

Welcome to The Executive Coach for Moms podcast, where we support women who are attempting to find balance and joy while simultaneously leading people at work and at home.

I'm your host, Leanna Laskey McGrath, former tech exec turned full time mom, recovering perfectionist and workaholic, and certified executive coach.

Hi everyone thanks so much for joining me today and welcome to Episode 5. If you tuned in last week, I was talking with my friend Andrea Palmer, who was interviewing me to share my story. I shared about my pre-baby life and career, my pregnancy, and my maternity leave. And we left off when I was getting ready to return to work. So today in Part 2 of this 3-part series, I'm going to talk about my return to work after maternity leave, my experience as an executive mom, and my decision to step out of the corporate world to focus full time on my daughter. Hope you enjoy! Here we go!

Leanna McGrath 42:29

So when I went back, it was tough, because I went back at three months. And at four months in a baby's life, there is often what's called the foremost sleep regression, which is actually a progression, basically, they stopped connecting their sleep cycles. So some babies, it doesn't affect at all. I hope that's your baby. But for mine, it meant she was awake every 45 minutes. Oh, boy. Yeah. And I remember actually, we were in DC at a board meeting on her four month birthday. And it was that night that she just flipped a switch. I mean, it was just like, she had been sleeping like seven to 11 hour stretches. And then suddenly, on her four month birthday, it just flipped a switch. So yeah, it was tough.

Leanna McGrath 43:21

So we had to make changes, and you know, you have to make adjustments on the fly. And, and yeah, so it was yeah, it was challenging, because I think the lack of sleep I had hoped was done. But it wasn't, it wasn't for a few more years. And I, we hired a nanny, so I was fortunate to be able to have a nanny come into the house so that I could breastfeeding was something that was really important to me. So I was able to take breaks and do that or, a lot of times I would just nurse her while I was on calls and things like that or working. But I feel fortunate about that because I remember thinking at the time, like I was sad about it, I was excited and sad about it. And I thought oh my god if I had to like take her to daycare drop her off at three months old. I just I just feel for all of the parents who live that at three months or even younger in many cases

Leanna McGrath 44:23

So but yeah, it was an okay transition, I think because of the situation and again because I was working kind of on my terms and I had set those boundaries very clearly. And so when the nanny couldn't get her down for a nap, you know, if I wasn't on a meeting I would help out so I was glad to be able to do that kind of stuff. But it was definitely hard to hear her crying whenever I was in a meeting that I couldn't step away from you know, that I chose to stay in and that kind of thing. So I traveled at least once a month. And so she had her passport at four months old,

she had this nice little baby passport. And she traveled with me to Montreal often and DC and wherever our conferences were she was, she was at our booth with me.

Leanna McGrath 45:18

And so whenever I was at conferences, Educause and things, and so it was fun, honestly, I mean, I would take either my husband would come along, or our nanny would come along. And so, you know, I think we made it work for that first year where I was part time, but it was hard as well, there were definitely days where I was like, man, I don't know how I'm going to go back full time. The way that it, the way they set it up is that I did, I had Monday mornings off and Fridays off. So I would work like Monday afternoon, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. And it wasn't that my workload was decreased, it was that I had to do it in a much shorter amount of time. But one of the things that I found and also, when I've talked to a lot of other women who have made the transition to motherhood is that you just get like, way more efficient, somehow.

Leanna McGrath 46:17

It's like, I only have this little amount of time, and so I have to use it, like, I don't have other time, right? And so, yeah, you just kind of find ways to cut out things that don't need to be done to deprioritize things. And that's really the only way to do it is to cut things. Rather than like, trying different systems and things like that. You know, cut it and also just like, focus, hyper focus and like, get it done. Yeah, so I don't think I ever spent time scrolling social media or doing a lot of like, BSing with colleagues and stuff, like I may have done a little bit more in the past, because there just wasn't time for that. So yeah, I definitely got a lot more efficient. But as that one year mark came up, where I was going back full time, I was getting a little bit nervous for sure.

