PROGRAM ON NEGOTIATION
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NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN

FREE REPORT

SECRETS TO SUCCESS

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Table of Contents

Why Women Sometimes Ask for Less

The average college-educated woman earns $713,000 less over the course of her working life than her male counterpart, according to the Coalition of Labor Union Women. What explains this persistent gender gap? Women employees' awareness that they could be penalized for negotiating assertively on their own behalf is one factor, according to new research from Emily T. Amanatullah of the University of Texas at Austin and Michael W. Morris of Columbia University.

The fear of a backlash

In their experiment, Amanatullah and Morris had male and female college students engage in a simulated job negotiation. The participants were told to negotiate either their own starting salary or a friend's starting salary through five rounds of offers and counteroffers.

Before negotiating, the women, but not the men, reported believing that they might be punished if they were perceived as too "pushy" or "demanding." Further, this fear of backlash was unique to women negotiating their own salaries, as those negotiating for a friend did not anticipate social punishment for their behavior. Another negotiation study suggests that this fear held by women negotiating their own salaries is warranted: women and men alike penalized female job candidates who initiated salary negotiations, researchers Hannah Riley Bowles (Harvard University), Linda Babcock (Carnegie Mellon University), and Lei Lai (Tulane University) found.

A self-protective strategy

In Amanatullah and Morris's study, women who bargained on their own behalf opened with significantly lower counteroffers—about $7,000 less—

than women who negotiated for a friend and than men who negotiated for either another person or themselves. These women appeared to fear a backlash for behaving contrary to gender stereotypes of women as accommodating and cooperative.

By contrast, the women who negotiated on behalf of a friend understood they would not be penalized for negotiating forcefully for someone else—behavior that complies with the stereotype of women as caretakers who focus on others' needs rather than their own. In this situation, they were not hesitant to negotiate assertively on behalf of their friends.

The results refute the theory that women are naturally less skilled or aggressive negotiators than men. Rather, the tendency of women to ask for less than men in certain settings may be a self-protective strategy based on a very real threat of being penalized for behaving contrary to deeply ingrained gender expectations.

How to fend off a backlash

The study results suggest several pieces of advice:

- **Connect to others.** To close the gender gap and avoid a backlash when negotiating on their own behalf, women should try to link aggressive demands to the needs of others, such as the organization's. (See "Dear Negotiation Coach" on page 4 for more detail.) Requests made on others' behalf are likely to be better received.
- **Stay vigilant.** Both men and women need to audit their judgments for the subconscious tendency to view assertive women negotiators as unlikable and overly demanding.
- **Use objective measures.** When making requests, women should reference relevant standards that would be difficult for the other side to ignore. In addition, organizations should attempt to control the insidious effects of gender stereotypes by instating salary benchmarks based on objective performance measures.

Resource: "Negotiating Gender Roles: Gender Differences in Assertive Negotiating Are Mediated by Women's Fear of Backlash and Attenuated When Negotiating on Behalf of Others," by Emily T. Amanatullah and Michael W. Morris. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, *Vol. 98, 2010.*

By Katherine Shonk, Editor, *Negotiation Briefings*.

First published in the May 2010 issue of *Negotiation Briefings*.

Dear Negotiation Coach: Negotiating the Gender Gap

Question:

I recently figured out that I am one of the lowest-paid people at my level in my organization—even though I am one of the top performers. I am also one of the few women at my level. I think I should negotiate for a compensation increase during my upcoming performance review. I negotiate all the time for my company and I love it, but I feel really uncomfortable about negotiating this raise for myself. Any advice?

Answer

It's quite reasonable for women to feel hesitant about negotiating on their own behalf. Negotiating in an assertive, self-interested way contradicts the feminine stereotype of women as selfless caregivers, and the social costs of contradicting this stereotype can be significant.

For instance, Linda Babcock of Carnegie Mellon University, Lei Lai of Vanderbilt University, and I found in our research that evaluators perceived women who negotiated for higher compensation to be significantly more demanding and less "nice" than those who didn't ask for what they wanted. Consequently, the evaluators were less inclined to work with the women who negotiated. This social cost is substantially greater for women than for men. Yet when women are advocating on behalf of others, the social cost evaporates, research by Emily Amanatullah of the University of Texas at Austin and Michael Morris of Columbia University has shown.

With these findings in mind, I suggest that you adopt two goals in your upcoming negotiation: (1) to get your compensation request granted, and (2) to make a positive impression. The latter goal is important because if your negotiating behavior undermines your reputation, any economic gains could be overshadowed by the long-term career costs.

In addition, consider how you can make the most persuasive case for a raise. My research with Babcock suggests that even if you're angry, you should focus on communicating how much you enjoy your job, love advocating for the company,

and value working with your colleagues. Our research indicates that women can increase their salaries by using what we call relational accounts. Accounts are the explanations we use to persuade others to accept our behavior. In a compensation negotiation, a relational account conveys both the legitimacy of your request and your concern for organizational relationships.

