

## TRANSCRIPT

Ep 076: Avani Desai on Balancing Your Career and Motherhood, Letting Go of Perfectionism, and Setting the Example for Future Generations

**Avani Desai, Intro Clip:** So I knew I wanted to be a mom. I was very motherly. But then I was also ambitious, right? You know, I wanted to run a company and I wanted to make decisions. And I wanted to be a game changer. Like I knew all of that. And in my mind going into my career, I never thought I would have to choose. But what I realized was my looked around when I was at the firm, if I didn't do what everyone else did, I would not have been able to take the next steps, right? I wasn't going to get there. And that experience was probably the one experience which has changed the way we do things that Schellman.

**Suneera Madhani:** Welcome to CEO school. We're your hosts Suneera Madhani and Shannan Monson, and we believe that you deserve to have it all. Less than 2% of female founders ever break 1 million in revenue, and we're on a mission to change that. Each week, you'll learn from incredible mentors who have made it to the 2% Club, as well as women well on their way sharing how they defied the odds so that you can do it to your real business now, class is officially in session.

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**Suneera Madhani:** Good morning, ladies. Welcome to CEO school, the podcast. This is your host Suneera Madhani and I'm so excited for today's guests, Avani Desai, Avani is a powerhouse brown female, who has literally taken an industry in cybersecurity and technology on its head, and is now running the ship at one of the largest tech houses for security called Schellman. And his journey is one that I'm so excited to share, because she is just not only an incredible professional, she's become entrepreneurial through her journey. So she started off in this industry, and has really worked her way up all the way to the top in the C suite. And I want to dig deep with me to see how she did that, what were some barriers that she faced, and how she can help all of us listening to really climb and break those corporate glass ceilings, on top of which Avani, you know, one of my dear friends and she's a mom of two, and really does just an incredible job of never missing a beat in such a high performing high growth company. And of course, taking care of her two kids under 10. And really, truly, I think that she's mom of the year. So welcome to the show of me, I'm so excited to have you.

**Avani Desai:** Thank you, Suneera, it's so nice to be here.

**Suneera Madhani:** So excited. I mean, your story is just, it's so powerful. And one that I think a lot of women here can resonate with, because you didn't start off as an entrepreneur. And you know, I would love to kind of dig deep into your background. What did you study? How did you kind of get into your corporate profession and a little bit about that? And then take us through?

Take us through that path. And now you're just you're the woman on top running the show. So let's talk how did that happen? Where did you start?

**Avani Desai:** Well, you know, I come from an Indian family, my parents immigrated here. So growing up, I had an option of being a doctor or an engineer, really, that was kind of the two things and I loved tinkering with things like my dad would always tell me he would come and the TV remote would be taken apart and all the springs would be everywhere. And he was like, I wanted to get mad at you. But I could see your brain turning like you're putting things back together. And you just really love to tinker with things and break things. And that's really where my love of engineering started. So I went to school at Lyman high school right here in Orlando, Florida. Graduated from there, went to University of Florida with a computer science degree. And I love software engineering, that was like my thing. But one thing I realized was I also loved people, like I love talking to people, seeing what their problems were, helping them solve issues. So I didn't know, like how to find the perfect profession where I took my technical skills. But then also my business acumen went to a career fair at University of Florida, met a big four accounting firm KPMG at the time, and they were starting their new risk practice, which was information risk. So how do companies who utilize technology, you know, this was 2002? How do they make sure that their technology is safe, secure, has the right privacy controls, the right security controls, to make sure that their business would run and that's exactly what I love. So I was able to kind of, you know, do ethical hacking in the background, you know, being able to try to break into things and then tell the business owners or the C suite of the client. Well because of these vulnerabilities. This is the business issue that you can have and it was perfect. It was a perfect marriage of the technology aspect and the business aspect. So I picked up, left Orlando, moved to Charlotte, North Carolina where I started my career with KPMG, spent a year there, they needed someone to help them open up a Tampa practice and Florida's home, I'm a Florida girl, you know, I love the weather. My family was all here. And so I moved to Tampa, I spent seven years there, but my husband at a bar in Tampa. So, Tampa was a great place for us, and stayed there for about eight years. And then I tell people all the time, like, you know, every four to five years, you have to pivot, like you have to reinvent yourself, re-engineer yourself. And I started feeling like I was a little bit stagnant. And that was kind of doing the same thing every day. And, you know, controls and security and privacy is not rocket science. And I got an opportunity to move to New York City and actually help KPMG run an internal practice called DPP, their department of professional services, something I've never done. I love the big city, my husband actually got a fellowship there. So we moved to New York City for three years, and I got an entire new skill set. And I did, I was able to kind of reinvent myself and we ate well, we I started running in Central Park, I was never an athlete by I couldn't even run half a mile. But, um, you know, we just really loved it. And I think that really is the stepping stone that got me where I am here. So we spent three years there, moved back to Florida. Um, but you know, during those, the last year I was there, I had my son Sahil, who's now 10 years old. And I traveled. I was home 42 days out of that whole year. And I remember just like being an airport, pumping my milk, and like sending it on dry ice and FedEx. And I just remember coming home and there was just one day I was like, I can't do this anymore. Like I can't pick between being this successful person. And being a mom, like I just and I quit my job. And that was probably the