Leanna McGrath 47:12

And kind of like, okay, is this? Do I want to stay? I was definitely starting to kind of question, what did I want to do? I think at that time, though, I liked having a nanny come in, I liked the way it was set up, you know, like I wished that I wasn't working quite as much. But I also, I kind of enjoyed it at that time. I also am not like a huge baby person. So I like felt like it was when I was part time and like just working those hours. I felt like it was pretty, like pretty well balanced. You know, unless I felt like my work was starting to encroach on the times that I wasn't supposed to be working.

Andrea Palmer 48:09

It's great that you had the support systems that you did too with your husband, and with an employer that sounds flexible enough. I feel like we don't see enough of that. And the more we see it, the more acceptable it becomes, you know, non-birthing parents taking their fair share of family leave and supporting the family as a whole and more employers who are understanding and see the value of mothers in the workforce, to not feel, you know, retaliated against or like there's not space for both. So it's, it's awesome that you had that level of support all around.

Leanna McGrath 48:48

Yeah, I agree. And we also in terms of, you know, partner taking time off, my husband had, accumulated, he had been working at the same university for several years. And so he had a

two week maternity leave, but he had also accumulated like, eight weeks of vacation, and I think like 16 weeks of sick time or something ridiculous. And so we actually had an opportunity to move back to Pennsylvania. He had a job offer here, where we are now and where our families are. And we decided not to take it because it was kind of like, here, it would have been really nice because we would have family around and you know, that support system. But I felt like with him starting a new job and they didn't have the same kind of they didn't even have a maternity leave and they didn't have you know, he didn't have all that vacation time accrued, obviously.

Leanna McGrath 49:45

And so, so we you know, I felt like he wasn't going to be a part of it. It was like we were trading family for him and so we chose to stay in Texas because so that he could, you know, so we could do it together. And it wasn't like, on me and our families. So I was glad that we made that decision, he took three weeks off at the beginning, and then he took, he would take, like, you know, a few days here and there or a week here and there. So it worked out really well. And then like, you know, my mom will come down, or his parents will come down. So I felt like I had a lot of support, especially at the beginning.

Leanna McGrath 50:25

Then, at the year mark, a lot changed. So she turned one in February of 2020. And in January of 2020, at work, our board replaced our CEO with a new CEO, who was very different. He was US based, Harvard background, military background, and just kind of a bit more, I would say old school in terms of thinking about time off and leave and things like that. So just kind of a night and day difference there. So the leadership changed. And then I was coming back full time in February. And I think it would have probably been like a much easier transition back. When I say easier, I mean, like a more gradual transition back, maybe. But whenever we had the leadership change, it was a new expectation of time investment on top of just one and a half more days a week, it wasn't just like, I was going to 40 hours a week, it was like I was going to way more than that. And then in March 2020, as we all remember, the world shut down.

Andrea Palmer 51:48

I know what's coming!

Leanna McGrath 51:50

Yeah, so we lost our nanny, and we couldn't travel, my family couldn't travel to see us to watch the baby. So it was and my husband started working from home. So it was just me and him and the baby trying to like, manage, right. So it was really, really tough trying to do that. And so new expectations from a new boss, you know, no more childcare? No, like none. And, you know, just trying to juggle all of it between the two of us. It felt really impossible, was probably the best way I would describe it. So I think those kind of factors that led to, eventually, the decision to step away. I'm not sure if it would have played out differently or not, because I was kind of already thinking, you know, wondering what I wanted to do, and if I wanted to stay or not. But those factors, I think kind of accelerated that decision for sure.

Andrea Palmer 52:59

Yeah. And I think there was probably a lot of mothers in the same position, right, who almost didn't have a choice of whether or not to stay in the workplace.

Leanna McGrath 53:09

Oh, yeah, absolutely. I mean, it was a luxury that I had any help, right like that my husband was home. And that I was home. Yeah, I don't know what we would have done if we weren't both able to be there. You know, if we had to go somewhere, if we were essential workers and had to go somewhere, because we literally had no one to take care for our baby. So yeah, I think, you know, hundreds of 1000s of women. That was the great exodus or the great of resignation, the hundreds of 1000s of women left the workforce that year. And I totally understand why. Right, like, I mean, how can you physically do it? It was impossible. And it took a toll mentally and physically.