Here are two types of relational accounts that worked in our research. In the first, the negotiator uses "we" language and explains that a supervisor suggested she make a compensation request, thus conveying that she is embedded in positive organizational relationships. In the second, the negotiator calls attention to her propensity to negotiate, identifying it as a key skill she brings to the company. When confronted with either of these strategies (as compared with a simple request for a raise), evaluators were more inclined to grant the compensation request and to work with the female negotiator in the future.

These scripts should help you brainstorm creative ways to justify your request in a manner that also signals your genuine concern for your company and your relationships with colleagues.

Here's how this might work. A senior executive recently recounted to me what happened when she found out for the second time that a male subordinate was being paid more than she was. She approached her superiors as if she were pointing out a mistake that she was confident they would want to resolve. "I know that the company would not want a subordinate to be paid more than a supervisor," she said. "I'm sure you agree that we should correct this." She got her raise.

By Hannah Riley Bowles, Associate Professor, Harvard Kennedy School.
First published in the August 2011 issue of *Negotiation Briefings*.

Women Negotiators and the Backlash Effect

Fearful of a backlash, women often avoid negotiating in an assertive manner, and with good reason. Women who negotiate assertively risk being passed over for jobs and promotions because they are viewed as socially unskilled and unlikable, research has found. By contrast, when women negotiate assertively on others' behalf rather than for themselves, observers tend to react much more positively to them.

By framing a negotiation in terms of its benefits to others, research suggests, women may be able to avoid the "likable versus competent" conundrum—that is, the tendency to be viewed as either likable *or* competent, but not both. In a new article in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Emily T. Amanatullah of the University of Texas at Austin and Catherine H. Tinsley of Georgetown University looked at the "backlash effect" against women negotiators more closely.

When behavior clashes with norms

In one experiment, Amanatullah and Tinsley presented college students with a hypothetical salary negotiation between a job candidate and a hiring manager. Study participants were less inclined to interact socially with women who advocated for themselves than with women who advocated for others during the negotiation scenario. The participants did not similarly penalize male negotiators who behaved assertively.

In two other experiments, participants viewed women who negotiated assertively for themselves as embodying stereotypically negative masculine traits, namely dominance, arrogance, and entitlement. In addition, participants punished women who negotiated for others in an accommodating (rather than assertive) manner and viewed them as weak, a stereotypically negative feminine trait.

It seems that when women violate social norms of traditional female behavior, they open themselves up to criticism. Yet when women negotiate assertively for others, they avoid backlash, apparently because they are fulfilling the feminine stereotype of being helpful to others.

Searching for solutions

The results suggest that women may face long-term social costs for negotiating assertively on their own behalf—and, for that matter, for not negotiating assertively for those they represent. Meanwhile, people appear to be much more tolerant when men violate typical expectations of male behavior (for example, by being accommodating).

Women may be able to overcome the threat of a backlash by framing their job negotiations in terms of how any gains would benefit others in addition to themselves. Managers who resist this type of accommodation might advocate for broader remedies. For example, organizations could adopt compensation systems that use objective performance criteria or peer evaluations to determine raises and promotions, thus diminishing the weight given to negotiations with individual employees, Amanatullah and Tinsley suggest.

By Katherine Shonk, Editor, *Negotiation Briefings*.
First published in the July 2012 issue of *Negotiation Briefings*.

The "Sandberg Effect": Why Women Are Asking for More

In early 2008, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg began thinking about hiring Sheryl Sandberg, a vice president at Google and a former chief of staff for the U.S. Department of the Treasury, as the social-media company's new chief operating officer. The two met several nights a week for almost two months to discuss Facebook's mission and future.

Finally, Zuckerberg made an offer. Sandberg felt it was fair. What's more, as she recounts in her recent bestseller, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (Knopf, 2013), she was "*dying* to accept the job." But her husband urged her not to take the first offer on the table.

Sandberg balked: What if, by playing hardball, she antagonized Zuckerberg?

She was on the verge of accepting when words from her brother-in-law stopped her in her tracks: "Damn it, Sheryl! Why are you going to make less than any man would make to do the same job?"

Newly motivated, Sandberg told Zuckerberg that she couldn't accept his offer. She noted that he was hiring her to run his deal teams. "This is the only time you and I will ever be on opposite sides of the table," Sandberg said, then laid out what she wanted. The next day, Zuckerberg came back to her with a significantly better offer.

Stories like this one from Sandberg's book, which is aimed at motivating women to aspire to leadership positions, appear to be striking a chord among women professionals. In fact, evidence suggests that women who typically pass up opportunities to negotiate on their own behalf at work have found a new role model—and justification—for more assertive behavior.

