

## The Female Negotiator

### Introduction

There can be little doubt as to the importance of effective negotiation skills to today's manager — be it negotiating with co-workers for resources, vendors on price, joint venture partners over agreement terms or with government agencies on the approval of a new product. We are faced with similar challenges on a personal level — negotiating with contractors, with the couple from whom we are trying to buy that new house, the car dealer on price and terms, and with our spouse or children.

### The Issue

Both men and women are faced with dealing with these issues; however, many of the women in our workshops have raised additional concerns related to how they are treated when they negotiate. The general reaction is - more is expected from us; we're not treated the same way as men are. As one woman suggested in a recent program, "I am always careful as to how assertive I am." A second participant echoed this concern when she pointed out "we are expected to be feminine, but when we do assert ourselves it can come across as not being a team player, not being collaborative". There is a great deal in the literature to support this concern - the essential message being that women are viewed differently than their male counterparts. To quote Hannah Riley Bowles, "We do have a greater expectation of niceness from women than from men. There's

a body of research showing that when women step into the realm of stereotypically masculine behavior and use an authoritative or directive leadership style . . . that this doesn't feel right coming from a woman."

Deborah M. Kolb and Judith Williams, (*Listening to Women: New Perspectives on Negotiation*)\*, reinforced this concern when they pointed out that, "the forceful tactics needed to advocate effectively can provoke retaliation, while collaborative overtures can be read as an invitation to press for concessions."

The dilemma women face was summarized in a recent article in the newsletter, "Negotiation", published by the Program on Negotiation at The Harvard Law School. The unsigned article pointed out that, "Having achieved significant gains in the workplace, women now face a double bind. To advance and succeed, they need to advocate for their interests, yet when they do so, they may be punished for being unfeminine", Not wanting to be seen as unfeminine, women may take a more accommodating approach to the negotiation process.

In their book, *Women Don't Ask - Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, Sara Laschever and Linda Babcock extend this argument and suggest that in many instances women do not get to the bargaining table. To quote them: "Our book is the first to recognize that women don't even get to the negotiation table - they do not try to negotiate nearly as often as men ... Our studies show that even among women in their 20s and 30s, men are much more likely to negotiate than women." They also point out that, "women are much less likely than men to ask for what they want and to

use negotiation as a tool to promote their own ambitions or desires.”

Where is all this coming from? Is it something unique to women or is there something about our culture that sends a message telling women what is acceptable and what is not. Laschever and Babcock suggest that the problem is cultural. Again, to quote them, “The evidence is overwhelming that this is a problem for which our society is to blame – that it is a socially constructed problem rather than something innate to females or just a blind spot women, don’t recognize. As a society, we teach women that it is not appropriate or “feminine” for them to focus on what they want, to assert their own ambitions and pursue their self-interests, and we don’t like it when they do.” However, when women do negotiate, there is an interesting distinction – “women don’t have a problem when negotiating on behalf of others or can be great negotiators when they’re promoting their company’s interests. This reluctance to initiate negotiations seems to strike women when asking for things for themselves - for instance, raises, promotions, or plum projects, Women are excellent advocates on behalf of others, whether the other is an employer, a colleague, a friend or family member.”

The authors go on to suggest that women bring a very different approach to the negotiating process than do their male counterparts. They suggest that women bring a “collaborative or cooperative approach to negotiation ...which often produces creative solutions to problems that might have been overlooked by men taking a more competitive or adversarial approach. Also, by looking for those win/win solutions, women tend to preserve and enhance long term business relationships – they don’t burn as many bridges as men who focus on short term gains.”\*

Lynne Cannon, formerly the VP of Human Resources at both BMS and Novartis and

currently the CEO of the Princeton Management Development Institute, conducted a series of focus groups with women scientific leaders in both pharmaceutical and biotech firms. Her findings were very similar to those already identified by Babcock and Laschever, as well as others. She reports that, “Women scientists and clinicians were at times not sufficiently assertive and pro-active in their own behalf and did not always look for the stretch assignments that could make a positive impact on their careers.” Ms. Cannon went on to point out that many women also feel constrained, since aggressive behavior is frequently seen as negative by their male counterparts. As a result, women do not feel as free to express their emotions and feelings as men do - what is seen as acceptable in men is not seen similarly in women.