Leanna McGrath 53:59

I mean, we were, we would wake up early in the morning so that we could work. And then in the eight hour work day to 10 hour workday, we would split it. So we would like go through at the beginning of the week, all of our meetings and like see who had important meetings at what times and then we would just like hand her off back and forth. And then in the evenings, we would spend a little bit of time together. And, you know, sometimes we would like it would be like one of us spending time and one of us working. And then she would go to bed and we would work until like one or two in the morning to get the rest of our day in and then, get up and do it all over again. So it was exhausting. And it was not sustainable. And yeah, that was obviously a tough time for the world in general. But I think especially for parents, and especially for parents of babies, right like little tiny humans that can't function without like they're reliant for you.

Andrea Palmer 55:03

Wow. So when did you decide to leave the workforce? Or when did you actually leave?

Leanna McGrath 55:11

Yeah, so I'll kind of walk through that process a little bit. So that everything shut down in March 2020, we lost our childcare. And then in April, we did layoffs, I had to lay people off virtually, which was awful. And I was thinking like, maybe I should just like, raise my hand to go. You know, I was, so I was kind of thinking that, but I also, I think, with the world being so the future being so uncertain, and every I mean, you remember that time, like, it was such a scary time, or like no one knew, we thought we're going to be in quarantine for two weeks. And then it just dragged on and like kept stretching on and on and on. And no one knew what was going to happen. So I think at that time, we were like, Whoa, like, we, we don't want to, let go of any income at this moment. Because we don't know what's going to happen. And so I wasn't ready.

Leanna McGrath 56:18

At that point. Then in May, we started to do some financial planning. I hired a coach to start the process of just kind of examining like where I was at, I was just, it was just so hard. And I was just not enjoying any part of life as much as I wanted to be. And so that was May. And then like

we kind of carried on through the summer. Also, travel shutdown, that was something that I really enjoyed. And I thought it was really fun to like, especially to take my daughter along on. So it was kind of like all the fun stuff was stripped out, and we were working much leaner, because we had cut 25% of our workforce. So yeah.

Leanna McGrath 57:12

And then in August, I remember thinking, I had this recurring thought all the time of like, How does anyone do this, and I am failing at everything. I just felt like I was failing at everything, like I couldn't. I wasn't, I obviously, is a type A perfectionist, a high achiever, I hold myself to really high standards, right. And so I just felt like I was being a shitty mom. And I was being a bad employee, like I just wasn't, I wasn't being successful, or like living up to my expectations of myself in any aspect. And then like, let alone like, being healthy and taking care of myself and my relationships. And, you know, it was just like, I had these two huge things that took up so much of my time: my baby and my job. And I just felt like, I don't know how to do this, I just, I cannot do this. And I think you know, so I hired a therapist, and a new coach.

Leanna McGrath 58:22

And that kind of started that process in August. And somewhere along the way, like things open up enough for us to be able to hire new nannies. But we had a lot of turnover, some COVID related, some just trying to find the right fit, so I think we between whenever we I can't remember it was like June or July that it reopened. So from whenever we could hire somebody till October, we went through like four or five nannies, and it was just so hard to like, do the onboarding, you know, like, teach them how the house, you know how everything goes and get them acclimated and get our daughter acclimated, and then have it not workout and have to do it all over again. It was just exhausting. And so it was in October, the beginning of October, another nanny quit.

Leanna McGrath 59:15

And I just said, I'm done. I'm done. I do not want to do this anymore. I don't have to do it. I've been trying to make it work. I am done. Also, I want to back up about that. Because the other thing like in April whenever the layoffs happened, and I thought about leaving and that was kind of you know, I was thinking about that. I am very much a person who I don't believe that it makes sense to make a decision from a point of weakness or vulnerability. So like if I am like in the weeds, I don't think that's the place to make decisions from right like major decisions, right? You have to make decisions to get yourself out of it of course and that was when I hired people to help me, but I didn't want to make a major life decision from that place. So that was really why I hired a coach and a therapist just so that I could get to a headspace where I could make a decision that I felt that I would feel good about.

Leanna McGrath 1:00:22

And so when I, yeah, whenever she quit, like, just, there was something in my body that just like a switch flipped, and I just, I just knew, I was like, You know what, I'm not going to do this anymore. I had been talking about it with my therapist, and my coach and kind of, you know, weighing the options and figuring, trying to figure out what I wanted to do. And it just, I don't

know how to explain, it's like the stars aligned and you know when you just know something. I just knew, I just knew that I was, I was gonna leave.

