

It Pays to Ask: Negotiating Conditions for Leadership Success

Introduction

It is still very much an open question about why women seem to plateau in the mid ranges of large organizations. Even though there is evidence that having women in top leadership roles benefits organizations,¹ their actual numbers are still disappointing.² The litany of explanations is familiar. Structural explanations, such as scarcity, an inadequate pipeline, and lack of line experience, have traditionally dominated executive thinking.³ In the popular press, it is often the women themselves who bear responsibility for their fates—choosing family over work, opting out of opportunities for leadership, and shying away from challenging jobs, competition, and power.⁴ While there is always some truth in these explanations, recently scholars have begun to look more closely at the complex interplay between organizational practices and cultures and how women confront and navigate through the different challenges they encounter in their leadership roles.⁵

On the organizational side of the ledger, research has shown that business and professional organizations often operate in ways that can place women at a disadvantage. Labeled second generation issues to distinguish them from overt discrimination and bias, certain structures, cultures, and norms of operating that appear natural and neutral on the surface can have differential effects on men and women.⁶ There are several ways in which this happens. For example, in professional services firms, patterns of work assignments can contribute to depth of expertise in subject matter and/or industry and exposure to critical partners and clients. Alternatively, assignment patterns can result in chaotic career trajectories that accomplish neither of these aims. In one firm, for example, assumptions about the longevity of female associates, along with the belief that these women would leave or opt for part-time work, meant that they were rather haphazardly assigned to client engagements. A progressive, strategic path is obviously more likely to lead to leadership than a haphazard path. Corporate cultures can also produce second generation issues that impact a leader's ability to lead. For example, in another corporation, people were expected to acquiesce when offered a leadership position, regardless of the circumstances. This norm of agreement had a differential impact on women because they were more likely than men to be assigned roles that neither fit with their career trajectories nor were at the level of the previous

incumbent. As these examples suggest, second generation issues mean that women often have to ask for and negotiate about things that men generally do not—good assignments, comparable titles, and/or credit for invisible work, among other issues.⁷

While few would argue that everybody needs to negotiate in order to be successful in today's workplace, second generation gender issues, like the ones described above, make it more important that women who aspire to leadership do negotiate, and do so effectively. However, the degree to which women negotiate in the workplace is subject to debate.⁸ Some suggest that women are less likely than their male counterparts to initiate negotiations over workplace matters, especially where compensation is concerned.⁹ Others suggest that it depends on the situation: for example, when subjects negotiate for themselves, when criteria, such as salary scales, are ambiguous, or when stereotypes are operative, sex differences are more likely to be observed to the detriment of women.¹⁰ The general conclusion is that women don't ask.¹¹

Our approach is different. Because we are interested in understanding more about the leadership gap, we wanted to look at negotiation in the context of leadership roles. It is in these situations of transitioning to new roles that all leaders need to negotiate conditions for their success.¹² Because of potential second generation gender issues, where a woman's authority and influence as a leader cannot necessarily be assumed,¹³ negotiating the conditions for success become even more important.

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Based on a recent qualitative study of 100 women who had taken up leadership roles in the previous three years, we identified a range of issues that seemed critical to women and to perceptions of women as leaders.¹⁴ We and the Simmons School of Management partnered with Hewlett-Packard to elaborate these findings with a larger sample of professional women to see how the results from the qualitative work would play out more generally. We surveyed 470 professional women who attended the Simmons School of Management Leadership Conference in April 2005. The survey had four major areas of inquiry, including:

1. When women take on leadership jobs, to what degree do they negotiate terms that position them for success?
2. What are the characteristics of the women who negotiate, and under what conditions do they do so?
3. What are the factors that influence a woman to accept (or reject) a leadership job, and how is this connected to what she sees as negotiable?
4. Finally, what are the connections between negotiating conditions and success, as measured in performance and potential?

Leaders from different industries and age groups were represented. Over three-quarters of the respondents held some kind of leadership position at the time of the survey. We defined

leadership to include a range of levels, from leading a task force or project team up to leading a business unit or an entire organization. Thirty percent of the women were senior executives leading companies, business units, and/or significant practice areas in

their firms. Fifty-four percent were middle managers, including women who managed programs and projects.¹⁵ The respondents were also interested in future leadership roles—76% would accept another leadership role if offered and only 21% had turned down previous leadership opportunities. Contrary to stories in the popular press, our sample did not shy away from leadership.¹⁶

Not only did these women embrace leadership, many sought challenging jobs and negotiated over the conditions that they believed were critical to success in those jobs. Additionally, those who negotiated were more likely than those who did not to have higher performance ratings, to be offered leader-

ship development opportunities, to be more satisfied with their jobs and with their organizations, and to anticipate that they would be offered additional leadership roles within the next year.

