

Women, Negotiations, and Career Advancement Report from a Survey at the 2013 Simmons Leadership Conference

On April 9, 2013, one week after the 2013 Simmons Leadership Conference, the U.S. celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which President John F. Kennedy declared to be the end of the “unconscionable practice of paying female employees less wages than male employees for the same job.”¹ Yet, in 2013, women across the U.S. earned, on average, 77 cents for every dollar men earned.²

Current discussion addresses not only the wage gap, but also the “glass ceiling,” a barrier that keeps women from rising to top leadership positions. 2013 marked the eighth consecutive year without significant improvement of women’s representation on Fortune 500 company boards, as shown by stagnation in CEO representation and top-earner slots held by women.³ When women do attain high leadership positions, some research shows that they might be near the edge of a “glass cliff,” a precarious situation in which they have high risk of failure.

Negotiation has been recognized as an important tool for changing these troubling statistics. Yet research has shown that women “who ask” often face a double bind – they can either be perceived as competent or likeable, but not both.⁴ Women can be penalized for asking, as this action violates gender stereotypes and cultural norms of women being

“nice” and “accommodating”. Nevertheless, in the 2005 Simmons Leadership Conference survey, Kolb and Kickul found that for women leaders, it does pay to ask.⁵ Women who achieve leadership success do so in part because they know

what they want and are able to negotiate effectively to get it. Kolb and Kickul concluded that “any time a woman considers a leadership role at any level, negotiations should be part of her thinking.”⁶ In light of the importance

of negotiation and the persistent lack of progress in advancement of women, we developed the 2013 Leadership Conference survey to enhance understanding about why and how women are negotiating in today’s workplaces.

The Survey

We surveyed participants at the 2013 Simmons Leadership Conference about their negotiation experiences. The purpose of Part I of the survey was to understand better *why* women negotiate at work and to look at the goals of the negotiations in which women engage to advance their careers. The purpose of Part II was to learn more about *how* women negotiate, including women’s experiences negotiating across distinct communication media: online, telephone, and face-to-face.

Survey Method and Respondents

Two hundred and sixty-four women at the 2013 Simmons Leadership Conference responded to an online survey set up at the conference facility. Eighty-six percent of the respondents were from the U.S., and 91 percent described themselves as native English speakers. The typical age range of participants was 41-50 years. Ninety-four percent of the sample had graduated from college, and more than half held graduate degrees (51%). Eighty-two percent of the respondents described their ethnicity/race as Caucasian/white, eight percent as Asian, five percent as African/black, three percent as non-white Hispanic, and two percent as other. Forty-five percent of the sample reported having more than 20 years of work experience, 30 percent between 10-20 years, and 25 percent less than 10 years.

Almost all of the respondents were employed full time (94%), and most (81%) contributed 50 percent or more to their household earnings. The vast majority of respondents (82%) reported working in organizations employing 1,000 people or more. Only three percent reported being fully

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self-employed. Fifty percent described their highest positions in the last five years as mid- or senior-level. Fifty-eight percent reported aspiring to senior- or top-level positions. Respondents represented a range of industries. About 19 percent reported serving in nonprofit, government, or healthcare sectors. The three largest for-profit industries were high technology (39%), financial services (14%), and manufacturing (8%).

Survey Part I: Why Women Negotiate

Most academic studies and popular press stories about gender and negotiation have focused on whether or not and how effectively women negotiate for higher pay. Compensation negotiations have become a focal point for academic researchers, perhaps because pay is a measurable result that researchers can analyze. Another attraction to studying compensation is that it is a standard subject of discussion in formal job negotiations.

Compensation negotiations are a well-illuminated topic, but the topic of pay has come to eclipse other important

forms of career negotiation. Indeed, how women negotiate their career paths is arguably a more important determinant of lifetime earnings (e.g., occupations, promotions, years in the work force, hours per week worked) than pay negotiations at organizational entry and promotion points. If we want to understand the

role of negotiation in women's career trajectories, we need to look beyond compensation to see how women negotiate their careers.

One of the few published studies that take an expansive perspective on women's use of negotiation for career advancement was the previously mentioned survey conducted by Deborah Kolb and Jill Kickul at the 2005 Simmons Leadership Conference.⁷ Drawing on that survey, plus data from interviews with female executives, Kolb and Kickul documented how women negotiate the terms and context of new leadership roles in terms of issues including job title and description, reporting relationships, areas of responsibility and authority, social support, and resources.

In our 2013 study, we followed Kolb and Kickul's lead to explore how women use negotiation more broadly in their career advancement, including how they might use negoti-

ation to overcome barriers as well as seize opportunities. To understand *why* women negotiate, we queried the women in our survey about recent career-related negotiations in which they had engaged. As explained in the survey, we use the term "career-related negotiations" to describe career-related requests to supervisors or other colleagues that involve some problem solving, creative tradeoffs, or a conflict to be resolved. This term does not include career-related requests that are simply accepted or rejected.

In the first section of Part I, participants indicated how frequently over the past five years they had negotiated for a variety of different reasons on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, 5 = very frequently). They were presented with a randomly ordered list of 20 different reasons for negotiating; ten represented opportunities for career advancement (e.g., "I was seeking a new type of position") and ten represented barriers to career advancement (e.g., "I was being overlooked for a promotion or other professional opportunity"). On average, participants indicated negotiating more often to seize opportunities than to overcome barriers.

