



Women and Negotiation: Why Men Should Come to the Table

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AS A LAWYER, MEDIATOR AND CONSULTANT who has advised organizations on questions of gender balance, diversity and women's leadership, it is not surprising that *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever caught my attention. The book summarizes research around women's general reluctance to negotiate, as well as the challenges faced when they do.

Ms. Babcock is a professor of economics and the principal researcher, and Ms. Laschever is a writer based in the United States. While not an expert in this area of research, I have read much of the research about how men and women tend to operate differently at times, and my experience is usually consistent with that research.

The primary finding of *Women Don't Ask* is that women often get less because they ask for less. Not only do women aim lower, according to the research, but in many cases they don't ask at all. Why is that? Because women are less sure of what is negotiable and what would constitute a good deal. The research further indicates that, for women, the social costs of



negotiating seem much higher in many cases than the benefits. Women might have learned that to ask is to be argumentative, unpleasant or uncooperative, and so they might avoid negotiating.

It isn't that women don't negotiate. Ms. Laschever points out that women often negotiate on behalf of someone else.

In some contexts women are generally more effective negotiators than men, the authors note. They generally negotiate well with other women and with men who use a cooperative negotiation style, and in negotiations in which creative problem-solving or moving beyond "fixed pie" solutions are possible. Women have the advantage in these types of negotiations because

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they require communication, information sharing, and trust-building approaches – areas where women are generally more skilled than men. These win-win negotiations often create better relationships between parties, make execution easier, and contribute to better negotiations in the future.

Assuming these conclusions are correct (and my experience bears them out), three questions suggest themselves to me: (1) Who is responsible for these dynamics?, (2) Who is impacted by this?, and (3) What can I do about it?

Who is responsible for these dynamics?

According to these research findings, social forces (including childhood games, classroom conduct, and family roles) play a major part in the creation of these gender differences. These forces direct and reward women for focusing on others' needs, rather than their own desires. Social norms that define "appropriate" behavior for women discourage assertive self-interested tactics more commonly used by men in negotiation.

As a man, am I to blame for this? I think not. I do not create social forces although I certainly have a part in perpetuating them. This may seem obvious, but the answer to the responsibility question strongly influences how willing we are to engage. All of us – but particularly men – are more willing to engage in a constructive conversation if we are not at the same time shouldering the blame.

Who is impacted by this?

Is this something that affects only women, and therefore something that women alone must manage? No. I am affected by my colleagues' willingness and ability to negotiate, as well as my client's negotiation skills. I am affected by the effective negotiation (or lack thereof) of my wife, my sister and mother, and the other women in my life. I am impacted by the success and fulfillment enjoyed by my women friends, and by any unhappiness they experience as a result of unpleasant and unproductive negotiations.

This is not their issue; it is our issue.

What can I do about it?

I can do my best to promote the type of win-win negotiation that generally suits women best. Because this type of negotiation creates a positive impact on the parties' relationship, it is likely to be in my best interest to do that anyway. In doing so, I can make the "women's style of negotiation" more the norm than the exception. I can recognize what might add value and do more of it.

I can offer support for the women I know as they prepare for important negotiations, whether they be professional or personal. While I do not consider myself to be an expert negotiator, I might be able to provide ideas and suggestions in preparation for negotiation. I could also provide encouragement; if it is true that women back off because they might think that negotiating renders them uncooperative or argumentative, I can remind the women in my life that they are absolutely entitled to go for what they want in their

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business and personal dealings. I can support them in remembering that.

I could also invite the women in my life to read the new book by Ms. Babcock and Ms. Laschever, entitled [*Ask for It: How Women Can Use the Power of Negotiation to Get What They Really Want.*](#) This book is a how-to manual that offers women (and men) strategies and techniques for negotiating. It helps women and men recognize opportunities to negotiate, avoid the real or perceived social costs of asking, and ultimately have more of what they want. The four phases of negotiation are discussed, including: preparation (including deciding what we want and don't want – challenging personal assumptions in the process), research and discovery (to determine what is possible and realistic), pre-negotiation preparation (which involves deciding how high to aim and creating a strategic plan), and the negotiation itself. This book is a great resource.

Finally, I can continue to look for opportunities to support my clients, colleagues, friends and family as they identify their focus and take steps to realize their goals. For some of us, negotiation is challenging. For others, it is something else. We all have barriers. Books like these help identify their causes and offer solutions that will help us have more of what we want – whether it needs to be negotiated or not. ■