turning point really just quit my job. We moved to Florida. And I enjoy being a mom for eight weeks. And then Chris Dolman who is our founder of Schellman, and

**Suneera Madhani:** I'm gonna pause you, I'm gonna pause you before we get into the Schellman story, because I think that what you've said here is it's so I think a lot of women definitely resonate with this. So first, I want to pick up the fact that you said that you believe that we should be reinventing ourselves every four to five years. And that is something I've actually not heard that I actually, would I you know, I in a different way, it's always a growth mindset. But that is so interesting that you're like every four to five years, you should fully reinvent yourself. So much has changed. So much. It's staggering. There's so much comfort, if you are just doing the same thing for so long. I love that I absolutely love what you said there because it is you have to, like really zoom out of like your like your overall being and say, okay, where am I in my life right now? And what have I been doing for the last four or five years? And what is this next journey, this next five years look like? And I appreciate they say, four to five years, because sometimes when people like what's your 10 year plan, like I don't, I have like, a tomorrow plan. And so four to five years is probably as far out as my brain goes. And so I wanted to kind of pause there for our listeners to really just really think about that. And then of course, you becoming a mom, I mean, I resonate with us so, so dearly when you talk about not being home for your first 42 days, 42 days, that's nothing in the, in a newborn's life. Right? That's literally one month out of 12 months, six weeks. So usually people people people are like, you're the amount of time that you were present with your child was six weeks versus like being on maternity leave for six weeks. It's the opposite. That is so painful. And you're, you're choosing your career because that is also important. And as society it, it does feel like as women we have to choose why is it that you feel like, you know, why is it set up that way? That it's not easy to have both? Like why is it the Why is it the or, why isn't it the and?

**Avani Desai:** Yeah, no, I mean, you know, it was the hardest. I knew, like, when you asked my parents when I was five years old. What did I want to be when I grew up? They would always say the first thing you would say is I want to be a mom. So I knew I wanted to be a mom. I was very motherly. But then I was also ambitious, right? You know, I wanted to run a company and I wanted to make decisions and I wanted to be a game changer. Like I knew all of that. And in my mind going into my career I never thought I would have to choose. But what I realized was my looked around when I was at the firm. If I didn't do what everyone else did, I would not have been able to take the next steps right? If I didn't go sell the next day. Client if I didn't go work on a fortune 50 client, which was, you know, all out of town, I wasn't going to get there. And that that experience was probably the one experience which has changed the way we do things at Schellman. We are a very female friendly women friendly mom friendly dad friendly place, because I didn't want anyone. I don't want anyone to go through what I went through. I mean, I remember when Sahil was nine months old, and he felt he looked at my mom and went to her. I was there. He didn't even look at me, right? I mean, and you know, my husband, who was a resident at the time, what brought him to bed and you know, give him milk and but I can tell you at now at 10 years old, I'm still this favorite. So it didn't impact, you know, our relationship, but it impacted. I felt like I was a failure as a mom. I mean, every day I would come home and or every weekend I would come home I was a full Saturday and a half a Sunday and my husband

would drop me off at LaGuardia airport with Sahil we would have lunch and I would get on the plane.