What Gets Negotiated and Why it is Important

Our qualitative research demonstrated that contrary to popular belief—that women fail to seize leadership opportunities or position themselves to succeed as leaders—the women in our study were savvy about what they needed to succeed and then asked for these things. For these women, that meant ensuring that their roles fit well with their skills, abilities, and levels of experience. It also meant that they had the wherewithal to deal with questions about their authority and legitimacy in their roles. Aware that they could be under the microscope to see whether they could deliver results, the women in our study negotiated for the resources, both financial and human, that they would need to create value for their organizations. They also sought support from other leaders and buy-in from their teams. These women believed that in order to position themselves to succeed, they had to ask for what they needed—they could not assume these things would be forthcoming.

Based on a 30-item scale that covered a gamut of negotiable issues from title and job description to resources, buy-in, and coalition building, we identified several major factors that described the kinds of issues that were negotiated when a respondent assumed her most recent leadership role.¹⁷ The percentages of respondents who reported negotiating on these factors are in parentheses.

- The *Fit and Support* (52%) factor involves negotiations over such things as title, job descriptions, key reporting relationships, and mutual expectations with a boss. This factor indicates the degree to which a person in a leadership role reported that she tried to clarify the structure and form of her role to fit her skills, abilities, and experiences.
- The *Key Functions* (47%) factor captures negotiating for areas of responsibility, such as control over incentives, compensation, and staffing. This factor indicates the degree to which a person negotiated to make the job more doable and to signal her authority and legitimacy to the organization.
- The *Strategic Positioning* (62%) factor captures items about introductions to the organization and team, support for an agenda, and the degree to which allies were cultivated. When leaders negotiate for strategic positioning, they are attempting to shape positive perceptions of themselves in their new roles. As one of the women interviewed mentioned, leaders do this because

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“impressions count—after three months, I want people to say, ‘Ann is okay.’”

- The *Resources* (84%) factor includes asking for more resources, linking results to resources, and engaging others as allies to help make the case for what is required to achieve results. We found in the earlier study that failing to negotiate for resources and instead assuming that you as the leader can “make do” is a common trap with often quite negative consequences.¹⁸

We created a measure called *Proclivity to Negotiate* to capture the degree to which women in the sample reported that they negotiated for resources, fit and support, strategic positioning, and key functions. Overall, 53% of the sample had a high proclivity to negotiate. This percentage compares quite favorably with other studies that suggest women do not negotiate.¹⁹ We found that proclivity to negotiate had payoffs in performance, potential, and satisfaction.

Performance is an important factor if we want to show the connection between negotiating what one needs to succeed and perceived success in a leadership role. Since the survey was composed of self-reports, measuring performance was tricky.²⁰ We created three measures of leadership performance. The first measure, *Job Performance*, is based on respondents’ most recent performance reviews. The second measure, *Potential Performance*, is based on whether respondents had been offered leadership development opportunities. The third measure, *Likelihood of being Offered a Leadership Job*, was based solely on the respondents’ own assessments, which could be inflated.

Leaders with a high proclivity to negotiate seem to gain a payoff from their actions (see Figure 1). Those who negotiated were more likely than those who did not negotiate to have higher performance ratings in their most recent performance reviews. They were also more likely to be seen as having

leadership potential and ability, as measured by their reports of being offered leadership development opportunities. Finally, most of those women with a high proclivity to negotiate expect to be offered another leadership opportunity within the next year.

Proclivity to negotiate is also related to other reported outcomes. Women who negotiate report being satisfied with their jobs (74% vs. 26% of those who don’t negotiate) and are less likely to consider leaving their companies (70% vs. 30%). So when women ask, it not only allows them to fulfill their own leadership aspirations, but also has implications (many with financial benefits) to their organizations in terms of motivation and turnover.

