Women Don’t Ask

Negotiation and the Gender Divide

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Introduction

Women don’t ask. They don’t ask for raises or promotions or better job opportunities. They don’t ask for recognition for the good work they do. They don’t ask for more help at home. In other words, women are much less likely than men to use negotiation to get what they want.

A few years ago, Linda Babcock conducted a study that looked at the starting salaries of students graduating from Carnegie Mellon University with their masters’ degrees. When she considered gender, the difference was fairly large — the starting salaries of the men were 7.6%, or almost $4,000, higher than those of the women.

Trying to explain this difference, Babcock looked next at who had negotiated his or her salary — asking for more money — and who had simply accepted the initial offer. It turned out that only 7% of the female students had negotiated but 57% of the men — eight times as many — had asked for more money.

Babcock was particularly surprised to see such a difference between men and women at Carnegie Mellon, because graduating students are strongly advised by the school’s Career Services department to negotiate their job offers. Nonetheless, hardly any of the women had done so.

The most striking difference, however, was that the students who had negotiated (most of them men) were able to increase their starting salary by 7.4% on average, or $4,053 — almost exactly the difference between men’s and women’s average starting pay. This suggests that the salary differences between men and women might have been eliminated if women had negotiated their offers.

Further Studies

Spurred on by these findings, Babcock and two colleagues designed another study to look at the propensity of men and women to ask for more than they’re offered. Students were told they would be paid between $3 and $10 for playing the game Boggle. After four rounds, the experimenter handed each research subject $3 and said, “Here’s $3. Is $3 okay?”

Almost nine times as many men as women asked for more money. This was despite the fact that both male and female subjects rated how well they played the game equally — meaning women didn’t feel they should be paid less because they played poorly. As well, in a survey, men and women complained equally about the compensation. But when it came to going beyond complaining and pressing for more, the women didn’t ask.

In a further study, conducted on the Internet, Babcock and three other colleagues asked respondents about recent negotiations. For the men, on average, the most recent negotiation they’d initiated had occurred two weeks earlier, while for women the most recent negotiation they’d initiated had occurred a full month before. Aver-
ages for the second most recent negotiations attempted or initiated were also striking: seven weeks earlier for men compared to 24 weeks for women.

**No Age Difference**
The more than 100 interviews conducted for this book supported these findings. Again asked about the last negotiation in which they'd participated, women named an event several months in the past and described a recognized type of structured negotiation, such as buying a car. (The exception were women with small children, who uniformly said, “I negotiate with my kids all the time.”)

The majority of men described an event that had occurred within the preceding week, and frequently described less formal transactions, such as negotiating with a spouse about who would take the kids to soccer practice, with a boss to pay for a larger-size rental car because of a strained back, or with a colleague about which part of a joint project each team member would undertake.

One particularly striking finding was how those broke down by age. The changes brought about by the women’s movement over the last 40 years had led to the expectation of greater differences between older men and women than among their younger counterparts. And indeed younger women often suggested that these problems were “boomer” issues, afflicting older women but not themselves.

However, the Web survey revealed that the gender differences for respondents in their 20s and early 30s on how often they initiated negotiations were similar or slightly larger than the differences in older cohorts. In addition, both the starting salary and Boggle studies used subjects in their early 20s. This suggests that the tendency among women to accept what they’re offered and not ask for more is far from a “boomer” problem.

**The Asking Advantage**
Women frequently take a more collaborative approach to problem solving than men take, trying to find solutions that benefit both parties or trying to align their requests with shared goals. In many situations, women’s methods can be superior to those typically used by men.

Unfortunately, however, in our largely male-defined work culture, women’s strategies can often be misinterpreted, leaving them operating from a position of weakness. And in many cases the only way to get something is to ask for it directly.

The importance of asking is shown in part by the situation of the graduating students at Carnegie Mellon, in which eight times as many men as women negotiated their starting salaries, with the women who didn’t negotiate starting out behind.

Suppose that at age 22 an equally qualified man and woman receive job offers for $25,000 a year. The man negotiates and gets his offer raised to $30,000 while the woman doesn’t negotiate and signs on at $25,000.

Even if each of them receives identical 3% raises every year throughout their careers (which is unlikely, given their different propensity to negotiate, as well as other research showing that women’s achievements tend to be undervalued), by the time they reach age 60 the gap between their salaries will have widened to more than $15,000 a year — the man will be earning $92,243 and the woman only $76,870.

In addition, since the man has been earning more all along, his extra earnings over the 37 years will total $361,171. If that had been banked in a savings account earning 3% interest, by age 60 he would have $568,834 more than the woman. That’s an enormous “return on investment” for a one-time negotiation.