Why women haven't asked

In a chapter called "Success and Likeability" in Lean In, Sandberg sums up the catch-22 that confronts women professionals by citing a study by Frank Flynn (Columbia Business School) and Cameron Anderson (University of California, Berkeley). In the study, participants read a description of an outgoing, well-connected, and successful venture capitalist. Some participants were told that the person's name was Howard; others were told it was Heidi.

When asked to judge Howard/Heidi based on the identical descriptions, the participants perceived them to be equally competent. Yet while Howard was judged to be pleasant to work with, Heidi was judged to be selfish and an unappealing colleague.

This and other research suggests that we tend to respond more favorably to successful men than to successful women. Why? When men focus on their careers, they fulfill familiar stereotypes of men as driven, decisive providers. But when women demonstrate drive and determination in the workplace, they violate gender stereotypes of women as sensitive, communal caregivers.

Internalizing this dilemma, women correctly intuit that they will be punished—in the form of being disliked by their coworkers—for negotiating on their own behalf. As discussed in past *Negotiation* articles, research bears out this expectation. In one study, Harvard Kennedy School professor Hannah Riley Bowles and her colleagues found that participants were less willing to work with

women who negotiated for higher compensation and judged them to be less nice than women who didn't ask for more.

No surprise, then, that women negotiate much less often than men for higher salaries, promotions, and plum assignments: They fear a very real backlash against traditionally unfeminine behavior.

Beyond the backlash

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Sandberg's quest to empower women to advocate for themselves may already be having an impact in the workplace. In an article for the website BuzzFeed, Ben Smith writes that numerous women had mentioned Sandberg's name in salary negotiations with him and other editors just weeks after the book's publication. After negotiating a new role with Smith, one senior editor stood up to leave, then stopped herself and said, "Sheryl Sandberg would be disappointed in me if I didn't ask you for a raise."

The book and its ensuing publicity blitz "have emboldened some women to speak up more directly about compensation," *New York Times* editor Jill Abramson told Smith. Negotiation researcher Bowles says that numerous women have told her they feel newly energized to negotiate for higher compensation and other career goals after reading *Lean In*.

"Think personally, act communally"

Women can increase their salaries and make other job advances by using what Bowles and her colleagues refer to as *relational accounts*—explanations for requests that both seem legitimate and display a concern for organizational relationships. For example, when requesting a raise, a woman might explain that her team leader advised her to try to improve her compensation because it is low for her position.

Along these lines, Sandberg advises women negotiators to "think personally, act communally" when negotiating on their own behalf, being careful to substitute "we" for "I": "We had a great year" rather than "I had a great year."

Women might even use the persistent gender gap in pay as a communal argument. Sandberg says she advises women to explain that they are negotiating for a higher salary because women in general are often paid less than men. In

this case, women position themselves as showing concern for all women, not just themselves.

Bowles takes Sandberg's argument a step further, pointing out that *Lean In* itself has become a powerful argument for a raise or other job-related goal. By citing Sandberg, women reference a known authority and potentially strengthen the legitimacy of their arguments.

Sandberg also advises women negotiators to "combine niceness with insistence," a style that University of Michigan president Mary Sue Coleman calls "relentlessly pleasant." They can do so by expressing concern and appreciation, drawing on common interests, and approaching the negotiation as a problem-solving task.

Toward a less biased workplace

Much of Sandberg's advice aligns with broader negotiation theory, which finds that a cooperative approach is the surest path to understanding the other party and discovering new sources of value.

But why must women, and not men, bend over backward to appear likable and communal? Isn't that unfair? It is, Sandberg admits, but "adhering to biased rules and expectations" is still the clearest path to advancement for most women for the time being.

Here, too, there are signs of change. In addition to motivating women to ask for more, *Lean In* also appears to be encouraging managers—men and women alike—to look for gender bias in their hiring and promotion practices. Bowles knows of one male executive whose high-tech company was having difficulty recruiting women despite an eagerness to do so. After absorbing Sandberg's message, the executive carefully reviewed his company's recruitment materials and found numerous references (such as to the video game *StarCraft*) that suggested the company was a "boys' club." "He is changing that," says Bowles.

By Katherine Shonk, Editor, *Negotiation Briefings*.

First published in the July 2013 issue of *Negotiation Briefings*.

Dear Negotiation Coach: Pushing for Better Results

Question:

I often leave a negotiation feeling that I got less out of it than I could have, had I only pushed harder. Could this have anything to do with the fact that I am a woman?

Answer:

Many different factors affect our decisions in negotiation—but since you brought it up, let's focus on possible gender effects. It could be that you prefer not to push hard during negotiations because, consciously or not, you're trying to conform to the stereotypical expectation that women care more about others' outcomes than men do. Or it could be that you truly put your relationships with other parties first.

You might be able to get at the root of your behavior by thinking about whether you would have acted differently if you had negotiated anonymously—over the Internet, for example, where no one has to know your gender. Would you have pushed harder?

"Of course," you might say. "It's natural to care less about someone you don't know and who doesn't know you."