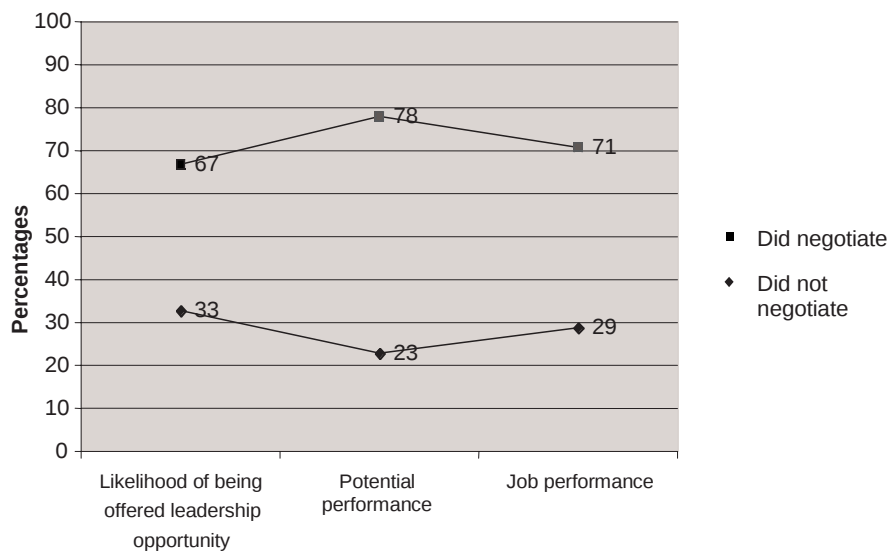
Who Negotiates and Under What Circumstances

Clearly, it pays to ask. What, then, helps us understand why some women ask and others do not? The following example is of a woman, Alice Adams, who asked.²¹

Alice, a broadcasting executive, was recruited to head up a major division of a media conglomerate. With over 15 years of leadership experience, she had recently been a division president in another media company. The offer appealed to her because it would involve her in a growing enterprise, one that needed new vision and leadership. For Alice, ironically, her major *non-negotiable* that needed to be tested, and worked out if possible, was the kind of relationship

she would have with her prospective boss, the CEO. As she said, she wanted a boss who was supportive but whose belief was, “I hire really good people and I get out of their way.” Alice wanted to be held accountable for results. To learn about the CEO and the company, Alice consulted with more than 15 people in the industry whom she knew and who knew the CEO. These meetings not only gave her insight into her potential boss, but also gave her ideas about what to negotiate to structure her role in such a way that she would have the autonomy she needed and the CEO’s support as

Figure 1. Proclivity to Negotiate and Performance



well. For Alice, the nature of their working relationship was critical, and so she negotiated with the CEO over that. They negotiated how she would be evaluated, how they would give each other feedback, and how the CEO would support her. She negotiated his support for hard decisions she knew she would have to make—downsizing in some areas, consolidating in others, and, critically, for the resources she would need in order to accomplish what she had promised.

Alice, according to our definition, had a proclivity to negotiate. In order to understand which factors are most important in explaining whether a woman will negotiate, we used Structural Equation Modeling. The model revealed an interesting pattern (see Figure 2): A woman is more likely to negotiate conditions for taking a leadership job if she has diagnosed and anticipated that 1) her new job will not be an easy one, and 2) if this kind of challenge in a new role appeals to her. A woman is also more likely to negotiate if she has a network of advisors she can consult about the need to negotiate and what she should negotiate about, and if she is clear about which factors—for example, support from the top and resources—will be important to her success.

Experience. Not surprisingly, women who had held more leadership positions in their professional careers were more likely to negotiate (72% negotiated) than those who did not have as much leadership experience (28%). Experience is likely to help a woman recognize the kinds of situations in which negotiating is a possibility. Experience probably also increases her confidence in her ability to negotiate for what she needs. But leadership experience does not directly explain proclivity to negotiate. Rather, an experienced leader like Alice knows that she needs to negotiate, and so uses her experience to diagnose and analyze the situation she is considering. Her experience helps her know what questions to ask when transitioning into a new leadership role.

Diagnosing her situation. The most important factor in predicting whether a woman will negotiate the terms of a leadership role is whether she is proactive in learning about the

challenges and opportunities the role presents. A woman who 1) digs deep to figure out where her supporters are and where there might be resistance, 2) tries to assess the commitment of a boss and other key stakeholders, and 3) is curious about what people in the organization think and feel about having her in the role gathers the type of information that will help her negotiate. This kind of diagnosis gives her insight into possible challenges she could face and, therefore, ideas about what she needs to negotiate in order to meet them.

