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PREOCCUPATIONS

Women, Repeat This: Don't Ask, Don't Get

By LINDA BABCOCK

ABOUT 10 years ago, I heard that my boss was recommending two of my male colleagues for promotion. Both of these men had joined the faculty the same year I was hired, both were good teachers, and both had published important research. They were certainly qualified to move to the next level, from associate professor to full professor.

But so was I. I figured it was just a matter of time before my boss stopped by my office with the good news that he was promoting me, too. So I waited. And waited. As time passed, it became clear that I might be waiting a very long time.

Finally, I worked up the nerve to talk to him about it. I vividly remember his reaction. A big smile spread across his face. "Well, let's promote you, too!" he said.

When my two male colleagues had asked to be promoted, my boss, seeing that they met all the requirements, readily agreed. Since he was a busy man, he didn't stop to think about who else was ready for promotion. A question was posed, he answered it, and he went on to the next problem.

About three years later, I held my boss's job. While hiring two people with similar credentials, a woman and a man, I made each the same salary offer. The woman accepted the offer without negotiating. The man bargained hard, and I had to raise his offer by about 10 percent before he would agree to it.

In between these two events, I watched similar situations play out among my students and friends. Time and again, I saw women accept the status quo, take what they were offered and wait for someone else to decide what they deserved. Men asked for what they wanted and usually got what they asked for.

Prompted by these experiences, I started a research project with several colleagues to study how and when men and women initiate negotiations. In my book "Women Don't Ask," I laid out overwhelming evidence that women are much less likely than men to use negotiation to promote their goals and wishes.

With my co-author, Sara Laschever, I also showed that this problem extends into most realms of a woman's life, hampering her success not just at work but also at home and in her dealings with everyone else in her world: contractors, retailers, service providers, family members, even friends.

I also found strong evidence that this reluctance to promote their own interests is not an innate quality or a genetic blind spot in women. As a society, we teach little girls (and I have a little girl, so I see this all the time) that it's not nice or feminine or appropriate for them to focus on

what they want and pursue their self-interest — and we don't like it when they do.

The messages girls receive — from parents and teachers, from books they read, from movies and television shows they watch, and from behavior of the adults around them — can be so powerful that as women they may not even understand that their reluctance to ask for what they want is a learned behavior, and one that can be unlearned.

More recent research that I conducted with two colleagues, Hannah Bowles and Lei Lai, points to another reason that women don't ask: They face a much chillier reaction — from men and from women — when they do negotiate for what they want.

Behavior that can lead a man to be seen as ambitious or a go-getter can brand a woman as too pushy and aggressive. She may be called rude names, receive negative evaluations based solely on her personal style instead of her work and find herself closed out of networks or opportunities from which she might benefit. My boss was pleased that I asked him for what I wanted. A lot of women aren't so lucky.

I've concluded that this is a crucial leadership issue for any organization committed to sound management practices. When I realized that the woman I'd hired would be earning less than the man for doing equivalent work, I called her back and raised her salary. I couldn't accept this disparity in my organization — not just because it was unfair but because I knew that it was bad for my organization, where it is crucial to attract and keep the best people.

Managers often watch talented women walk out the door when they discover that they've been treated inequitably. So good managers need to be on the lookout for these sorts of inequities and take steps to correct them.

THERE'S a lot that women can do, too. They can recognize more opportunities to negotiate and master basic negotiation skills. They can learn how to assess and strengthen their bargaining power; research, prepare and practice before their negotiations; and use strategies that won't make them seem threatening and provoke a backlash.

I've also founded an organization, Progress (www.heinz.cmu.edu/progress), to teach young girls to negotiate. In partnership with the [Girl Scouts](#), we've already developed a negotiation badge that takes girls through a series of 10 activities to develop their negotiation skills. We've created a video game that requires girls to negotiate in order to reach the highest levels and win.

We may not consciously realize that we're tougher on assertive women than we are on men who behave in similar ways. But we need to be diligent on this score.

So the next time you react negatively to the behavior of a strong woman, stop yourself and say instead, "I'm glad she's going after what she wants."

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