## Next Steps

The essential question then is - how can women address these issues and utilize the necessary skills when they are negotiating in their own behalf and not for someone else? Certain of the answers lie in the skills of a good negotiator: understanding your own needs and interests, researching and understanding the issues, clarifying your own and the other parties’ objectives and understanding what is driving them to take their positions. However, the more fundamental question is - how should women respond to those gender- specific issues? We suggest the following:

- Assess your own skills and understand your strengths and improvement opportunities. What is the difference between those negotiations in which you feel you were successful and those in which you were not? What impact, if any, has gender had on your success?

- Understand the culture of your organization, including the nature of the gender-related issues that may be at work and their potential impact on you.
- Anticipate and prepare for any gender-related issues that may surface during a negotiation.
- Seek out women you know have been successful in dealing with gender-specific issues and talk with them about how they have dealt with them.
- Seek out training opportunities that will allow you to obtain feedback on your negotiation and management skills.
- Seek out training opportunities that address gender-specific issues and provide strategies for dealing with them.

Babcock and Laschever suggest that: women should –

- not try to be like men. However, women can and should ask for what they want. For women who are pragmatists, asking for what they want in a more social, friendly way can be a very effective strategy for getting what they want – without turning people against them;
- assume that most things are negotiable - that they don't have to accept the status quo as fixed and rigid and settle for whatever is offered. This one mental adjustment can produce extraordinary results - we've seen it happen time after time;
- begin thinking differently about negotiation, seeing it as a benefit to

everyone involved, rather than an aggressive or adversarial act. In this way they can reframe their negotiations in ways that make them feel more comfortable with the whole process.

Laschever and Babcock also understand that if fundamental changes are to take place, companies must work to provide a level playing field for women. Basically, companies need to look at their corporate culture and its' impact on women. The goal is to change the corporate culture to ensure that it is "more acceptable for women to assert their personal goals and ask for what they want." As Lynne Canon points out - One way of approaching this issue is to ensure that women get the type of mentoring they need to enhance their skills.

### Conclusion

There are no easy answers for the issues that women face in the workplace - they will require a great deal of effort, both from corporate management as well as from the women involved. What organizations need to recognize is that by failing to address this issue, they risk losing valuable resources.

Note: The quotes attributed to Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, are taken from the websites of their book; *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*. The quotation attributed to Deborah M. Kolb and Judith Williams is taken from the website: womensmedia.com. The Hannah Riley Bowles' quotation is taken from The Harvard Business School's "Working Knowledge Paper", published on October 13, 2003 and entitled "Negotiating Challenges for Women Leaders". The quotes attributed to Lynne Cannon are taken from a recent interview.

## ADDITIONAL READING

*Women Don't Ask: The High Cost of Avoiding Negotiation and Positive Strategies for Change;* Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, Princeton University Press, 2003

*Ask For It: How Women can use the Power of Negotiation to Get What They Really Want;* Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, Bantam, 2008.

*The Shadow Negotiation: How Women can Master the Hidden Agendas that Determine bargaining Success;* Deborah M. Kolb and Judith Williams, Simon and Schuster, 2000.

*Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men in the Workplace: Language, Sex and power* Deborah Tannen, Ph.D, Avon, 1995

*They don't get it, do they? : Communication in the Workplace – Closing the Gap Between Men and Women;* Kathleen Kelley Reardon, Little Brown, 1995

*The Female Advantage Women's ways of Leadership,* Sally Helgesen, Doubleday, 1995

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**Note:** Should you want additional information on any of the above please contact Ira or Sandy at 212-243-0782 or Ira via e-mail at [ira@asherman.com](mailto:ira@asherman.com) or Sandy at [sandy@asherman.com](mailto:sandy@asherman.com)

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