The penalties for not negotiating extend far beyond the monetary. In many cases, employers actually respect candidates more for pushing to get paid what they’re worth. That means women don’t merely sacrifice additional income when they don’t push to be paid more — they may sacrifice some of their employers’ regard as well.

**Missing the Chance**
Besides not realizing that asking is possible, many women avoid negotiations even in situations where they know it’s appropriate and expected. The Internet survey asked respondents to consider various scenarios and indicate whether they thought negotiation would be appropriate — and then in such situations to indicate how likely they would be to negotiate.

Particularly around work scenarios, such as thinking they were due for a promotion or a salary increase, women as a group were less likely than men to try negotiating — even though they recognized that negotiation was appropriate and probably even necessary.

These findings are momentous. Until now, research on negotiation has mostly ignored the issue of when
and why people attempt to negotiate, focusing instead on tactics that are successful once a negotiation is underway — what kind of offers to make, when to concede and which strategies are most effective in different types of negotiations. With few exceptions, researchers have ignored the crucial fact that the most important step in any negotiation process must be deciding to negotiate in the first place.

If you miss your chance to negotiate, the best negotiation advice in the world isn't going to help you much. And women simply aren’t “asking” at the same rate as men.

Society’s Messages
After all, nice girls don’t ask. From childhood, that message is delivered to women. While men are focused on their own aims and interests and are more likely to act independently of others’ needs and desires, women tend to be more communal, less focused on their own needs and more focused on the welfare of others.

The pressure to put the needs of others first manifests itself in a variety of ways in women’s lives. Lory, a theater production manager, sums up her other-directed approach to life in this way: “If it’s something that’s just for me, only for me, then I go back to, ‘Do I really need it?’ More, it’s really, ‘How does it affect people around me?’”

Ada, a lawyer in her early 50s with a distinguished career as a litigator behind her, now serves as inspector general of a high-profile government agency. And like Lory, Ada is extremely successful and outwardly self-confident. But, although she has no trouble asking for things on behalf of her clients, her employees or her children, she says, “I find it really hard to ask for things for myself.”

Of course, nobody is completely “other-oriented” or “self-oriented.” We all possess both of these qualities to varying degrees. But many studies have shown that as a society we expect women to be more oriented toward the needs of others and men more toward their own needs and ambitions.

This is where problems arise, because the ideas we share about gender roles are normative — they involve qualities and behaviors that we believe men and women should have. So a man who isn’t especially ambitious risks being called a “wimp” or a “loser.” And an assertive, ambitious woman runs head-on into society’s requirement that she be selfless and communal.

Scaring the Boys
Indeed, a tough personal style, often seen as an advantage for men in business, can be a liability for women. The Growth and Leadership Center, an executive coaching firm in California, even has a “Bully Broads” program for women who need to be taught to be nicer, even though their behavior wouldn’t be inappropriate for men. Whereas the majority of men sent to the Center by their firms go to be taught to delegate or handle stress better, 95% of the women are sent because their firms say co-workers find them scary.

That doesn’t mean the world is suddenly being overrun by bitchy women. It means that an assertive personal style can be a gender-norm violation for women.

As well, research has shown that for women who want to influence others, likeability is critically important. Unfortunately, research has revealed that assertive women are less well liked than those who aren’t assertive. That means an assertive woman, no matter how well she presents her arguments in negotiation, risks reducing her likeability and therefore her ability to influence the other side to agree with her point of view.

The Confidence Gap
Women face another problem in negotiations: they tend to pick low goals and safe targets. One of Babcock’s studies found that male negotiators set goals that are about 15% more aggressive than female negotiators in comparable circumstances.

Women settle for less in negotiations because they lack the confidence in their abilities to negotiate effectively. Assuming they’re no good at negotiations, they conclude that they won’t be able to attain higher goals. One way to offset this is to conduct research beforehand, gaining information and external guidelines about what’s possible. This tends to improve the results of negotiations.

Conclusion
Recognizing more opportunities for negotiations in your circumstances is a skill that can be learned — in some case quite easily. Certain kinds of training can help women become more effective negotiators (and can substantially reduce their anxiety) by increasing their sense of control over the negotiation process and
teaching them to anticipate roadblocks, plan counter-
moves and resist conceding too much too soon.

Rather than merely imitating men (which often
doesn’t work), women can learn to ask as women.
They can find their own “negotiating voices,” retaining
their collaborative style and developing more ambitious
goals — and get good results.

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