**Suneera Madhani:** And I want to cry just like, thinking about, like I literally because I go back to my days when Mila was born. I was like, fundraising for Fattmerchant the company was growing like crazy. I was literally, I was so underwater, and I had so much pressure and especially after you give birth, you're just in such like, an emotionally fragile state. And you ignore that and you're just pushing, you're physically pushing yourself mentally pushing yourself. And then you add like the mom guilt, everyone talked about the mom guilt. But it is, it is a, it is a, it's so difficult to not be with your child and feeling like you are literally failing, it is the ultimate failure is what you feel. And I right now, I haven't thought about that in a long time. It's hard. And but you make the sacrifice, right? Like and you you made the sacrifice.

**Avani Desai:** And I was lucky, you know, my mom and dad moved to New York City, I knew he was in the best care, my husband supported me 100% and said, Hey, I want you to get to that next level. So you do what you have to do. And, you know, I'll be home in the evenings and, and it worked itself out. But it, if someone asked me, you know, what was that one low point in my career, it wasn't related to my career. It was a personal low point. Right, you know, um, and I made the decision, you know, I made the decision to leave. And it was the hardest decision I had to make. I am not a quitter. You know, I wanted to, you know, become the first female partner in the technology arena at the firm. I looked around me, there was no one who was either married or who had kids and who had a spouse that worked as much as they did, right. I didn't, I didn't happen, and I wanted to break that glass ceiling. I was like, I could do it. But you know, unfortunately, I couldn't. I mean, it came to a point where I had to, internally realize that I could do it, but maybe this isn't the place for me. Or maybe this isn't the time for me to do it. You know, I'm just not at the right place, not the right time. Um, so yeah, so I did, I took that step of, yeah, just leaving without a job, I didn't think I would ever do that, you know, leave a company without having a job. But, you know, it also helped me, I was at my four to five year point, you know, kind of reinventing myself and, and, you know, you talked about this growth mindset. But when you're in technology, I think technology is the only field where, you know, technology outpaces humans at the end of the day, like, you know, how much data are you like you You know, every day, you probably are doubling the amount of data that you have from a week ago, right? new emerging technologies, cloud is so to 2010. Right now we have artificial intelligence and predictive analysis, like, you know, I'm in a field where you have to maybe reinvent yourself every two to three years. And leaving and kind of switching gears and pivoting to something allowed me to reinvent myself. So it was, that was the right time to do it. And I look back now. And I realized, well, it all, everything worked itself out. And, you know, if I didn't take that step, I wouldn't be where I am today. Um, yeah, at that point, it was a really low point in my life career personally, as a mother, as a wife, as a daughter, you know, I felt like I couldn't do I couldn't do anything well. Yeah.

**Suneera Madhani:** I really appreciate you sharing such a vulnerable time in your life because it this happens. As much as I want to say this is your story. This is the story of a lot of people. A lot of people go through this exact phase and whether it may or may not be at the, at the top of

their career. It could be at different points in their career. But it's definitely difficult and feeling like you have to choose and at the end of the day, I think the lesson always is, is that it does work out right. Like it does work out whatever your path is meant to take place. It does. It does. work itself out. And so to kind of alleviate that pressure to feel like, you know, one of my mentors, one of the best advice I've ever been given is It's never as great as you think it is. And it's never as bad as you think it is. And that every day like when I walk into the office, there's always some there's always as an entrepreneur, as a business owner, as a leader, there's so many highs, and there's so many lows, and you want to be like, this is the greatest or this is the worst. It's just not. And everything is just in its cycle of like, I believe in the cycle of the universe. And there's going to be the highs, there's gonna be the lows and everything will work itself out. So bravo to you for, you know, leaving at such a high point in your career. That's a huge sacrifice that you're making, but the right decision for you and your family. So you move down, you move to, you move to Florida, you guys, like leave New York, and then what happens next?