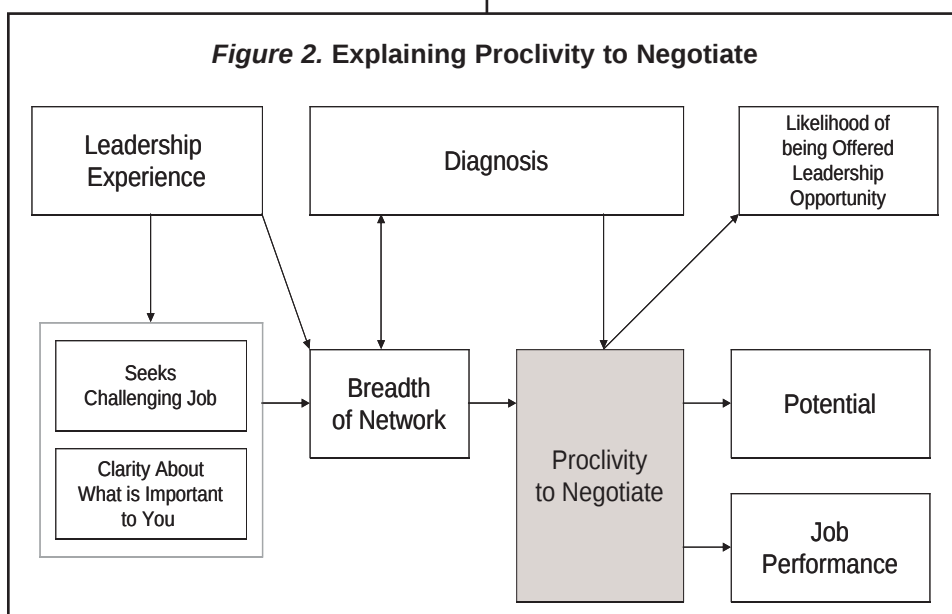
That is precisely what happened when Linda took over as president of a small investment bank. Recruited by the bank's board, who had lost confidence in the senior managers, Linda had to deal with both the failed senior leadership—people

who were afraid of losing their jobs—and more junior people, who were hoping she could save the situation. She had to deal with both resisters and supporters. She negotiated a new relationship with the chairman of the board, who had, over time, become enmeshed in the day-to-day operations. Linda also negotiated full authority

to make investment decisions and even to overturn ones that had been previously made. She negotiated visible support from the chairman and vice chairman and brought them in to articulate the business case for her appointment. By negotiating with the board over benefits, particularly a long-term compensation plan, Linda demonstrated to her team that she was committed to doing what it took to turn things around. Alice, similarly, carried out an intense diagnosis, digging deep to understand the situation she was entering. Given the mandate for change that was associated with the job she was considering, she expected resistance and so tested for commitment from her potential boss and negotiated for his support for the kinds of changes she would need to make. Women like Linda, who analyze and anticipate challenges they will face, are more likely to negotiate over these matters than women who do not (see Figure 3).

Consulting her network. Those women who negotiate about their leadership roles have broader networks—partners, spouses, friends, mentors, bosses, co-workers, and others whom they consult about career decisions—than those who

Figure 2. Explaining Proclivity to Negotiate



do not (see Figure 3).²² Networks can be especially important to women pursuing leadership roles. Members of one's network can lend support to a new leader, providing her with insights into the challenges she might face. Alice used her network to learn about her new company's CEO and what kind of boss he would be. But network members can do more; they can offer ideas for what a leader can propose when she negotiates.²³ For example, Barbara used her network when she took over as chief of staff for the president of her division. She knew that it would be easy in that role to become, as she said, "invisible", to become the president's person without a portfolio of her own. What Barbara learned by consulting her network of women colleagues was that she needed to negotiate a significant project that would be visible and be hers to claim. Women who have more leadership experience, like Barbara, are more likely to have a broader network, and therefore they have a higher proclivity to negotiate about these matters.

Diagnosis and consultation are part and parcel of a well orchestrated, appreciative negotiation.²⁴ As you negotiate, you are trying to learn more about the situation, which helps you problem-solve creatively about how to deal with the issues that are raised. In the process, the perspectives of trusted advisors can help you feel more confident in asking for what you need and can give you ideas for resolving issues that you might not have considered.