Leanna McGrath 1:00:57

And so I talked to my husband that night, and suddenly, you know, like, we've been having these conversations, we've been doing the financial planning, like, you know, everything's set up, I'm gonna leave. And so then I gave notice and left at the end of the year. So I stayed through December, but I remember, whenever I was about to, I was having a conversation with my boss, I was so nervous. And had an emergency coaching session about it, because I was just like, I imagined this conversation in my head over and over and over again, like, played it out. And yeah, I was just so nervous about what I was going to say to him, how he was going to react? And I don't know, I mean, I don't know why, but I was just,

Andrea Palmer 1:01:47

I was gonna ask why I mean, you're doing what's right for you, you've already made the decision, you know, it's not necessarily burning a bridge. But did you still feel some that your value was tied to the workplace, or that you just were didn't want to disappoint people? Like, did you ever get to the bottom of why you were so afraid to share that news?

Leanna McGrath 1:02:07

There was a lot. I think, you know, as women, we are socialized to put other people first, right. And so I definitely, definitely can relate to like people pleasing. And so I was like, I'm going to disappoint him, I'm gonna let him down. I think there was also a little bit of like, like, he let other executives go in the layoffs, and kind of enrolled me to help rebuild the, you know, I don't know, I just like felt like I was a big part of it, which, honestly, I mean, hindsight, like everybody's replaceable, they hired someone else. The company went on, it's fine. But there was a lot tied into the decision. So even though I made the decision in an instant, it was like, I did a lot of pre work to do that. So there was a lot of unraveling of why I was hesitant.

Leanna McGrath 1:03:14

I felt like am I being a bad feminist? You know, I mean, how can I call myself a feminist and walk away from a job and a role that so many women before me didn't have the opportunity to be in and then, even more women fought for me to have that right to be in that role. So I felt this, like, you know, this extreme kind of guilt and like, talking about the identity thing, you know, it was just like, how am I even going to call myself a feminist if I just like, decide to step out of an executive role to be a full time mom. And then I think, you know, we talked about before about identity being tied up in it, it was definitely different than my first company. But by this point, I had fully stepped into the executive identity.

Leanna McGrath 1:04:10

I was no longer feeling like, who am I, you know, like, maybe I didn't earn this or whatever. Like, I had been hired, I had been recruited hard. I had been, I had negotiated for what I wanted, right, like, I felt like I had earned it at this point, and that I was a full on executive and so kind of like, who am I without that title? Who am I? Like, when we introduce ourselves to people, when

people ask about us, you know, I would say like, I ran a team, or I'm vice president or something along those lines, something with my career first. And so all of those things were tied into it. And so all the all of those things took a bit of unraveling, to really kind of dig into before I was able to make that decision. And then when it came to telling him, it was just kind of the final step.

Leanna McGrath 1:05:07

And I think it just felt so big like, I had quit one company before to start my own business. Right. So I had already walked away from an executive role. So you would think it would have been easier, but I think, because it was like to do women things. I'm doing air quotes here. I felt like, I was probably judging it in a way that I assumed he would judge it too. And I, that feminist thing, I think, like when I was thinking about all the women that came before me, I also was thinking about all the women that come after me, and what kind of precedent am I going to set for them? And, you know, am I just going to reinforce these beliefs that, like the old school thinking of like, oh, when a woman has a child, she's just gonna leave or, you know, kind of those thoughts were probably front of mind for me, too, whenever I was talking to him.

Leanna McGrath 1:06:01

So like, what is he going to think of me? And what's he going to think of the next woman who comes in here for an interview? You know? And is he going to think less of her or kind of have that in the back of his mind of you know, maybe she's not all the way in? Because I thought Leanna was all the way in? And it turns out, she wasn't.

Andrea Palmer 1:06:23

Yeah, that's a good point.