**Avani Desai:** Yeah, so I moved to Orlando. I grew up here. My husband got a job at a local hospital here. He does high risk obstetrics. And he started working and I got to enjoy things I never did. Like I wasn't attached to my Blackberry at the time. I didn't have email that people were sending me. I went to brunch. I was able to take my son to Gymboree. And then six weeks into it, Chris Schellman, the founder of Schellman and Company called me and said, Hey, I'm looking to grow my company, and I want you to do it. And I had met him probably 10 years before when I was a manager. I remember at Panera Bread in Tampa, and we talked about me coming to Schellman and Company at the time. And I said no, I wanted to stay at a big firm and get you know, the the experiences and he's like, okay, but he said that he knew I would come work for him. He knew and he said, One day you come work for me. And I ended up going to the office in Tampa and talking to him about the role he wanted. And it was a role of someone helping him grow the company. You know, we were about 50 people at the time. Um, you know, new services, new locations, potentially, you know, international locations, m&a, and it's something I had never done. I was always professional services, I was always internal. And he said, but you're so good at that, you can probably take those skills, and bring it to help us grow. So I did. I started I still took off probably about eight more weeks. So I was like four months of enjoying my momhood. And I started in July of 2012. And it has been the most exciting and challenging point in my career. I said to someone the other day, like I wake up and I'm in my own video game every day. Like that. I love that that is so good. And it's, it's exciting. And you know, it's stressful, but it's not anxiety, right? You know, it's like, I enjoy doing what I'm doing. I have an impact. So I have came in the role as the executive vice president. And in 2018, I took his role as president of the company. And yeah

**Suneera Madhani:** Slow down slow down, slow down. You just kind of like said that so casually, like again came in in 2012. And I helped grow the company. And then in 2018, you said yeah, okay, so like six years of hard work later, I just took the boss's job. Like, hold on, timeout, timeout, timeout, timeout, timeout, listeners timeout, like, how does that happen? How do you How did that happen? So you're running the show at Schellman now?

**Avani Desai:** Yes, yeah.

**Suneera Madhani:** In technology, in cybersecurity, a brown, Indian woman is literally on top running the show. How big is the company now?

**Avani Desai:** So we hit 85 million last year. We are the 71st largest accounting firm in the US were the youngest on the list. And someone told me I'm the only female minority running a top 100 CPA firm. So

**Suneera Madhani:** There you go. That I mean, your awards. I mean, I've seen you come up, you know, in the ranks, and it's just been so amazing to watch, you know, all the awards, like so well deserved. 40 under 40, entrepreneur of the year. And I know you're gonna, you have so many incredible so well deserved. So incredible of me. So you come in, you take charge, you're like, here's how we're gonna do this, grow revenue growth systems, you grow people, and you take the company and now you're running now you just, you took over?

**Avani Desai:** Yes. So Chris, luckily is there and he, you know, I tell people, you have to have a mentor and a sponsor, and he was my sponsor, you know, he says, From day one, he knew that I was gonna, you know, run the show for him. And I can tell you from day one, I didn't even think I was going to run the show for him. So to be able to come and be mentored and sponsored by somebody who has so much faith and trust. in you, without even really knowing you is what has allowed me to be you know where I am. So he is still around, he has announced his retirement. In a few years, he's going to be stepping away. But I've been really lucky to kind of have him. So he still focuses on the internal technology of the company and the legal aspect of it. But yeah, I oversee all of our service delivery, human capital, finance. And yeah, it's a lot of fun. And we have, we have grown. But what we, what I decided I really wanted to focus on was making a people centric company. And, and I think that's the reason we have been able to grow so much. All of that is from my past experience, right? I didn't want people to feel like they were just a member. I wanted them to have autonomy, because there was a point where I felt like I didn't have autonomy. I wanted parents to feel like they could be parents, and then they can also be successful here. So you know, we decrease the amount of travel people were doing, you know, we have a great maternity policy, we have a great paternity policy. So yeah, no, it's been the road has been great. During this time, I had Sareena, who's now seven years old. And I can tell you, we're having baby number three in about three months. You know, the career hasn't stopped me from being a mom, and really enjoy being a mother.

