

Women Dance to Different Tune on Raises

Globe and Mail July 20, 2005

Susan Pinker

Copyright Susan Pinker 2005

Dear Susan:

Many months ago I took on a major contract that is challenging and interesting but as I near its completion I am running into a problem. Every layer of management has to have a say on the final product. Before it reaches the client there will be so many hands in it that it will look like a dog's breakfast. How do I exert more control or withdraw from the project before my name becomes associated with this mess?

Anonymous

Dear Anonymous:

Think about what you want. In the long run, if you want repeat business from this client, do a lot of listening. Make every manager feel as if they are making an important contribution. Reflect their points back to them without refuting them. Then shepherd the project along hewing to the original vision you hammered out with your point person right at the beginning, making small concessions that don't alter the big picture.

Your biggest gain here is not your fee or even the experience of an interesting project, until now at least. It's the knowledge that next time, no matter how much good will at the outset, you'll know to discuss who and how final decisions are made, and who you report to, ultimately. "Many people let their guard down when they're about to get a contract," says Kevin Tasa, a professor of organizational behaviour at the De Groote School of Business at McMaster University and an expert in decision making. As a result of a deal's novelty, they rush ahead without considering who will be responsible and how to resolve the inevitable power struggles when a lot is at stake.

But it's not too late. The best place to start is where interests of both parties overlap, according to Professor Tasa, instead of presenting two opposing alternatives. "A lot of people underestimate a bit of insightful firmness. No one is going to blink if you ask, what is required of me in this situation?" Instead of taking a one-way ticket on a miffed trip, take the long, long view.

Dear Susan:

I am a female professional with a graduate degree and ten years of work experience and skills. I used to work in the public sector where raises were automatic with seniority, but I have been working at a non-profit organization for four years now and haven't had an increase since I started. I like my job but I am starting to feel exploited. I feel nervous about asking for money and could use some tips.

Nervous Nellie

Dear Nervous:

What happens if they refuse? That's what you're really worried about. Research shows that over 90% of women are concerned that they'll displease someone just by asking or that they'll be roundly humiliated if the answer is no. So they just don't ask. Yet if you do, you won't be much worse off than you are now.

I say not much, because everything depends on how you broach the subject. If you keep your mouth shut, you may spend your golden years clipping grocery coupons and scrimping on heat. And if you ask, you'll have to prepare, rehearse and do it with sincerity and grace. Like dancing, negotiation is all a matter of style. And like the tango, what's acceptable is gender specific.

Economist Linda Babcock and her colleagues at Carnegie Mellon University have demonstrated in several elegant studies that not only are women far less likely than men to negotiate raises, the women who do it successfully have to use a nuanced, cooperative and inclusive approach. If not their request can backfire. They can't just hit their superior over the head with demands. For some reason this just doesn't work for women.

By tracking recent graduates of their university, Babcock and her team found that eight times as many men as women negotiated their starting salary, and that, with the exception of mothers of small children, women negotiate in daily life far less often than men. At work women primarily accepted what they were offered, a precedent that disadvantaged them to the tune of \$4,053 at the outset of a new job and exponentially ever after. By extrapolating the difference between the salaries of those who negotiated, and those who smiled and said thank you very much, Babcock estimates that the cumulative effect of small negotiated annual increases would result in a savings of \$568,834 by the age of 60. Now that's what I call a raise.

Forget the women's prerogative. When it comes to discussing money, women are consistent. They don't like to initiate negotiations and they don't like it when anyone else does, either. That's what Babcock found in a new, still unpublished study that examines the effect of women and men using different styles to ask for what they want. When independent raters were shown videotapes of prospective employees and asked whether they would give them a raise, men responded negatively to women being direct about job demands, whereas a competitive style did not result in male job applicants being viewed askance. In contrast, women penalized both male and female candidates who attempted to negotiate. It was take it or leave it for both.

Screw up your courage and ask, making sure to document all your accomplishments and to rehearse your spiel well in front of confederates in advance so that even if you feel nervous, you still make eye contact, speak warmly of the greater good and don't look threatening to anyone. "They never offer you the most they're willing to pay – that would be crazy," according to Professor Babcock. So if you didn't ask four years ago, now is the moment to make up for lost time. Just do it nicely.