Leanna McGrath 1:06:26

So yeah, but I had the conversation. He was shocked, everyone was shocked. It was interesting, because he was like, I explained the whole, like, I feel like I'm constantly failing, I just don't feel like I can be really good at anything when I'm trying to do both of these things. And he was like, he was like, flabbergasted, like, What are you talking about? I think you're an excellent employee, you know, like, it was interesting, because I think it was kind of the first realization that like, oh, maybe my view of this is a reality is like, not 100% accurate? Maybe, I mean, not saying that his was or that anyone else's was, but like, that, the way that I was thinking about it, maybe there was some room to challenge that a little bit.

Andrea Palmer 1:07:25

Interesting. I mean, do you think if you would have seen it that way, before your decision, you would have stayed?

Leanna McGrath 1:07:31

I don't think so. Because I think that I, I, though I left in some stressful circumstances, I didn't leave because of them. Like, I didn't leave, I could have, and I did hire another nanny. And actually, she ended up being the best, like one of the best ones to finish out my, the rest of the year there. So, you know, I could have kept going, I could have continued to do that. It wasn't

like, oh, my God, that these things are insurmountable. There was the other main factor, which I haven't even really talked about. But it was just that, like, I felt like I was missing out on spending time with my baby, like I, you know, at that point, she was a year and a half to two years.

Leanna McGrath 1:08:21

And so when her nanny would be like, Oh, we're going outside to play and I'd be like, oh, man, like, I want to go outside and play with her. Right. Like, by the time it's dark, and you know, my boss had kind of some expectations that we worked a lot. So it was like a 50-60 hour work week. And I just felt like, you know, she is sleeping. Like, a lot, right? Like, there's still sleep a lot of that time. So if I'm working, 10-12 hours a day. And she sleeps 15 hours a day, like, it just the math didn't work out for me to feel like, Why did I have a baby, if I'm just going to pay somebody to spend all their time with her and then like, I'm going to see her in these like, tiny little chunks of time, I just didn't feel like it was enough time to spend with her. I wanted to flip it, you know, because I honestly didn't want to stop working completely. And when I gave my notice, he was like, let's figure out a part time thing or...

Leanna McGrath 1:09:30

But I think if I had done that, in that environment, it would have been that I would have been working full time and getting paid for part time because that was just kind of, you know, kind of trying to like scale back my role. I just didn't see that as a possibility. And so no, I felt like I needed a clean break. So my plan was really to start my business shortly after I like, take some time and then do some little projects, start my podcast soon after I left and just like, you know, still do projects, and things like that.

Andrea Palmer 1:10:07

Your coaching business you mean?

Leanna McGrath 1:10:10

Yes, yes. Yeah, I didn't want to like launch it fully. But I felt like maybe if I like reengaged a couple of clients and just kind of kept that part of my brain going, I thought that would be fun. But yeah, but it was basically just, I felt like I wanted the inverse, I just didn't want to work 10 to 12 hours a day, and have the leftover time with her, I wanted it to be the opposite, right? Like, maybe I would work a couple of hours a day and, but have the majority of time with her. And also she was getting a lot more fun. She was very, like, she wasn't a baby anymore. She was wanting to go and do things. And they're just so cute at that age, and, you know, starting to kind of talk a little bit and be more interactive.

Leanna McGrath 1:10:58

And so, my decision was, I want to spend more time with her, I want to enjoy her one and only childhood. A thought that I had that I think was very helpful is that a job is always going to be available to me, I will always be able to find another job, but she only has one and only she has this one and only childhood, and I want to enjoy it with her. And so I think that a lot of times women get stuck in that decision of like, what if I can't come back? What if jobs aren't available?

And I know that that has been a reality in the past of you know, questioning, like, and still is in many places questioning a gap in, you know, a career gap. But that wasn't something I ever worried about, because I just thought like, it was so easy for me to get this job. I'll get another one.

Andrea Palmer 1:11:52

comes back to confidence to you know, that you built over time to feel then that position. I remember, when you made the decision, you changed your LinkedIn title to something super cute. What was it?

Leanna McGrath 1:12:05

Yes. Chief Learning and Development Officer to a future CEO. Yeah, and I think that that mindset too, when I transitioned out was really important, because I had this mindset that like I was now doing the nanny's job. So like, right now. So I was working. My job was my daughter from call it nine to five, whatever those real real hours, you know, seven to six, or whatever. But my job was during the day with her. And then kind of before and after that was like, shared time with my partner, right? Like we shared the load equally, because he did his job. And I did my job.