**Suneera Madhani:** How, how has it not right. So I know every woman here listening is we're so proud of you like this is I want to just speak on behalf of our community here. It's so badass. You're So Amazing. This is so cool. How are you managing this? How are you managing everything taking over such a large company and growing it? What is a secret? How do you balance?

**Avani Desai:** Yeah, I don't. I don't think they're secret. But I think there's a few things that I learned along the way. No, is a complete sentence. I started saying no and not not explaining why I'm saying no. Right. And, and that's okay. And I think it's so hard for women. I mean, I can

tell you, you know, when people asked me to be on charity boards, or help run a silent auction, like I would say, yes, yes, yes. Or, you know, my son would say, okay, you know, these are all the games that you have to be at. And my husband would say, like, I want a home cooked meal. Like I started saying no, like, there's a no. And it was very liberating. I mean, it just like, changed my world that I realized there are certain things that are really important around what my passions were and what my purpose was. And so that's what I started saying yes to. And so that's one, two, I have an amazing support system. You know, my mother lives with us, who is an amazing cook and cook for us every night, which really helps. And, you know, there's certain things that I have been very lucky that I can, you know, have people help me with, you know, if it's the kids or the house or grocery shopping and so forth. Um, yeah, I'm lucky. I know, a lot of people aren't, don't have that ability. But, you know, I, I'm blessed to be able to do that. And then also making sure that at the firm, I have just the lieutenant's I mean, the the people who are there who are helping me, you know, who have the same vision I do, who are helping me execute this vision. We have put together just a phenomenal team, and I couldn't do it without them every day. Right. So yeah, I think that's what it is. And, and, you know, what, and a very supportive husband, you know, my husband can easily say, you know, why are you doing all this, but instead, he was like, you need to do more, he will tell me that. And so, yeah, so I'm really lucky. And, yeah, trust me, I'm scared about having baby number three, you know, I'm gonna be 40 years old in a few months, as well. But yeah, it's, it's just a new challenge that we're just adding on. Right. And so, really excited about that.

**Suneera Madhani:** I appreciate you sharing your top three. And I really do. I think we left Hamilton one night, and I told you that we're going to be best friends. And yeah, we're gonna, it's the exact same reasons of how I've been able to find balance, but use the word lucky a few times, and you're deserving of it. Like, it didn't just happen by luck, you created the life that you designed, because you worked hard for it, and you put in those pieces in place. I see a lot of times women value time in a different way. For me, you know, if I can have somebody else, go pick up the groceries, whether it's even a shift delivery app, right? It doesn't even have to be having a full time nanny. Even if it's just little things that I can automate that take time like that, give me back time in my day with my kid, that's what I prioritize, versus having a nicer bag or, you know, or, or whatever, another subscription that I don't need. And so really prioritizing? So when you say the word luck, you know, you're so humble. Because it is, it's one thing. No. And I didn't come to that realization, probably until just about two years ago, and I'm still working on it. I am such a yes person, I just naturally say, Yes, I have a very, very tough time with this. I have such a tough time setting boundaries, I have such a tough time saying no. Because I care so much about every, every damn thing. I'm just like, Oh, yes, I want to do what I want to do it. But you can't. And, you know, something that really helped me was I created this like, three bucket principle. And it's actually in our CEO School planner. So I'll give that a little shout out here. But in that, in the three my three buckets, my three buckets, that's the only thing I can focus on are these three main categories. So it's, it's family, its work in itself, and the self, if community fits in that, or if this podcast fits in that and if my mentorship and these things fit in that that's one bucket of itself, but the family bucket is separate, and the work bucket is separate. And there isn't no such thing for me as work life balance, it's work life integration, like I've not been able to find this harmonious balance that I've heard people say that, oh, it's this and it's this morning