Now, imagine that you negotiated with a coworker through a one-way mirror: you can see the other party, but he or she can't see you. Would you still have pushed harder?

If your answer is no, then either you intrinsically care about your coworker's outcomes or you feel uncomfortable asking for what you want in competitive environments.

Research suggests that your gender could at least partially explain both of these tendencies. In a forthcoming special issue on gender in the *Negotiation Journal*, researchers Catherine Eckel, Angela C. M. de Oliveira, and Philip J. Grossman report that women do tend to be more generous with others than men, even in anonymous interactions; however, this gender difference is small. In the same issue, Muriel Niederle and Lise Vesterlund report that women tend to shy away from competition, particularly with men, whereas men are more likely to

embrace it. Socialization may contribute to this pattern. From an early age, girls are encouraged to be nice and empathetic, and boys are trained to be assertive.

What if you said that you would have pushed harder than usual in a negotiation with a coworker if your identity was anonymous? If so, you asked for more because you weren't worried about conforming to your coworker's expectations about your gender. Research suggests that this is the most likely cause of your behavior. Although women and men differ slightly in what they want from a negotiation, their beliefs about how they should act in a negotiation differ even more.

Both women and men are able to overcome stereotypical expectations through positive experiences that counteract such stereotypes, according to research by Kessely Hong of Harvard University. Try to find a low-risk environment, such as your home or office, where you can experiment with asking for more. Doing so may bolster your self-confidence for your next high-stakes negotiation. Once you are at the table, it sometimes helps to use a stereotypical style to make your case: Ask kindly but firmly.

By Iris Bohnet, Professor of Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.
First published in the August 2008 issue of *Negotiation Briefings*.

Women Negotiators: Focus on Power and Status

"The women are taking over," Senator John McCain joked several times during October meetings of a bipartisan Senate group working on a deal to end the government shutdown, the *New York Times* reports. Republican female senators Susan Collins, Lisa Murkowski, and Kelly Ayotte convened the 13-member group, which was roughly evenly split across gender lines despite the fact that women make up only 20% of the Senate.

IWomen senators took a leading role in building the deal framework that ended the standoff and averted a U.S. debt default. By contrast, negotiation research has found that women are often hesitant about initiating negotiations and achieve less than men at the bargaining table, at least when they are negotiating on their own behalf.

In addition to the fact that the women senators were negotiating on behalf of their constituents, there was a key difference between these women who negotiated during the shutdown crisis and the college and graduate students who typically participate in negotiation research studies: their power and status. This difference prompts the question of whether power and status could enhance women's performance in negotiation. Two new studies published in the journal *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research* suggest the answer may be yes.

A powerful prime

Women may be less likely than men to advocate for themselves via negotiation, but they perform at least as well as men when they are negotiating on behalf of others, such as their subordinates, research has found. These differences in how men and women negotiate are often attributed to gender differences in socialization. Boys are generally raised to be assertive and self-focused, traits that serve grown men well when it comes time to forge a professional path. By contrast, girls are typically socialized to be communal and nurturing—traits that clash with the motivation to claim value for oneself in negotiation.

Given that a sense of power has been found to trigger personality traits such as dominance and assertiveness, researchers Alain P. C. I. Hong and Per J. van der Wijst of Tilburg University in the Netherlands conducted an experiment to determine whether encouraging women to feel powerful would lead them to be more competitive and achieve better outcomes for themselves in a subsequent negotiation.

The Dutch university students who participated in the study each engaged in a negotiation simulation with researcher Hong, who posed as a participant. Before negotiating, some participants were primed to feel powerful by recalling and writing about an incident from their lives in which they had power over one or more people. By contrast, those in the control condition were simply asked to write about how they usually spend their evenings.

During the negotiations that followed, Hong, playing the role of home seller, asked each participant, playing a home buyer, to make a first price offer for his house. Hong then drove a hard bargain, challenging each offer the participants

made and the rationales behind them. The negotiation concluded when the participants made their final offers.

The results showed that women who were primed to feel powerful made much more aggressive first offers and negotiated better outcomes for themselves than the women in the control condition did. The performance of the high-power women matched that of men in both conditions. Men reached similar outcomes whether or not they were primed to feel powerful.

The results suggest that women (but not men) receive a real psychological lift from feeling powerful that motivates them to negotiate more forcefully for themselves, at least in distributive negotiations where parties are haggling over a single issue, such as price. The findings imply that women in low-power positions may be able to improve their negotiation performance simply by reflecting on a time when they had more power or even, research by Harvard Business School professor Amy Cuddy suggests, striking powerful, expansive poses prior to negotiation.

Beyond the backlash

A sense of power may enable women to negotiate more assertively, but what happens next? Past negotiation research has found that women (but not men) who initiate negotiations over their compensation suffer a backlash: People are less willing to work with them than with women who don't ask for more money, Hannah Riley Bowles of the Harvard Kennedy School, Linda Babcock of Carnegie Mellon University, and Lei Lai of Tulane University found in one study. Women are often reluctant to advocate for themselves at work because they anticipate such a backlash.