Challenging jobs. Women who seek out challenging leadership roles are the ones most likely to negotiate about the structure of these jobs. Fifty-four percent of the sample indicated that they were likely to accept jobs that were challenging and a stretch for them and that would give them significant responsibility and visibility. And these women were also more likely than those who did not seek out challenges to negotiate about their fit with the job requirements and the support they would need (80% vs. 20%). They were also more likely to negotiate for a strategic introduction (78% vs.

22%), resources (77% vs. 23%), and the key functions (79% vs. 21%) they thought they would need to lead in the role. These are also the women who feel that given their position in their organizations, fewer leadership opportunities are likely to come their way. As a result, they have little choice but to take these roles, and in doing so, recognize that they can negotiate about the roles so that they better fit their own situations.

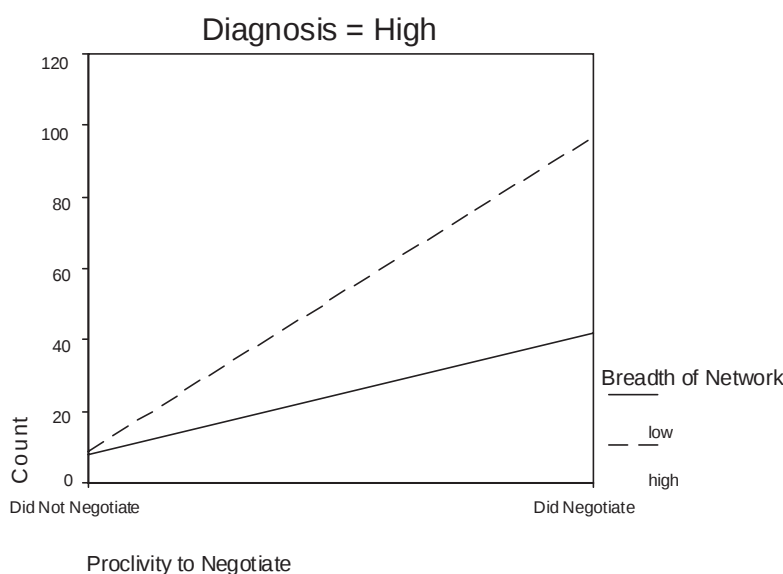
This was the case with Helen, a marketing executive, who was offered a significant promotion. Helen did not think she

could say no to the offer; at her level, few other opportunities were likely to come her way any time soon. But with young children at home, she knew she could not meet the travel demands that came with this global position. Because she was interested in the job, Helen chose to negotiate about the travel. She proposed a restructuring of the unit, where two deputies, already in place, would enlarge their responsibilities and work more directly with the global customers. At headquarters, Helen would develop strategy and meet with customers only when her expertise

was needed. Helen negotiated about a job she wanted, and that negotiation enabled her to take a leadership job she might not otherwise have considered. By negotiating the terms of an ostensibly non-negotiable offer, Helen produced an alternative that worked for everyone: customers received hands-on attention, key staff members gained important experience, the company put its channel distribution in capable hands, and her home life remained stable.

Helen recognized that there was potential to negotiate over issues like travel, flexibility, and time. That recognition enabled her to accept a leadership position that in other regards was a good fit. This was not true for others in our sample—they rejected potential leadership jobs because these roles would require a great deal of travel and a heavy time commitment. By rejecting them, these women over-

Figure 3. Interaction between Diagnosing the Situation and Network Consultation on Proclivity to Negotiate



Note: Results revealed that women had a high proclivity to negotiate when they diagnosed their situation and consulted their network; Pearson Chi-Square = 4.79, $p < .05$. Count is number of women reporting under each type of condition.

looked the possibility that they could negotiate about travel and flexibility. Here is another situation where consulting one's network can be so important—network members can help you benchmark the kinds of arrangements that others have made about such issues as flexibility, time, and travel.

Clarity about what matters. It is a central maxim in negotiation that “you cannot get what you want if you do not know what you want.” This was true for the women in our study. If a leader thought that support for her agenda from her boss and her team was important, she was more likely to negotiate for that support. And women with more experience were

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more likely to see support from colleagues as important, and therefore could propose ways to ensure that support would be forthcoming. For example, when Susan was asked to head a risky turnaround

in her consulting firm, she faced two challenges—the first based on her limited leadership experience and the second because she would need to make major changes to bring the practice up to standard. She negotiated to adjust the role to fit her experience and skills; got agreement to shift authority for critical allocation decisions to her; pushed for and got visible support from her boss, who made the case for why she was the right person for the role; and negotiated for his continued support in the face of the resistance she knew would attend the changes she was proposing.

