

# Common ground

How women can overcome the six common errors they make during negotiations

## Question:

**I recently joined a firm where I am the only female. I am being asked to get involved with more and more negotiations. I'm wondering, what are the common mistakes women make at the bargaining table?**

## Answer:

After years of experience, research has proved that females match males in verbal ability, math ability, spatial ability, moral reasoning and leadership skills — all the attributes necessary to be successful at the bargaining table.

At the same time, women have not matched men in negotiating compensation. According to a 1999 study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women managers take home 68 cents for every dollar a man earns. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that this holds true for the executive level as well.

I have observed women who are outstanding at the bargaining table. They know what they want and are skillful in finding common ground. They demonstrate impressive emotional discipline, especially when the tension between the parties is intense. They remain focused, not allowing digressions in the conversation to distract them. In the end, they consistently walk away with a handshake and a smile, with both parties achieving some of what they desired.

But while some women have mastered the art of negotiation, others are not getting what they want and deserve. When categorized,

there are six common errors some women make negotiating.

**1) Women confuse asking for what they want with conflict** – Generally speaking, women feel a need to provide. They find it difficult to ask for what they want. They make the mistake of confusing being assertive with being hostile. They feel holding true to their boundaries means taking advantage of others; and that simply is not true.

Not every negotiation has a storybook ending. Sometimes you ruffle someone's feathers when you don't give in. That's part of the negotiating process. It's difficult for some women to feel responsible for making someone else feel bad.

Rosemarie Greco, the highest-ranking woman in American banking before she quit as president of CoreStates Financial Corp., confesses it took her years before she learned to negotiate forcefully on her own behalf.

**2) Women feel pressured to be accepted by others** – Feminist psychologists contend that women will sacrifice almost anything — especially their own needs — to win the approval of others. Women worry about being nice or appearing selfish. That does not bode well for being successful at the bargaining table.

When the intensity between the two parties increases, women often say, "I don't want to jeopardize the relationship or the deal. If I just give in, this will go away." What they don't realize, is in the process of giving up what they want, they are also giving their power away.

**3) Women are critical of themselves, creating a cycle of self-doubt** – Carol Watson, a professor of management and organizational behavior at Rider University in Lawrenceville, N.J., says women man-

agers made far more disparaging remarks about their negotiating ability than their male peers, even when they used similar methods and came out with equal results.

It is not uncommon for women to have a chorus of inner voices reciting negative self-talk when they are engaged in a negotiation. Those are expressed in phrases such as: "I'm not really worth that much," "I'm really too young to make that much money," "I don't want anyone to think I am taking advantage of this situation," "If I do what I want, it will make him/her feel bad," And, "That's not nice."

Self-bashing creates a cycle of concession making that is difficult to break. Women who don't feel they are worthy or who are too concerned about making everyone else happy end up with less than they deserve. The cycle is perpetuated when she doesn't feel successful in getting what she wants out of the negotiation. That makes her feel incompetent, when in fact, she gave away her power.

**4) Some women overcompensate and act tough** – To avoid being passive, some women become piranha-like. They become someone they are not, and it usually backfires. Other people sense the tension and begin to distrust the intent behind their actions and communications.

When people take on the characteristics of someone they are not, they expense their natural talents. It becomes a self-defeating prophecy.

**5) Women expect everyone to be as nice and accommodating as they are** – This is both idealistic and impractical. Every negotiation is different. Even when the players are the same, the circumstances, objectives, frame of mind, baggage, skill-level, needs, etc., vary from one discussion to the next. Most people do not come to the bargaining table to be nice. They come to the

# **SMALL** **Business Times**

Reprinted from *Small Business Times*, August 8, 2003

bargaining table to get what they need and want.

A young woman whom I coach explained she had an experience negotiating with a seasoned female business professional. She expected the woman to be nice — almost acting as a mentor. She was totally taken off guard when the woman was tough and demanding, and in her own words “not at all nice.”

What she underestimated was this woman has earned her success through personal stamina and hard work. No one had cut her any slack. She was not about to make it easy for anyone else.

**6) Women distrust their intuition** – Your intuition is your connection to your inner wisdom. Its purpose is to guide you toward your highest potential. When you distrust your intuition, you are discarding a valuable piece of insight. The dynamic nature of a negotiation makes it difficult to be prepared for all possible scenarios or outcomes.

When you receive a message, slow down. Take a “time-out” if needed. Listen for clarity. You will reap greater rewards by following your guidance system, rather than trying to follow your rehearsed strategy.

To be successful at the bargaining table, you must be true to yourself. Leverage your strengths. Recognize that we all have weaknesses. Don’t dwell on them. Know what you want and what you need, and take responsibility for your own personal outcomes.

With every experience, there’s a learning curve. When the other person doesn’t win because they didn’t do their homework, or lacked the talent, or didn’t follow their intuition, they will learn a valuable lesson that will serve them in future negotiations.



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