Researchers have speculated that women trigger a backlash when they behave contrary to stereotypes of women as accommodating and communal. In a new study, professors Emily T. Amanatullah of the University of Texas at Austin and Catherine H. Tinsley of Georgetown University examine an alternative explanation for the backlash effect—namely, the low status often ascribed to women—and find that it can be overcome.

Consider that traditionally, women have held lower-status positions in society relative to men, as reflected in job titles and earnings. Consequently, when

people lack information about a woman's status, they tend to assume it is relatively low. When women of presumed low status behave as if their status is high, people are likely to react negatively and punish them, Amanatullah and Tinsley theorized.

In their first experiment, the researchers asked participants to imagine that they were a hotel manager dealing with an event planner named Chris. Chris asked to cancel some rooms and receive a refund soon before an event, a favor that would violate the hotel's policy. Participants were asked whether they would grant the request or not. Chris was presented as either a man or a woman, and as having low status ("newly hired junior officer") or high status ("executive vice president").

Chris was least likely to get the refund when she was a low-status female; she suffered a financial backlash for asking for the favor. By contrast, high-status female Chris was significantly more likely to receive the favor, as were men in both status conditions. (Male low-status Chris did not experience a backlash.)

In a similar, second experiment, Amanatullah and Tinsley found that participants viewed the request of a low-status woman—but not that of a low-status man—to be illegitimate, leading to a wave of negative reactions: In addition to having her financial request rejected, the woman was deemed undesirable as a potential colleague, friend, and leader. By contrast, participants viewed high-status women's requests to be legitimate and did not penalize them on any of these dimensions.

Past research concluded that all women risk a backlash when advocating for themselves in negotiation. By contrast, the results of this study suggest that high-status women may be immune to this effect. Therefore, women may benefit from

4 other ways to help women negotiators advance

1. Focus on skills. Women may be able to gain confidence and overcome insidious stereotypes by viewing negotiation skill as something that can be improved through practice—which it is—rather than as a stable personality trait.

2. Emphasize communal skills. When advocating for themselves, women can avoid a backlash by stressing that they will negotiate just as assertively for the organization, according to negotiation researchers Hannah Riley Bowles and Linda Babcock.

3. Open doors. Organizations should actively connect women negotiators with high-status colleagues to help them access career opportunities that previously were closed to them.

4. Increase objectivity. To lessen gender bias in their organizations, managers can institute salary benchmarks based on objective performance measures.

signaling high status when initiating and engaging in negotiations. Those who lack an impressive title may be able to communicate status by displaying awards, referring to their most impressive credentials, and associating with high-level colleagues, Amanatullah and Tinsley suggest.

Overall, the results of the studies described here imply that women negotiators can claim more value by reflecting on past experiences with power and communicating high status.

Resources:

"Women in Negotiation: Effects of Gender and Power on Negotiation Behavior," by Alain P. C. I. Hong and Per J. van der Wijst. Negotiation and Conflict Management Research, *2013.*

"Ask and Ye Shall Receive? How Gender and Status Moderate Negotiation Success," by Emily T. Amanatullah and Catherine H. Tinsley. Negotiation and Conflict Management Research, *2013.*

By Katherine Shonk, Editor, *Negotiation Briefings*.

First published in the January 2014 issue of *Negotiation Briefings*.

Dear Negotiation Coach: A Closer Look at the Gender Gap

Question:

I recently became the chief talent officer in my firm. I've identified that few women are advancing from midlevel to senior leadership positions, and an internal audit showed that female managers tend to earn less than male managers even when in similar positions. The men don't seem to have trouble negotiating for what they want, and I think that's why they get ahead faster and make more money. How can I help our female employees become better negotiators?

Answer:

Before you conclude that the women are less skilled negotiators than the men, consider the following three questions, which could help you better understand what job negotiations are like for men and women in your organization.

1. Do women and men have the same information about what is negotiable?

In the workplace, some information about negotiable issues may be available only through informal conversations with friends and mentors. Research on social networks in organizations by Herminia Ibarra of the international business school INSEAD and Daniel Brass of the University of Kentucky indicates that

women tend to be less connected to the men in their organizations than their male colleagues are, particularly in male-dominated organizations. If women are less connected than men to the senior decision makers in your firm (who are apparently mostly men), then women may have fewer opportunities to learn about career opportunities and to get advice on what's negotiable.

2. Do men and women perceive the same risks and benefits from job negotiations? Research shows that the social risks of negotiating for higher pay are greater for women than for men, especially when the decision makers are male. I found in research with Linda Babcock of Carnegie Mellon University and Lei Lai of Tulane University that decision makers were significantly less willing to work with a female candidate who asked for higher compensation than with a woman who passed up the same opportunity to negotiate. How can women overcome this hurdle? Babcock and I found that a woman needs to both legitimize her negotiating behavior and communicate that she cares about her work relationships, for example, by explaining that her team leader suggested that she ask about her compensation.

