

A Toolkit for Women Seeking a Raise

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Even now, when women represent half the work force, they're still paid considerably less than men — and part of that pay gap may be a result of what happens at the salary negotiation table.

That's assuming that women make it to the table, since research shows that they are less likely to ask for raises. Even when they do, their requests may be perceived as overly demanding or less agreeable.

"We have found that if a man and a woman both attempt to negotiate for higher pay, people find a woman who does this, compared to one who does not, significantly less attractive," said Hannah Riley Bowles, an associate professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, who has conducted numerous studies on gender, negotiation and leadership. "Whereas with the guy, it doesn't seem to matter."

So what's a woman to do if she feels her work merits a raise?

A new study concludes that women need to take a different approach than men. Women, it suggests, should frame their requests in more nuanced ways to avoid undermining their relationship with their boss.

You may be asking yourself, as I did, whether negotiating in ways more favorable for women means that we're just succumbing to stereotypes — or whether the ends justify the means.

"People associate men with higher pay because men tend to hold higher-paying and higher-level positions than women," Ms. Riley Bowles said. "When a woman negotiates persuasively for higher compensation, she clears the path for other women to follow."

Even though working women tend to be more educated, on average, than working men, females who work full time only earn about 77 cents for every dollar that men earn annually, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research. That's up from about 59 cents in 1965.

Part of the pay gap can be easily explained away. Women are more likely to leave the work force to care for children, for example, so they end up with fewer years of experience. Men also tend to work in higher-paying occupations and industries.

"But what you find is that when you pull out all of those factors, you still have about 40 percent of the wage gap — or 9.2 cents — unexplained," said Ariane Hegewisch, a study director at the institute.

Academic research on gender and negotiation suggests that part of the unexplained gap may be tied, at least in part, to the negotiating process itself. It may be that some women have lower pay expectations. Men, on the other hand, have been found to be more likely to negotiate higher starting salaries.

The work by Ms. Riley Bowles and her peers suggests that women in the work force can use specific advice. Here are some of their suggestions:

BE PROACTIVE

If you believe you deserve a raise, don't sit around and wait for someone to notice. "A lot of women, and this is quite commonly found, think, 'As long as I work really, really hard, someone will notice and they will pay me more,'" said Karen J. Pine, a psychology professor at the University of Hertfordshire in Britain and co-author of "Sheconomics" (Headline Publishing Group, 2009). But "people don't come and notice."

You also want to think about the best time to approach your boss. It may make sense to approach him or her after an annual performance review, said Evelyn F. Murphy, president of the WAGE Project, a nonprofit organization, who runs negotiation seminars for women. "Or, if you just took on a major responsibility or won an award."

BE PREPARED

Doing your research pays, literally. A study found that men and women who recently earned a master's degree in business negotiated similar salaries when they had clear information about how much to ask for.

But in industries where salary standards were ambiguous, women accepted pay that was 10 percent lower, on average, than men. "In our experiments, we found that with ambiguous information, women set less ambitious goals," said Ms. Riley Bowles, who ran the study. "They asked for less in a competitive negotiation and got less."

That theory also holds in other areas where there aren't set expectations, like executive bonuses and stock options. "You get bigger gender gaps in those less standard forms of pay," she added.

That's why you need to be prepared. Informational Web sites like Payscale.com and Salary.com can help uncover what people are being paid for a particular position in your geographic area. And Glassdoor.com and Vault.com provide intelligence on pay inside a company — employees share their salaries online.

Part of your preparation may also include talking to peers. But remember that women tend to be less connected to male networks in the workplace and are more likely to compare themselves to people they think are similar, Ms. Riley Bowles said. That means they may be comparing their salaries with other women.

"If a woman asks her girlfriends how much they are paid and a guy asks his guy friends, Jane and Jim will come up with different numbers," Ms. Riley Bowles added.

TAILOR NEGOTIATIONS

This is where the women may want to use a different strategy. A new study by Ms. Riley Bowles shows that women are more likely to be successful if they explain why their request is appropriate, but in terms that also communicate that they care about maintaining good relationships at work. "The trick is trying to do both of these things at the same time and in a way that feels authentic and fits within the norms of the company," she added.

Using this approach, the study found, women were more likely to be granted a raise without harming relationships, at least in an experimental setting. The results were consistent for women negotiating with other women and with men.

Some of the language used in the study provided an explanation on how to explain why you're making the request now — "My team leader advised me to do this" — while at the same time communicating that you are taking the boss's position into account: "What do you think?"

The study doesn't suggest specific language, but offers some general outlines.

Instead of explaining why you deserve a raise directly, for instance, frame it in terms of why it makes sense for the organization or the person you're trying to persuade. "Make the company the focus," she said.

And if you're thinking about using an outside offer to help negotiate a raise, take heed. It's effective, but Ms. Riley Bowles said her studies have found that it tends to leave a more negative impression on women. "Women may need to be more strategic than men about how they raise an outside offer so that it doesn't put them in a negative light," she added.

ANTICIPATE

Try to envision what kinds of objections your boss may have, Ms. Murphy said, and think about what your response might be. "There is no single way through this," she added. "It's largely reactive once you start the process."

If you're unsuccessful, ask your boss for recommendations on what you could do to move to the next level in your job. That way, "you are still in control and are still being constructive," Ms. Murphy said. "If you trust your own language and your own ability to perceive these potential roadblocks or damaging outcomes, then you will find your way through them."

NEGOTIATE AT HOME

Before you even start negotiating for a raise, or a promotion, consider how it might affect your life at home — but don't assume that one has to come at the expense of the other. Working women who double as caregivers still carry a disproportionate load of household chores, even as men have begun shouldering more responsibilities. Try to re-examine some of these roles and think about how new divisions of household labor may help each partner's situation at work, Ms. Riley Bowles suggested.

Some people believe the negotiations at home may be more challenging than those in the workplace. "That is the big secret in our culture," said Paula Hogan, a Milwaukee-based financial planner who works with a career counselor in her practice. "The workplace has become increasingly gender-neutral and at home there is still a lot of old thinking."

BE CREATIVE

If you have family responsibilities, it helps to consider alternatives like flexible work schedules. "Be sure you are thinking as creatively as possible for win-win solutions," Ms. Riley Bowles said.

And remember that it's your responsibility to suggest these solutions (or to seek out companies known for considering them). "They are not going to come to you and say, 'Gosh, I notice you have three kids now. Would you like Tuesdays off?'" said Ms. Hogan. "It's your job to present the business plan."