routine. And it's this, it's not for me, it's integration. Because some days, I'm a really great mom, it's great mom's quality time, it's there. And some days, I'm gone on a conference, and I'm not home for three days, right, and I'm a really great boss, and I'm putting in all my time into that bucket. But when I'm present in whatever bucket I'm president, that is where I'm failing 100% of the quality into that bucket. And at the end of the week, when I zoom out, that is what I feel full when I'm able to do all three of those things. And that's kind of how I find that balance. But saying no, and then saying no to everything else that isn't those three buckets. That is something that God I wish somebody had told me I wish we had this conversation in 2014. Because I needed this no is a complete sentence. And it's hard. And even now I say no, I still feel like I have to justify it. Why? Why? Okay, so teach us, teach us, Let's do a teaching. How do we just use just say no, just nothing.

**Avani Desai:** It was the hardest thing? Because I remember in meetings, if I didn't like an idea, I would say no, because I tell all my points and people are just glazed over. And I realized now in a meeting, if I say no, I don't know, it's like more powerful. And they're like, Okay.

**Suneera Madhani:** No, I gotta practice that ladies, okay, we're gonna be practicing no, is a complete sentence, this is amazing. And then and then having that support system. And unfortunately, there are women that do not have that support system. And that is, that is shout out to all the single moms out there. The ones without the family support that are it is harder it is definitely it's harder already to do it as a mother. And it's so much harder to do it without the support. But it's leveraging community then, right. So it's leveraging friends, and it's leveraging amazing childcare centers. And there's other ways of still accomplishing it. Not that it's easy. But I also too, was really lucky to have my parents in my backyard. And I feel like we share a lot of the same cultural things that really do drive our success is that families always first and families always around. And so that's there, then and a supportive partner. And whether it's your friends that are supportive, or that as your partner or your spouse, or you know, whoever that person is your person in your life, whoever your person is, it does really lift something off your shoulders, when you're not having you don't have that extra burden of trying to prove it to your partner. How do you, how do you build that, you know, I don't feel like people, we talk about our spouses enough, we don't talk about that, because that also is contributed to your success. And that's been a huge contributor to my success. As I've had really strong men in my life. I had never had that feeling of being pushed back. I've worked with my brother every day. My husband is like the most supportive husbands I feel your husbands have a fault. I got a specialist OB who is one of the best doctors in Orlando, by the way, and has a crazy schedule himself. And you're saying that he's rocking your child while you're on your career? many Indian men may not be supportive of that.

**Avani Desai:** Oh, yeah, I know. And, you know, I'm really lucky because he is and you know, he was raised the right way. And you know, he had a very, he has a very strong mother who had her own career. Right. And, and I can tell you, you know, there, there are tough times. You know, I think a lot of women, we take a lot of that third shift, right, you know, coming home at the end of the day and making sure homeworks done lunches are packed. Christmas gifts are done and birthday gifts are done, you know,

**Suneera Madhani:** Projects, what is up with my kid just like not even in kindergarten every week I have like, it was like 100 days of school like why do we need a project for everything?

**Avani Desai:** Exactly. And I and I would take all of that right because a part of me felt that I was The best at it to like, you know, and I have to sit my husband down, and he had to say, give me some of that it may not be perfect, it's not going to be the perfect, you know, 100 sequences on the hat, but we'll figure it out and it will be good enough and good enough. And that was, that was difficult. And you know, this weekend, he had to work on a Valentine's Valentine's Day box. And I saw it and I'm like, it was blue and gold. And I was like, sometimes it's red and pink. But I let it go. I said, You know what, and my son was happy and he was happy. And it was good enough. And you know, and so that was on me, right? I was taking that third shift when I didn't have to that extra 20 hours, 50 hours a week. I was taking it. And so either, you know, I had to learn to delegate it to somebody else, or, you know, let them do it. And it's okay if it's not the way that I was gonna do it. Right. And, and it's all learning it's it's, it's, it's not easy. And I think women, we are just naturally perfectionist, we are just naturally supermom, right, we hear that. But yeah, sometimes good enough is good enough.

