

# Ask Annie

## How women can be better negotiators

**FORTUNE**

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PriceWaterhouseCoopers has launched a huge training program to develop its female employees' negotiation skills. The first step: Getting women comfortable with sitting at the table.

By [Anne Fisher](#), contributor

FORTUNE -- Dear Annie: I've been following the [recent debate](#) about whether women need to improve their negotiating skills and, if so, how. This interests me because I suspect that, if I want to take my career to the next level, I'm going to have to start asking for more of what I believe I've earned, rather than just accepting whatever comes along. Can you recommend any resources for learning to be a better negotiator? — *Alison in Atlanta*

Dear Alison: This is indeed a hot topic lately, and for good reason. Lee Miller, co-author (with his daughter, real estate executive Jessica Miller) of a new book called *A Woman's Guide to Successful Negotiating*, believes that a reluctance to haggle is holding many women back.

"It doesn't have to be that way," says Miller, who teaches courses on negotiation at Columbia Business School. His firm, [NegotiationPlus](#), counts among its coaching clients American Express (AXP), Bank of America (BAC), Dell (DELL) and the National Football League.

Although women now earn, on average, 20% less than men in the same jobs, Miller says, "for some women who have learned to negotiate, that statistic has been completely reversed." He points to recent U.S. Census data showing that single women aged 22 to 30 in major metropolitan areas now earn 8% more than their male peers.

"The irony is that women have been socialized in certain ways that make them quite good negotiators, if you can get them to do it," observes Jennifer Allyn, a managing director at PriceWaterhouse Coopers. "The biggest hurdle is usually persuading them to try."

Copious academic research bears that out. Consider: When Carnegie-Mellon professor Linda Babcock asked men and women to choose from a list of metaphors to describe how they feel about the prospect of negotiating, the men's top pick was "winning a ball game." The women's: "Going to the dentist."

Those vastly different perceptions help explain why, Babcock's research found, men negotiate four times more often than women do. "Men tend to see more situations as negotiable. They look for opportunities to negotiate," says Allyn. "Women, by contrast, often don't see opportunities that

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### About This Author



**Anne Fisher**  
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Anne Fisher has been writing "Ask Annie," a column on careers, for Fortune since 1996, helping readers navigate

booms, recessions, changing industries, and changing ideas about what's appropriate in the workplace (and beyond). Anne is the author of two books, *Wall Street Women* (Knopf, 1990) and *If My Career's on the Fast Track, Where Do I Get a Road Map?* (William Morrow, 2001). She also writes the "Executive Inbox" column on New York

are right in front of them."

In an attempt to close the gap, PriceWaterhouseCoopers launched a training course on negotiation and gender this spring, available online to all 15,000 of its female employees, and is conducting in-depth discussions on the topic at its offices across the U.S. for the rest of this year. A few highlights:

Practice asking. Making requests and proposing changes, a skill like any other, gets easier the more you do it. "Think of negotiating as an ongoing conversation, rather than just a big, rare event like asking for a raise," Allyn suggests. "If you practice on small stuff, like delegating day-to-day tasks or requesting a change in a deadline, you'll be more comfortable with the process."

Build your case by pretending you're asking on someone else's behalf. Harvard professor Hannah Riley Bowles found in her research that many women regard asking for anything for themselves as "greedy or selfish. But men have no such reservations," notes Allyn.

"So, when you're getting ready to make a request, imagine that you're doing so on behalf of your team or a colleague. How would you present the case for them? What supporting data would be most compelling?" Taking this more objective view can help you get out of your own way.

Aim high. Bear in mind that "in most negotiations, there is an expectation that where you start is not where you will end up," says Lee Miller. "If you ask for too little, you can be sure that's what you will get."

In the PriceWaterhouse Coopers course, Stacey Blake-Beard, a professor at Simmons College and an expert on networks and mentoring, tells an anecdote from early in her own career. While preparing to discuss the terms of a new position, she told her mentor she planned to ask for just two things. "No! No!," he said. "Here are 18 things you should insist on. You'll probably get nine of them."

Blake-Beard balked at the list he gave her, which covered everything from the size of her office to the location of her parking space to the number of students in her classes. But she made all 18 requests anyway. She got nine.

Expand your network. Blake-Beard's story illustrates an important point, Allyn says: "You don't have to go it alone." Brainstorming with people you trust and getting their advice can make you a far more effective negotiator. "Investing in relationships is one of the most important long-term negotiation strategies there is."

One common theme emphasized in both PriceWaterhouse Cooper's course and the Millers' book is that many women's ingrained talent for empathy can be a double-edged sword.

"Women are always thinking of how the other side views the situation and what will make the other person happy," Allyn observes. "You can use that to your advantage in negotiations. The key is to connect what's good for you with what's good for the organization."

Or, as Lee Miller puts it, "Empathy is about understanding other people's needs, not necessarily about giving them what they want -- especially at the expense of getting what you want." Avoiding what he calls "the empathy trap" could, he believes, go a long way toward turning more women into powerhouse negotiators.

Talkback: Are you reluctant to ask for what you want or need at work? What negotiating strategy has worked best for you? Leave a comment below.

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KamaTimbrell, 06/27/2011 02:07 PM

Thanks Anne, that's interesting. I think it's unfortunate that women have to adopt a different style to be successful. Most of what I see on the subject seems to be along the lines of "X works for men, therefore women should do X," which always seems to miss the point that women who adopt "masculine" attribute are rarely rewarded socially, just as men who adopt "feminine" attributes are rarely rewarded socially.

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KamaTimbrell, 06/17/2011 03:52 PM

I think one that ought not be overlooked is the social cost to women who negotiate. Aren't there studies that show that women who ask for raises, promotions, insist on negotiating salary, benefits, are view negatively - even by other women - while men who do the same thing are viewed positively?

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AnneFisher, 06/17/2011 04:42 PM in reply to KamaTimbrell

Kama, there are indeed studies that show this, but the negative repercussions affect only women who adopt a "masculine" style of negotiating — which is why the PwC course and the books on this subject are all about developing women's ability to negotiate in a different, less confrontational, less ultimatum-driven style (which not only gets a better response but is likely to be more comfortable for women anyway). The cost to women who avoid negotiating...

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