3. Does your organization help employees negotiate their work-life dilemmas? For employees with caregiving responsibilities, agreements reached with employers must be ratified at home. Because women tend to assume a greater share of domestic responsibilities than men (even in dual-career households), their workplace negotiations tend to be more constrained than men's by their home life. Employers can collaborate with employees to find mutually beneficial solutions to work-life conflicts. Flexible work schedules, for example, bring benefits both to the firm (greater employee satisfaction) and the household (availability at critical times).

In sum, while negotiation training can be invaluable, creating an environment in which all employees feel encouraged to negotiate career opportunities is also likely to enhance your firm's ability to retain and promote its talent.

By Hannah Riley Bowles, Associate Professor, Harvard Kennedy School.
First published in the December 2008 issue of *Negotiation Briefings*.

Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers

Many CEOs who make gender diversity a priority—by setting aspirational goals for the proportion of women in leadership roles, insisting on diverse slates of candidates for senior positions, and developing mentoring and training programs—are frustrated. They and their companies spend time, money, and good intentions on efforts to build a more robust pipeline of upwardly mobile women, and then not much happens.

The problem with these leaders' approaches is that they don't address the often fragile process of coming to see oneself, and to be seen by others, as a leader. Becoming a leader involves much more than being put in a leadership role, acquiring new skills, and adapting one's style to the requirements of that role. It involves a fundamental identity shift. Organizations inadvertently undermine this process when they advise women to proactively seek leadership roles without also addressing policies and practices that communicate a mismatch between how women are seen and the qualities and experiences people tend to associate with leaders.

A significant body of research (see "Further Reading") shows that for women, the subtle gender bias that persists in organizations and in society disrupts the learning cycle at the heart of becoming a leader. This research also points to some steps that companies can take in order to rectify the situation. It's not enough to identify and instill the "right" skills and competencies as if in a social vacuum. The context must support a woman's motivation to lead and also increase the likelihood that others will recognize and encourage her efforts—even when she doesn't look or behave like the current generation of senior executives.

The solutions to the pipeline problem are very different from what companies currently employ. Traditional high-potential, mentoring, and leadership education programs are necessary but not sufficient. Our research, teaching, and consulting reveal three additional actions companies can take to improve the chances that women will gain a sense of themselves as leaders, be recognized as such, and ultimately succeed. (This article expands on our paper "Taking

Gender into Account: Theory and Design for Women's Leadership Development Programs," *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, September 2011.)

Becoming a Leader

People become leaders by *internalizing a leadership identity and developing a sense of purpose*. Internalizing a sense of oneself as a leader is an iterative process. A person asserts leadership by taking purposeful action—such as convening a meeting to revive a dormant project. Others affirm or resist the action, thus encouraging or discouraging subsequent assertions. These interactions inform the person's sense of self as a leader and communicate how others view his or her fitness for the role.

As a person's leadership capabilities grow and opportunities to demonstrate them expand, high-profile, challenging assignments and other organizational endorsements become more likely. Such affirmation gives the person the fortitude to step outside a comfort zone and experiment with unfamiliar behaviors and new ways of exercising leadership. An absence of affirmation, however, diminishes self-confidence and discourages him or her from seeking developmental opportunities or experimenting. Leadership identity, which begins as a tentative, peripheral aspect of the self, eventually withers away, along with opportunities to grow through new assignments and real achievements. Over time, an aspiring leader acquires a reputation as having—or not having—high potential.

The story of an investment banker we'll call Amanda is illustrative. Amanda's career stalled when she was in her thirties. Her problem, she was told, was that she lacked "presence" with clients (who were mostly older men) and was not sufficiently outspoken in meetings. Her career prospects looked bleak. But both her reputation and her confidence grew when she was assigned to work with two clients whose CFOs happened to be women. These women appreciated Amanda's smarts and the skillful way she handled their needs and concerns. Each in her own way started taking the initiative to raise Amanda's profile. One demanded that she be present at all key meetings, and the other refused to speak to anyone but Amanda when she called—actions that enhanced Amanda's credibility within her firm. "In our industry," Amanda explains, "having the key client relationship is everything." Her peers and supervisors began to see her not

just as a competent project manager but as a trusted client adviser—an important prerequisite for promotion. These relationships, both internal and external, gave Amanda the confidence boost she needed to generate ideas and express them forthrightly, whether to colleagues or to clients. Her supervisors happily concluded that Amanda had finally shed her "meek and mild-mannered" former self and "stepped up" to leadership.

Effective leaders develop a sense of purpose by pursuing goals that align with their personal values and advance the collective good. This allows them to look beyond the status quo to what is possible and gives them a compelling reason to take action despite personal fears and insecurities. Such leaders are seen as authentic and trustworthy because they are willing to take risks in the service of shared goals. By connecting others to a larger purpose, they inspire commitment, boost resolve, and help colleagues find deeper meaning in their work.