**Suneera Madhani:** No, and that's so true. And it's so hard sometimes for us to let go of that we talk every single episode, when I have on the guest, somehow perfectionism does come up as a setback and the women that are successful, every single one, every single one has said I've had to let it go. And just say it's okay, it's okay that it's not perfect, it is good enough. And that principle is good enough. It's actually great. And it's actually great, that gets awesome that his Valentine's box is done. Okay, that's great. And then it's cool, and it's blue and it's his and it's in it, we're not looking at it have a sense that it should be perfect in our viewpoint to your son, that's probably perfect. That's a great moment with his father that he got to build this really cool blue Valentine's box with him. And that is great. That's not just good enough. And we have to change our vocabulary in our thinking and our professionalism and saying that, you know, it's not just okay, it's amazing, like, this is amazing us getting to, you know, be professional women have children grow into our careers, have supportive partners. That is what life is all about, like feminism is not women are greater than men. Feminism is that we are equal to, right we are equal to and this it's, it's an exciting time to be in because I see that shift. Taking place all over, I see that shift with my friends, I see that shift even within our culture, I see that shift taking place where you don't have to be, I actually created a really funny reel. This week, it'll post up next week on like, things like your Indian parents tell you and it's like, you have to be a doctor or lawyer. Like literally you have to be a doctor, if you don't have kids before 30. You're, you know, your time is done. Right? And it's not there's like there's a cultural shift that that is happening. So it's really great to see, what do you say to those women that don't have that, but don't have that supporting spouse, because I we also see that where when women, you know, the guys get to choose their careers, and they get the advancement and they and then as soon as they become pregnant, it takes two of them, but she's the one having to take that step back. And the she thinks that step back and it's like, oh, I'll go to back to school, I'll go to work when my kids are in kindergarten. And that never happens. What do you say to that woman? That doesn't have that supporting spouse?

**Avani Desai:** Yeah, no, it's hard. And I know so many people, and I could have easily been there, right? You know, a part of us is asking what we want, say what you want, right? You know, most of the time if you if, you know, you kind of go to your spouse and say, you know, this is what I want in my life, and we got to figure it out. It may work right. And, and I think it's it's, you know, I hate to say ask for permission, but ask for what you want and or tell people what you want at the end of the day and and figure it out. You know, it's, I love seeing more women in the workplace. I love seeing more dads who are staying home and taking care of kids and really embracing it. But yeah, it's we owe it to all women to start having those open conversations with our spouses. But not only that, I have to have these open conversations with my husband, so my son can see it, you know, I want him, you know, if he has a spin, he's only 10 years old. But when he has a spouse who can have a very lucrative career, and which may mean for a few years, he has to be the stay at home Dad, I want him to embrace it and be okay with it. And so if we don't start taking those steps right now and having those difficult conversations. I mean, I remember having a conversation with my dad who you know, left India because he had two daughters and I was born here, but he left because he knew that he wanted his daughters to have a different life that was open to a lot more opportunity, right? And I can't take that step back if he can. All the Way, you know, across the ocean with no money, a degree that didn't translate in the US and was mopping floors at a McDonald's, I can't take a step back. Right? You know, I owe it to him. And I owe it to every other immigrant parent who came here for a better life for their children. Right? And so, yeah, having that conversation, having that open dialogue, and demanding that, you know, I, this is what I want. And I'll tell you a funny story. We, were we live in Windermere and we're in downtown Windermere. And it was me and my son and my daughter. And I ran into a client who's the CEO of a company, and I was like, Oh, you know, that's a client of mine, a CEO of a company, and he's like, who the man or the woman? And I was like, Yes, like, you know, he, he didn't I, in my mind, it was like, the male was the CEO, which was true, but my husband, but my son was like, Who? The guy or the girl? And I was like, Yes, like, that's what we want, right? We want to make sure that our children don't have that bias. And, you know, he's never going to have that conversation probably with his spouse about you know, you do the domestic work and I'll go to a nine to five job right and so, so when I think about it, I think about what's the legacy that I'm leaving my children right, it's not the jewelry and the money right? It's the the passion of doing what you can do for the better life of your family for the better life of the little part of the map that we're part of right and so that's what I would tell the women is you know, it your life may be the way it is but just know the decisions you make really affect that next generation.

