



Q

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?

A

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.

Hannah Riley Bowles
Associate Professor
Harvard Kennedy School

Send a question to our Negotiation Coach

By e-mail
negotiation@law.harvard.edu
(Please write “Q and A”
in the subject line.)

By mail
Negotiation, Program on Negotiation
Harvard Law School
1563 Massachusetts Avenue,
513 Pound Hall
Cambridge, MA 02138-2903