Integrating leadership into one's core identity is particularly challenging for women, who must establish credibility in a culture that is deeply conflicted about whether, when, and how they should exercise authority. Practices that equate leadership with behaviors considered more common in men suggest that women are simply not cut out to be leaders. Furthermore, the human tendency to gravitate to people like oneself leads powerful men to sponsor and advocate for other men when leadership opportunities arise. As Amanda's story illustrates, women's leadership potential sometimes shows in less conventional ways—being responsive to clients' needs, for example, rather than boldly asserting a point of view—and sometimes it takes powerful women to recognize that potential. But powerful women are scarce.

Despite a lack of discriminatory intent, subtle, "second-generation" forms of workplace gender bias can obstruct the leadership identity development of a company's entire population of women. (See the sidebar "What Is Second-Generation Gender Bias?") The resulting underrepresentation of women in top positions reinforces entrenched beliefs, prompts and supports men's bids for leadership, and thus maintains the status quo.

The three actions we suggest to support women's access to leadership positions are (1) educate women and men about second-generation gender bias,

(2) create safe "identity workspaces" to support transitions to bigger roles, and (3) anchor women's development efforts in a sense of leadership purpose rather than in how women are perceived. These actions will give women insight into themselves and their organizations, enabling them to more effectively chart a course to leadership.

Educate Everyone About Second-Generation Gender Bias

For women. More than 25 years ago the social psychologist Faye Crosby stumbled on a surprising phenomenon: Most women are unaware of having personally been victims of gender discrimination and deny it *even when it is objectively true and they see that women in general experience it*.

Many women have worked hard to take gender out of the equation—to simply be recognized for their skills and talents. Moreover, the existence of gender bias in organizational policies and practices may suggest that they have no power to determine their own success. When asked what might be holding women back in their organizations, they say:

"It's nothing overt. I just feel less of a connection, either positive or negative, with the guys I work with. So sometimes I seem to have difficulty getting traction for my ideas."

"I look around and see that my male colleagues have P&L responsibility and most of us are in staff roles. I was advised to make the move to a staff role after the birth of my second child. It would be easier, I was told. But now I recognize that there is no path back to the line."

"My firm has the very best intentions when it comes to women. But it seems every time a leadership role opens up, women are not on the slate. The claim is made that they just can't find women with the right skill set and experience."

These statements belie the notion that gender bias is absent from these women's work lives. Second-generation bias does not require an intent to exclude; nor does it necessarily produce direct, immediate harm to any individual. Rather, it creates a context—akin to "something in the water"—in which women fail to thrive or reach their full potential. Feeling less connected to one's male colleagues, being advised to take a staff role to accommodate family, finding oneself excluded

from consideration for key positions—all these situations reflect work structures and practices that put women at a disadvantage.

Without an understanding of second-generation bias, people are left with stereotypes to explain why women as a group have failed to achieve parity with men: If they can't reach the top, it is because they "don't ask," are "too nice," or simply "opt out." These messages tell women who have managed to succeed that they are exceptions and women who have experienced setbacks that it is their own fault for failing to be sufficiently aggressive or committed to the job.

We find that when women recognize the subtle and pervasive effects of second-generation bias, they feel empowered, not victimized, because they can take action to counter those effects. They can put themselves forward for leadership roles when they are qualified but have been overlooked. They can seek out sponsors and others to support and develop them in those roles. They can negotiate for work arrangements that fit both their lives and their organizations' performance requirements. Such understanding makes it easier for women to "lean in."

For women and men. Second-generation bias is embedded in stereotypes and organizational practices that can be hard to detect, but when people are made aware of it, they see possibilities for change. In our work with leadership development programs, we focus on a "small wins" approach to change. In one manufacturing company, a task force learned that leaders tended to hire and promote people, mainly men, whose backgrounds and careers resembled their own. They had good reasons for this behavior: Experienced engineers were hard to find, and time constraints pressured leaders to fill roles quickly. But after recognizing some of the hidden costs of this practice—high turnover, difficulty attracting women to the company, and a lack of diversity to match that of customers—the company began to experiment with small wins. For example, some executives made a commitment to review the job criteria for leadership roles. One male leader said, "We write the job descriptions—the list of capabilities—for our ideal candidates. We know that the men will nominate themselves even if they don't meet all the requirements; the women would hold back. Now we look for the capabilities that are needed in the role, not some

unrealistic ideal. We have hired more women in these roles, and our quality has not suffered in the least."

In another case, participants in a leadership development program noticed that men seemed to be given more strategic roles, whereas women were assigned more operational ones, signaling that they had lower potential. The participants proposed that the company provide clear criteria for developmental assignments, be transparent about how high potential was evaluated, and give direction as to what experiences best increased a person's potential. Those actions put more women in leadership roles.