The more a leader thinks she has choices and does not have to accept what is offered, the more likely it is that she will negotiate. So not surprisingly, those who assumed that they had few choices about, for example, resources—those who believed that it was up to them to make do and to pick up the slack—did not negotiate for resources. These women may be creating problems for themselves down the road, finding that they are the ones who need to work long hours to get the work done. Women in senior roles are less likely to hold this assumption about resources—they do not believe they have to accept these conditions, but rather, that they can negotiate about them. Thus, it is not surprising that they tend, like Susan and Alice, to negotiate specifically for the resources they will need. And they do this by being clear about the resources they need, by linking them to goals and potential results, and by enlisting others to help make the case.

When a woman is appointed to a new leadership role, it is often up to her to negotiate for what she needs to be success-

ful in that role. That is what can enable her to take an opportunity rather than turn it down or accept a situation where she lacks the wherewithal to succeed. Alice, for example, clearly had the technical competence, but that was not enough. She needed the role and her relationships to be structured in such a way that she could use her competence, and she, like others in our sample, negotiated for exactly that.

Implications

The gender leadership gap has many causes, some attributed to organizational practices and processes, and others with more individual roots. Clearly, there are actions organizations can take to level the playing field for women.²⁵ However, our research from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives suggests that there are actions individual women can take to position themselves to be more effective in the leadership roles they get. The learnings from women in senior leadership roles and women with more leadership experience suggest that any time a woman considers a leadership role at any level, negotiations should be part of her thinking. There are several recommendations we have for people who are transitioning into new leadership roles:

- First, it is important to recognize that any job with challenge and stretch will never be a perfect fit—some aspects may build on a candidate's strengths, while others may present a steep learning curve. Too often, people assume that they only have two choices: to accept a new role or to turn it down. A better way to approach these situations is to ask yourself, “What would make me say yes to this offer?” Posing this question forces you to assess your strengths and weaknesses, particularly the match of your skill sets to the role. This focus can help you identify what you will need in the way of title, resources, safety net, and support for potential actions, among other things, in order to be successful in your new role. In other words, it helps you figure out what you want. Clarity about what matters is a crucial first step in a negotiation.
- Second, you need to assess what kind of support you will have from a boss, the team, and other relevant stakeholders. You also need to understand where resistance might lie. This is where it is important to gather good intelligence by talking to people both inside and outside the organization. You want to understand why people want you at this time and in this role, and why others might not. Experienced leaders consult their networks and mentors to learn about the people, the organization, and its challenges. But they also use these networks to generate ideas for proposals that make sense. Knowing that others have negotiated for specific strategic functions and resources, for example, makes it easier for you to do

the same. If we benchmark these issues, it makes it easier for us to supply a rationale for our requests—they become defensible, enabling us to stand up for them.

- Third, the new leader needs to diagnose the situation, particularly where resistance to her agenda and leadership might lie. Leaders in our study dug deep to gather good intelligence, which gave them a read on where the pockets of support and resistance were and the problems and challenges that individuals and groups were facing. Ninety-six percent of the women reported that they identified pressing problems in their groups and tried to find ways to have early successes. A strategy of *small wins* served them very well.²⁶

When an organization recruits a woman like Alice (or Susan, or Barbara, or Linda) for a leadership role, it should have an investment in helping her succeed. In the context of this study, that means the organization and its leaders need to support the efforts of women to negotiate conditions for their own success. Indeed, there is the promise of tangible pay-offs. Creating the conditions so women can ask for what they need to perform well, and encouraging women to ask, has implications for performance, motivation, and turnover. In a win for both women leaders and their organizations, it obviously pays to ask.²⁷

Methodology

Survey data was coded and analyzed using statistical software (SPSS). Frequencies, descriptive statistics, and analysis of means were used in the first wave of our research. Additional work on understanding the underlying themes was obtained through factor analytic techniques, also in SPSS. Final analyses and data were then submitted to Structural Equation Modeling (SEM; using Lisrel), thereby allowing us to adopt a rigorous approach to understanding women's proclivity to negotiate and an understanding of the complex relationships between proclivity and conditions and strategies for leadership success.

