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Four Negotiating Mistakes That Women Often Make



by Lee E. Miller and Jessica Miller CareerJournal.com

Introduction

Davia Temin, president of Temin & Co. and former head of corporate marketing for General Electric Capital Service, remembers when she realized "almost everything is negotiable if you see it that way." When she finished business school, she began working as assistant to the director of development at Columbia Business School. She saw the offer as a choice, not a negotiation: You either took the job or you didn't. It never crossed her mind that she could negotiate the offer.

While working at Columbia, however, she learned something that changed her view of the world. She had always assumed that applicants to a business school either were or weren't accepted, period. If you weren't accepted, you applied to another business school or did something else.

But at Columbia, some students who were rejected sought out the director of admissions and asked what they could do to change her mind. To Ms. Temin's amazement, the director didn't send them away. She told them she'd admit them if they took four semesters of advanced calculus and statistics and got an "A" in each. A handful of students actually met that goal and were admitted. At that point Ms. Temin realized that "way more things" were negotiable than she had previously thought.

Some women are uncomfortable with the word negotiating. Yet every day you negotiate, even though you don't necessarily think about it that way. You negotiate with your husband about who will make breakfast for the kids; with friends about what movie to see; and with your children about curfews, allowances and chores. You also bargain when buying a car, selling a house or getting a divorce. In business, being a good negotiator is critical to success.

While some people have more natural ability than others, no one is born a great negotiator. Negotiating is a skill that has to be learned. Many women who think they aren't good negotiators simply have never been taught how.

Correcting Missteps

Even powerful and successful women have made negotiating mistakes. We wanted to know what they learned from them. We talked with top women executives in a range of industries to discover the most common mistakes

women make when bargaining. Four of these missteps, which follow, are relatively easy to correct once you realize that you're making them.

Mistake No. 1. Adopting a negotiating style that doesn't reflect who you are.

Solution: Be yourself, but be the best self you can be. Women often think that a good negotiator is tough, screams, knows all the tricks and can outsmart her opponent. So if they're seeking to become successful negotiators, they try to be this way. It usually doesn't work. Why? In the first place, this competitive negotiating style doesn't help the men who try it either. Moreover, most women simply aren't comfortable with this style, preferring a collaborative negotiating style instead.

Because many women haven't learned that there are other successful negotiating styles, they avoid negotiating or think they don't have an aptitude for it. To be successful, however, you must employ a negotiating style with which you're comfortable. How you negotiate needs to reflect who you are. You must be authentic or you'll lose all credibility.

People see through you if you try to be something you aren't. If you're soft-spoken, you can be a soft-spoken negotiator and still take strong positions. You can disagree politely. You can provide reasons for seeing things differently. You can offer alternatives, but you must be able to disagree rather than give in to something that's contrary to your interests. However, you can be flexible in how you satisfy those interests. This is what we call being "quietly firm." It's very powerful. When you raise your voice, even just a little, people will notice. They'll know that you're serious.

Mistake No. 2. Not seeing a situation as an opportunity to negotiate.

Solution: Ask -- almost everything is negotiable if you see it that way. Like Ms. Temin, many women don't recognize that opportunities to negotiate exist in almost every interaction. They look at situations in terms of decisions that have to be made, rather than opportunities to negotiate. Often this is because women fail to realize that they don't have to simply accept or reject what's being offered. Rather they have the option of asking for something different.

If you assume everything is negotiable, you'll find that it's true. Ordinarily, a situation doesn't preclude you from negotiating. Instead, it dictates how you need to go about trying to get what you want. Successful women recognize that almost everything is negotiable, although you don't want to negotiate everything. You decide what's worth negotiating.

One of the strengths women bring to negotiating is their ability to develop relationships. Used properly, relationships can facilitate effective negotiating. It's always harder for someone to say no if they know and like you. By the same token, women sometimes don't ask for things they want, out of fear of damaging the relationship. This fear can hold women back and keep them from

getting what they would like. We call this the "empathy trap." To avoid it, realize it almost never hurts to ask. While you may not get everything you ask for, you'll be amazed at how often you get most of what you want. Remember, you can't get something if you don't ask for it.

Mistake No. 3: Not being willing to say no.

Solution: Don't be afraid to use the "no" word. Women often have difficulty saying no, particularly when they're dealing with someone they care about. Because women place a high value on relationships, they're more hesitant about saying no. They want to keep everyone happy. As Patricia Farrell, author of "Be Your Own Therapist" (McGraw Hill, 2002), told us: "[Women] have a difficult time believing that if there's a negative outcome, it won't have a negative effect on the relationship." But being able to say no is sometimes critical when you're negotiating. No is the most powerful word in negotiating. Sometimes it's necessary to say no before you can get to yes. Successful negotiators have learned when and how to say no.

You don't have to say no loudly or aggressively. If, however, an offer is less than you think it should be, you need to point that out politely but firmly. If the other party can't -- or won't -- improve the offer, you need to be willing to walk away. If you have prepared properly for the negotiations, you'll know the other options you have in case this discussion doesn't work out the way you had envisioned. Knowing your bottom line and being willing to say no to something that doesn't meet your needs often results in the other party finding a way to satisfy your needs, as long as you're flexible and willing to work with them.

Saying no isn't personal. It's simply a way to exchange information. Looked at that way, saying no becomes a lot easier as does accepting it as a response from someone with whom you're negotiating.

Mistake No. 4: Not negotiating well when it's for yourself.

Solution: Negotiate for yourself as if you were negotiating for someone else. Both men and women find it difficult to negotiate for themselves, but women often have an even harder time. Even women who are exceptional negotiators and have no trouble negotiating on behalf of their organizations have a difficult time when it comes to negotiating for themselves. Many women were raised to believe that it's selfish to ask for things for themselves. Sometimes just recognizing that you have a tendency to put others' needs ahead of your own is enough to change your behavior. If you do your homework, you'll know what's fair and reasonable to request. Don't settle for less.

One helpful technique is to visualize yourself as negotiating for someone else. Think about what you would do if you were advocating on behalf of a person whom you care about. Then approach your personal negotiations similarly. Another technique that can help you negotiate more effectively for yourself is

"self talk." Before you begin, give yourself a little pep talk. Go over all the reasons why you deserve what you're requesting. You are your toughest audience. Once you convince yourself, you'll have no trouble convincing everyone else.

Learning to negotiate will empower you. You'll decide what to agree to and what you aren't willing to accept. You'll be able to shape situations to ensure that your needs are satisfied. Negotiating well will help you to get what you want, not only in business but in your personal life as well. Once you master the art of negotiating, you'll soon recognize that the only real limits to what you can achieve are those you place on yourself.

-- Mr. Miller is a speaker, corporate trainer and executive coach and managing director of NegotiationPlus.com. He's author of "Get More Money on Your Next Job" (McGraw-Hill Trade, 1997). Ms. Miller is a commercial real-estate executive, and Mr. Miller's daughter. This article is adapted from their book, "A Woman's Guide to Successful Negotiating" (McGraw-Hill Trade, 2002).

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