Create Safe "Identity Workspaces"

In the upper tiers of organizations, women become increasingly scarce, which heightens the visibility and scrutiny of those near the top, who may become risk-averse and overly focused on details and lose their sense of purpose. (In general, people are less apt to try out unfamiliar behaviors or roles if they feel threatened.) Thus a safe space for learning, experimentation, and community is critical in leadership development programs for women.

Consider performance feedback, which is necessary for growth and advancement but full of trip wires for women. In many organizations 360-degree feedback is a basic tool for deepening self-knowledge and increasing awareness of one's impact on others—skills that are part and parcel of leadership development. But gender stereotypes may color evaluators' perceptions, subjecting women to double binds and double standards. Research has amply demonstrated that accomplished, high-potential women who are evaluated as competent managers often fail the likability test, whereas competence and likability tend to go hand in hand for similarly accomplished men. We see this phenomenon in our own research and practice. Supervisors routinely give high-performing women some version of the message "You need to trim your sharp elbows." Likewise, we find that participants in women's leadership development programs often receive high ratings on task-related dimensions, such as "exceeds goals," "acts decisively in the face of uncertainty," and "is not afraid to make decisions that may be unpopular," but low ratings on relational ones, such as "takes others' viewpoints

into account" and "uses feedback to learn from her mistakes." We also frequently encounter women whose performance feedback seems contradictory: Some are told they need to "be tougher and hold people accountable" but also to "not set expectations so high," to "say no more often" but also to "be more visible," to "be more decisive" but also to "be more collaborative."

Creating a safe setting—a coaching relationship, a women's leadership program, a support group of peers—in which women can interpret these messages is critical to their leadership identity development. Companies should encourage them to build communities in which similarly positioned women can discuss their feedback, compare notes, and emotionally support one another's learning. Identifying common experiences increases women's willingness to talk openly, take risks, and be vulnerable without fearing that others will misunderstand or judge them. These connections are especially important when women are discussing sensitive topics such as gender bias or reflecting on their personal leadership challenges, which can easily threaten identity and prompt them to resist any critical feedback they may receive. When they are grounded in candid assessments of the cultural, organizational, and individual factors shaping them, women can construct coherent narratives about who they are and who they want to become.

The Importance of Leadership Purpose

In a recent interview with members of Hillary Clinton's press corps, a veteran reporter noted, "The story is never what she says, as much as we want it to be. The story is always how she looked when she said it." Clinton says she doesn't fight it anymore; she just focuses on getting the job done.

How women are perceived—how they dress, how they talk, their "executive presence," their capacity to "fill a room," and their leadership style—has been the focus of many efforts to get more of them to the top. Voice coaches, image consultants, public-speaking instructors, and branding experts find the demand for their services growing. The premise is that women have not been socialized to compete successfully in the world of men, so they must be taught the skills and styles their male counterparts acquire as a matter of course.

To manage the competence-likability trade-off—the seeming choice between being respected and being liked—women are taught to downplay femininity, or to soften a hard-charging style, or to try to strike a perfect balance between the two. But the time and energy spent on managing these perceptions can ultimately be self-defeating. Overinvestment in one's image diminishes the emotional and motivational resources available for larger purposes. People who focus on how others perceive them are less clear about their goals, less open to learning from failure, and less capable of self-regulation.

Anchoring in purpose enables women to redirect their attention toward shared goals and to consider who they need to be and what they need to learn in order to achieve those goals. Instead of defining themselves in relation to gender stereotypes—whether rejecting stereotypically masculine approaches because they feel inauthentic or rejecting stereotypically feminine ones for fear that they convey incompetence—female leaders can focus on behaving in ways that advance the purposes for which they stand.

Focusing on purpose can also lead women to take up activities that are critical to their success, such as networking. Connections rarely come to them as a matter of course, so they have to be proactive in developing ties; but we also find that many women avoid networking because they see it as inauthentic—as developing relationships that are merely transactional and feel too instrumental—or because it brings to mind activities (the proverbial golf game, for example) in which they have no interest or for which they have no time, given their responsibilities beyond work. Yet when they see it as a means to a larger purpose, such as developing new business to advance their vision for the company, they are more comfortable engaging in it.

Learning how to be an effective leader is like learning any complex skill: It rarely comes naturally and usually takes a lot of practice. Successful transitions into senior management roles involve shedding previously effective professional identities and developing new, more fitting ones. Yet people often feel ambivalent about leaving the comfort of roles in which they have excelled, because doing so means moving toward an uncertain outcome.

Second-generation gender bias can make these transitions more challenging for women, and focusing exclusively on acquiring new skills isn't sufficient; the learning must be accompanied by a growing sense of identity as a leader. That's why greater understanding of second-generation bias, safe spaces for leadership identity development, and encouraging women to anchor in their leadership purpose will get better results than the paths most organizations currently pursue.

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