Demographic Profile	2005 survey: (n=470)
Average age	44
Average work experience (years)	21
Race	85% white Caucasian 15% women of color
Position	30% senior managers 54% middle managers 16% other
Dominant industries represented	Technology and finance; banking; insurance

Author Deborah M. Kolb is the Deloitte Ellen Gabriel Professor for Women and Leadership at the Simmons School of Management and CGO Faculty Affiliate. Author Jill Kickul is the Elizabeth J. McCandless Professor of Entrepreneurship at Simmons School of Management and CGO Faculty Affiliate.

Endnotes

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¹⁷Factor analysis is an analytical technique used to uncover and reveal major "themes" that describe the issues that an individual negotiates for when assuming a leadership position. Common issues that are related to each other comprise a major factor or "theme".

¹⁸We had two additional factors. One was a problem-solving factor that captured a different type of activity. Ninety-six percent of the sample reported efforts to get buy-in from relevant stakeholder groups by dealing with pressing problems, getting early successes, building a good reputation, and focusing on people's needs. A sixth factor concerned diagnosing resistance. Since this factor was not really action-oriented, but rather diagnostic, we have included it elsewhere in the discussion.

¹⁹Research conducted by Linda Babcock, Michele Gelfand, and colleagues suggests that women negotiate at much lower rates than men. For example, only 12.5% of women negotiate starting salaries, compared to 52% of men. Further, in situations where there are no cues to negotiate, women negotiate less than 3% of the time while men do so 23% of the time. Women also have a lower propensity to negotiate. See Babcock, L., Gelfand, M., Small, D., and Stayn, H. 2005. Gender differences in the propensity to initiate negotiations. Unpublished paper.

²⁰We had a number of different measures. Some were based on the respondents' opinions about their leadership abilities, their guesses about how their bosses, subordinates, and peers would judge them, and their assessments as to whether they would be offered other leadership opportunities in the coming year. We also asked about their most recent performance reviews and whether they had been offered leadership development opportunities. We reasoned that the survey items about ratings on the most recent performance reviews and a question about being offered opportunities to be groomed for leadership were more reliable measures than opinions. Obviously these kinds of self reports are not facts about whether this belief will come to pass. However, in the study, the women themselves were consistently more likely to rate their performance lower than did their bosses, their peers, and their subordinates. This leads us to believe that they may not be as likely to overestimate their chances as one typically expects with this kind of survey.

²¹The cases in this paper come from interviews. The names have been disguised. See Kolb, D.M., Williams, J., and Frohlinger, C. *Op. cit.*

²²Differential access to networks is often identified in the literature and given as an explanation for why women fare worse in, for example, salary negotiations. Ibarra, H. 1993. Personal networks of women and minorities in management: A conceptual framework. *Academy of Management Review*, 18(1): 56-87; Blake-Beard, S. 2001. *CGO Insights* No. 10: Mentoring relationships through the lens of race and gender. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management; Babcock, L., Gelfand, M., Small, D., and Stayn, H. *Op. cit.*

²³The importance of networks for minorities and women has been demonstrated in salary negotiations. Seidel, M-D.L., Polzer, J.T., and Stewart, K.J. 2000. Friends in high places: The effects of social networks on discrimination in salary negotiations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 45(1): 1-25.

²⁴Kolb, D.M. and Williams, J. 2003. *Everyday Negotiation: Navigating the Hidden Agendas in Bargaining*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

²⁵Merrill-Sands, D., Kickul, J., and Ingols, C. *Op. cit.*

²⁶The concept of "small wins" is laid out nicely by Debra Meyerson in her book *Tempered Radicals: How People Use Difference to Inspire Change at Work* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001).

²⁷In their work on who initiates negotiations, Michele Gelfand, Linda Babcock, and their colleagues have found that when negotiating is described as asking, sex differences disappear. Gelfand, M. and Babcock, L. 2005. Who goes to the bargaining table: Understanding gender variation in the initiation of negotiations. Unpublished paper.

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Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO)
Linking gender and organizational effectiveness

Simmons School of Management
409 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215 USA
Tel: +1-617-521-3824 Fax: +1-617-521-3878 E-mail: cgo@simmons.edu
www.simmons.edu/som/cgo