**Suneera Madhani:** You really do and I appreciate the, the the candor here and the support, because it is sometimes sometimes having that crucial conversation is really difficult. But it's needed, and we have to have it so that the future generation doesn't and and the women before us that have paved the way for us to be here we owe it to the to the to the future feminists through the future goals that don't have to actually be feminist, right? Like, there shouldn't be feminism. When we lived in my age, right? Mila, Mila is starting her career, there's a shooting and be this concept. Alright. Sorry, art my, my beats going off. There should even be this concept. Because we've, we've solved for it.

**Avani Desai:** Yeah, I don't want the word, gender inequity to even be words that my kids know, right? or pay inequity, or, you know, those things shouldn't even be in the vocabulary of the next generation, right? We should, we should help solve those things. While we can, I think it's on us, right. And the decisions that we make are really going to affect that. And that's how I look at it, you know, my life is my life. And, but you know, these small changes can have a massive impact when you take your small change and my small change, and the women who are listening, you know, small change, regardless of your stay at home mom, or an entrepreneur or an executive of a fortune 500 company, right? We all have these little building blocks that we can do that makes such a big impact.

**Suneera Madhani:** Absolutely. And I know one of the ways that you make an impact always is mentorship, you do so much for the community. And I kind of want to talk about that to see like, you know, what are the things that we can support you with? You know, you've shared so much knowledge with us today, we'd love to see how can we support you in your journey? And what are some things that are you know, you're passionate about that we can also get behind? Sure.

**Avani Desai:** Well, you know, I talked about, you have your buckets, I have a I have like a purpose statement. So I say no to anything that doesn't fit my purpose statement. So it could be community related things work related, family related, and one of my big purposes, is helping women and children in our community. And I was lucky enough to be part of a group called 100 woman's strong, we're venture philanthropists. And I really enjoy that because like I told you, I'm not great at fundraising or throwing galas that's not my thing. You know, my skill set is data and technology and auditing, right? I'm a CPA. And what we do is we pull money together to solve source problems related to women and children in our community. And I love that and we're having a summit come up in two weeks around women empowerment, you know, how to make sure women are empowered and finance, healthcare, healthcare disparities, getting more women, pe funding is one of the topics that we're going to be talking about. So I really am passionate about, you know, philanthropy that makes an impact and what I call strategic philanthropy. Also really involved in the Children's Hospital here. I think if you can change the life of a mom and a child, you've changed life from multiple generations, right? You know, you know, giving the mother what she needs to be successful. It's going to allow her children to be successful. I mean, it's a big mantra that I've always thought to be true. So Yeah, no, I would love you know, any woman who wants to learn more about you know how to help women and children in the community. I'm happy to have that conversation with them.

**Suneera Madhani:** Oh, awesome. We'll link some of the websites here on the show notes for the audience. You guys can also be part of the movement. I mean, this has just been I get to hear and talk to you. I have so many more questions. I know the audience definitely wants to dig deep. So I'm actually going to invite you back. I don't usually do that on the show for like the next one. But I really want to dig deeper into the difference between having a mentor and a sponsor, especially for professional women. Because one of the things that has made me so successful is incredible mentors, I didn't do this alone. I didn't like come up. Like I didn't go to CEO School. This is where this comes from. And it's, it's really learning from other women. And

there's a huge difference between having a mentor and a sponsor, and you need to have both to be successful. So I would love to pick 20 minutes we do, we do this series called wind on Wednesday, so it's gonna be 20 minutes. And I'd love to just deep dive further into double click into this particular topic, so that we can learn how we can find mentors, how we can find sponsors, and really just up level our professional, our professional and personal lives. So would you, would you be willing to come back for that?

**Avani Desai:** I would love to talk to the women on this show. So anytime.

**Suneera Madhani:** So thank you so much, everyone for listening to today's show on CEO School. It's been such a pleasure. We'll see you next week at CEO School.

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