able to speak in front of a group in most jobs, and encouraged me to work at it. I tortured myself in high school, taking Speech at the first available time freshman year. I struggled to look up at all, whether it was from my notes or the floor. But I didn’t throw up! I joined Model UN, learning to debate and role-play for a country. By the time I took Advanced Speech my senior year in high school, I could at least stare at the desks in front of me and maybe my wonderful, encouraging speech teacher, Mrs Karavitis. I kept working on it. I studied and learned from good speakers. I practiced, even though it was painful, because I knew it was important in what I wanted to do.”

When I work with people, I talk about two ways of working with weakness.

I call the first paradigm shift “managing around.” This is recognizing that my best contribution isn’t in that specific area, so I should look for other people for whom it is.

I call the second paradigm shift “working with” weaknesses, which is what we need to do when that weakness is limiting our effectiveness in living and achieving our purpose, goals, and values. Another “working with” for me is my patience. It will be a lifelong struggle for me, as my strength as a driving force is opposite to patience. I have gotten a lot better with my methods of influence, but as my daughter reminds me regularly, I still have a long way to go.

I love the combination of working with Belbin Team Roles and identifying your own purpose and goals. As one of the few assessments that offer observer views, we can see if others perceive us the way we intend. We also have the chance to work with the weaknesses that may be limiting our work, either by “managing around” or “working with” them.

My series of “Be Your Best...” or “Be a Better...” classes all use the Belbin Team Role Assessment, as I see it as essential to bringing our best self into our teams and work. I also offer individual Belbin assessments and coaching, and would be happy to talk to you more about the options.

## 4 Find your community. It most likely isn't at work—unless you're lucky.

I love the expression, “It takes a village...” Humans are social beings, even if you prefer introversion as I do.

We have strong needs of belonging, of giving and receiving love, and of being recognized. As part of my compassion training, I realized I had a very strong unmet need that led to most of my interpersonal conflicts: belonging. Only when I recognized that, and practiced an awful lot of self-compassion, that I could truly open myself up to be compassionate to others.



Once I recognized my own self-loathing is what kept me on the outside, I could work with it. As I learned to accept, and then gently love, that nerdy little girl that I still saw within me, I felt a lot more comfortable reaching out to others. I didn't have anything to hide anymore. I had protected what I was most ashamed of in the world, and realized that it was only the act of protection that was truly holding me back.

I have had amazing friends through the years. Quite a few have loved me even when I didn't love myself. Most of all, I have been both lucky and smart in my choice of a life partner.

It took me a while to realize what I needed, but having someone who both loved me as I am while pushing me out of my own shell, helped me love and be me.

I am also learning to reach out to others who have skills or passions that I don't have but need. Somewhere out there, someone gets up in the morning to fix that exact problem. When we can reach out, either to hire or to help, we are better for the experience than trying to solve it all ourselves.

I have talked to quite a few people over the years who went into their work thinking it was going to be everything for them. It was going to be a way to fulfill their passion, to earn money, to have friends, and in an extreme extent, even to become a family.

Having been too close to that myself, I now think it is pretty unhealthy when work becomes everything in life and has the expectation to fulfill all our human needs (for a good list of them, look here: <https://www.cnvc.org/training/resource/needs-inventory>). It isn't realistic, and remember: your company will let you go if it doesn't need you or can't afford you.

We all need at least one or two people, whether family or friends, who will be there for you no matter what.

*Hold on to those people. Treasure those people. Keep those people your priority—if not daily, over the course of time.*

## 5 Forget about the perfect woman/ mother/ wife/ colleague/ boss/ leader/ “duktig flicka.” No one is or will be, but a team can be. Work to build that team in everything you do.

From all the things I’ve said so far, I think it comes together with this point. Whether it is social media pressures or our society in general, we feel that we should be or do or have it all.



I know I have felt a lot of pressure to:

- ... prepare perfect healthy organic meals for my family
- ... work 12+ hours per day
- ... read a bedtime story
- ... join a late night customer call
- ... listen to my husband’s day
- ... go shopping for whatever is needed
- ... work out to try to get rid of the pregnancy weight (10 years postpartum)
- ... host Pinterest-inspired birthday parties
- ... volunteer
- ... study
- ... all while being on time to everything, but protecting the environment through sustainable transportation...

The list goes on and on. I, and pretty much every other woman around my age, feel it. I read an article that said it is generational: women born in the '70s and '80s were told we could be anything we wanted—but also expected to meet the same perfect Martha Stewart or June Cleaver wife and mother expectations as always. We burned out at amazing rates as we tried to fulfill at least two full-time jobs. Society, and we, told ourselves if we were only better at time management, we could really “have it all.” Our spouses or partners were praised for “helping out at home” and “being an active parent” if they did the dishes or picked up our child from daycare. Meanwhile, we were the crazy ones, not thankful to our wonderful, helpful partners, and just raving lunatics going from work to home and home to work, believing we were never enough anywhere.

Thankfully, for those of you in the next generations, you are questioning this work with your partners: the work that was the silent burden of wives and mothers in our generation.

So keep pushing, keep questioning, and keep partnering with others. No one can be or do it all well on their own, but in teams, whether at work or home, I have seen how we can achieve near perfection. We can cover all team roles. We can complement personalities and skills. And we have different perspectives and solutions that overall will drive better outcomes—whether it is for an autonomous drive system, a cloud-based navigation app, or a child.

Once I could let go of holding myself up to an unrealistic perfect ideal, I could seek out others who were better than me without fear or shame. Kristin Neff’s work on Self-Compassion, or the Compassion Cultivation program, are both good ways to work with accepting yourself—or I would love to talk to you to see if I would be a good coaching partner for you.



Now that you have read this far, I sincerely hope you don't feel alone. Your experience isn't the same as mine, of course, but I think we have at least a few things in common.

My main goal in sharing this is exactly that: to help women, who are now where I have been, to at least know they aren't alone. Our field is tough. We don't have a lot of role models, and unfortunately, we will be hurt the worst by some of the ones we hope will be.

You aren't alone. When I tell my story and open up about the things I am most scared to say or most ashamed about, I always have at least a few women who come up and have been where I have been. We might share tears, or a hug, or just a nod and knowing look from someone who understands.

If you want more than that, if you want to explore how I might join with you and be a part of your journey in some way, I would love to talk to you!

Take care!