Leanna McGrath 1:12:53

I think I'm happy that I made that transition, I made it you know, I left right before she turned to because I know, you know, I think a lot of women, there's like an expectation that they just like own everything in the house and kids, if their partner is working and they're not. And that is not the dynamic that we had. Because I was thinking that like, this is – I am the Chief Learning and Development Officer, this is an important job that I am doing and so I need to be my best self, I need to be well rested. I cannot be the only one waking up at night because I need to be rested for my job just like my husband needs to be rested for his job. And I think that's not always the reality for women who are the the sole caretaker or primary caretaker while their partners work, unfortunately.

Andrea Palmer 1:13:53

Right. And I mean, obviously that means selecting a partner, right? That's going to be supportive and kind of equally contributing in any area of life, even outside of a child. But does that just involve you two kind of having conversations? I mean, was it a negotiation at all? Or was it just this is what's going to work? And this is what I need? And this is how we both need to work together to support the family. What was that? Like?

Leanna McGrath 1:14:16

It was just kind of like the inertia, like it was just how it was before only I was doing a different job. So like we already had those dynamics in place where, he does a lot more of the cleaning than I do. And I do a lot more of the spending time with our daughter than he does, right like so we just balance it. And on days where like he spends more time with her than I do different house products, you know, so things like that. So yeah, it was kind of like we already had it in place. And so it just continued that way.

Leanna McGrath 1:14:58

When I first left, it was very much like, we would get up and he would take her in the morning so that I could do my meditations and yoga and kind of like, be in a good headspace for her because, dealing with kind of, the big emotions of a two year old, you really have to have the kind of mental fortitude and like, be good yourself before you can really, feel like, okay, I'm being helpful here. Rather than like, ahhh you know, losing my mind. So, yeah. And then in the evenings, we would do different trade offs. And you know, I might do bedtime, and he would clean up the kitchen from dinner, and, you know, one of us, we would take turns cooking and that kind of thing. So yeah, so yeah, it was, I mean, of course, conversations, but also, I think the fact that it was already in place was helpful.

Andrea Palmer 1:16:10

And I think that's so important. And, you know, obviously, you'll talk and we think a lot about of us as women and us as self-proclaimed feminists and how what we do impacts that, but I really think there's something to be said for the male feminists and the male contributors to the conversation too, because it really does take that balance, or, I mean, maybe it's not always males, right, but the other partner to, to jump in to help to have it be equal, and to lessen the mental load that I think really oftentimes does fall on the woman or the mom, at home. And in the workplace, you know, that I've seen, there's a lot of kind of shadow work that we pick up even in the workplace, just because of those societal kind of gender norms that we inherit.

Leanna McGrath 1:16:56

Yeah. Yeah. No, I 100% agree. I think that was something else Sheryl Sandberg talked about in her book in Lean In and about equal partnership and dividing the duties, you know, things like that. And, I mean, I remember when we came home from the hospital basically, it was like, my job to take care of the baby and his to but like, you know, I was, I was breastfeeding. She from day one only ever wanted me. That was like, my focus. And then he took care of everything else and me. And so it was like, he was taking care of me, he was taking care of the house, he did all the diaper changes, because I hate diaper changes, and, like, made sure I was good. He was obviously also like, really involved with her.

Leanna McGrath 1:17:52

But it was like, that was mainly how we kind of chose to, to break it up. Right. And so I think it's really important for some ground rules or boundaries, or you know, things to figure out. And honestly, I don't think there's much you can do to figure it out beforehand, until you get into it, and you're like, ah! what do we have to do here? So I think from the beginning, it was very much like there's a lot of work to do here. Let's like we are both responsible for getting it all done. When I say work I mean, like home stuff, right, like cleaning and paying bills. Yeah, and taking the trash out and taking care of baby everything.

Just like the career pause I'm about to talk about, I'm going to take an episode pause right there! Thanks so much for listening to Part 2. Join us next week for the final installment of this series where I'll talk about my transition into full time mom life and what I've learned after much reflection on this experience. Thanks again, and see you next week!