

WOMEN DON'T ASK: Negotiation and the Gender Divide

Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever
Princeton University Press 2003

Despite the title, this book is not only about - or for - women. It's about a negotiating style that is not limited to women, although it does show up most frequently among women. (And for brevity's sake, I'm going to refer only to women in reference to this style.) So, what? you might be asking. You've gotten through life just fine by simply not negotiating. Or you feel you are an assertive person, perhaps of a more recent generation, so this doesn't apply to you, right? And what if you're a man?

Read the book. You haven't gotten through life as well as you might have, you likely aren't as assertive as you think you are (and generation doesn't make the difference you might expect) and maleness isn't an automatic free pass into successful negotiation. Plus, male or female, if you are married to, related to, work with or encounter women, you should read the book.

WOMEN DON'T ASK caught my attention immediately by citing research by Babcock, a professor of economics at Carnegie Mellon, and others on the cost of not asking. The authors and others estimate that a failure to negotiate starting salary for a first job out of college can cost a worker half a million dollars in earnings. That's from a single negotiation chance not taken. According to a study, women who continue to negotiate salary over the course of their careers will make a million dollars more in their careers than women who don't. A million bucks.

Okay, but that's a carryover from pre-liberation days, right? Or the women not negotiating don't have power/education/smarts, so they can't negotiate, right? Nope. One of Babcock's studies looked at recent students graduating with master's degrees from Carnegie Mellon. Eight times as many men as women negotiated their salaries - EIGHT TIMES. And the men who negotiated upped their starting salaries by 7.4 percent.

This book also points out that money isn't all that's at stake. An employee accepting lower pay would seem to value her/himself less than one who asks for more - and the employer will accept that employee's self-valuation. That then influences evaluations, which determine promotions. So this effect multiplies over time in what sociologists call "accumulation of disadvantage" or, as these authors quote one expert as saying, "molehills become mountains."

When women do negotiate, they set lower goals. Some see this as “safer.” Indeed, they might improve their chances of getting what they ask for, yet will likely get less overall. A study Babcock and colleagues did of Ivy League MBA students showed that men did 30 percent better on average than women in negotiations. Why? Their targets. A woman might ask for \$50,000 and get \$50,000 and feel good. But a man would tend to set a goal of \$65,000 (30 percent higher than the woman’s target.)

Maybe he doesn’t get what he asked for, but if he gets \$55,000, he’s still 10 percent better off than the woman who met her lower target.

Babcock details how women tend to shoot too low (with emphasis on how important the first offer from the other side is in the outcome of a negotiation), and then how they concede too much, too quickly.

Even when not discussing salaries, *WOMEN DON’T ASK* is strongly focused on the workplace. However, it doesn’t require much imagination to apply the examples and principles to the business of publishing. In addition, the authors venture into everyday opportunities for negotiation, including a chapter on negotiating at home.

The book delves into societal causes for women’s reluctance to negotiate, and the societal costs of women’s failure to negotiate (along with the costs for the individual, which I’ve put more emphasis on here.) It also recognizes that a negotiating style more common among women of viewing it as a collaborative process can produce the best outcome - if both parties are employing that style. However, if one party is going for collaboration and the other is competing, guess which one wins?

For more on the book (and some eye-popping statistics) check out <http://www.womendontask.com>. And read the book!

~ ~ ~

Originally published in NINK, the newsletter of Novelists, Inc.