Those who recounted a personal career-related negotiation had more work experience and tended to hold higher-level positions. Ninety-four percent of women in senior- or top-level positions reported personal examples of career-related negotiations as compared to 78 percent of mid-level women and 70 percent of those at entry or supervisory levels. White women were also more likely to report negotiating for career advancement than women of color – 81 percent of white women as compared to 57 percent for women of color.

These patterns might reflect the influence of the psychological experience of power on the propensity to negotiate. Both organizational rank and being from a majority vs. minority racial/ethnic group can influence one's perceived social status.⁸ Another potential explanation for the effect of rank on the propensity to report negotiating for career advancement is that senior positions typically provide more potential for self-direction, which can help a woman to develop creative options for which to negotiate. Women in entry-level to mid-level-management positions agreed more strongly than women in top/senior-level positions that they were negotiating for something standard within their organization at entry-to-mid level. However, greater discretion at higher ranks would not explain the effect of being a woman of color on the propensity to report a career-related negotiation. The women of color in our sample reported the same levels of positions on average as white respondents.

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To gain a better sense of the reasons that women use negotiation to advance their career, we asked respondents to describe briefly a recent career-related negotiation in which they had been involved. Seventy-six percent of respondents provided an example; almost half of these negotiations (45%) were not yet fully resolved. We then asked those who provided an example to categorize that example from a list of 20 potential reasons for negotiating (i.e., ten opportunities and ten barriers in random order), checking all reasons that applied. In the majority of examples (59%), women categorized the negotiation as about both a barrier and an opportunity. In 37 percent of the cases, women described their negotiation as purely opportunity focused. Only four percent of the examples were categorized as purely about resolving a barrier.

It is noteworthy that while compensation was a commonly cited motivation, it was not at the top of the list. More commonly cited topics of negotiation were: seeking a new type of position, seeking a promotion or new leadership opportunity, advancing one's career by changing how or where one worked, and looking to enhance one's potential for promotion or a leadership opportunity. The top five most common barriers that women described related to not being given appropriate recognition or reward, getting stuck in bad politics, being overlooked or blocked from advancement, and feeling undervalued.

Survey Part II: How Women Negotiate and Use Communication Modalities

The second part of the survey looked at *how* women are negotiating at work. Increasingly, career-related negotiations are taking place remotely, either by telephone or by email, as workforces become more geographically dispersed.

Research shows that the communication modality used can greatly impact the success of the negotiation.⁹ In face-to-face negotiations, communications are informed not only by the words said, but by a range of intangibles that convey meaning and can promote trust, understanding, and cooperation. Over the telephone, some of these intangibles can be addressed, as nuance can be conveyed through the tone of voice and the speaker's inflection. In negotiations using email, however, we rely primarily upon the written word to convey meaning.

Nevertheless, email negotiations can provide other opportunities for negotiators. Research indicates that gender stereotypes that put women into a double bind have less influence in email communications than in face-to-face negotiations.¹⁰ For people who prefer to think carefully before responding, the asynchronous nature of email

allows for a delay, which could provide more time to prepare a response.

This part of the survey asked questions about how women negotiated at work, to ascertain if they negotiated face-to-face, over the telephone, or online, and how they felt about their effectiveness negotiating across these modalities. Questions included how well they felt they were able to create value for all parties, to claim their share of the value, and to address power imbalances. Participants confirmed that negotiation is an important and active aspect of their work, and is significant in pursuing career success. They engage in a range of negotiation strategies, including face-to-face, online, and telephone negotiations. The vast majority of women surveyed self-assessed themselves as modestly effective when negotiating in these different modalities.

However, the leadership level women had attained had a significant effect on their self-reported effectiveness and confidence in negotiations. Women in higher-level positions reported engaging more often in face-to-face negotiations, although they also are more likely to use a range of communication modalities. Women in higher-level positions also agreed more strongly that they prepare themselves well before they negotiate, use different negotiation strategies effectively in different negotiation situations, and are better able to create value for all parties in negotiation. Women in higher-level positions were also more likely to indicate that they are able to claim their share of value from negotiations and effectively address imbalances of power through negotiations.

The age of respondents correlated with their perceived effectiveness using different negotiation strategies. Not surprisingly, younger women felt most effective online, and the 50 and older demographic felt most comfortable in face-to-face negotiations.

Regardless of their age group, years of work experience, or level of leadership attained, the participants indicated unequivocally that they would like more training to become better negotiators, and that this training would assist them in improving their career success. The types of negotiation training desired varied, including traditional face-to-face executive education and online sessions. The higher the annual salary, and the more senior the profes-

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sionals, the more a traditional executive education context was requested. For middle-level executives, there was a preference for online education.

Conclusion

This research is important for expanding women's imagination regarding how they can use negotiation and overcome the potentially self-fulfilling prophecy that "women don't ask."¹¹ For negotiation scholars, teachers and trainers, this work (building on that of Kolb and Kickul) challenges an overemphasis on gender differences in compensation negotiation, which has distorted the discussion of women's career negotiations.

Clearly, women recognize the need to negotiate to attain career success. Whether women are negotiating to seize an opportunity or overcome a barrier, whether they are negotiating in person, over the telephone, or by email, women

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appreciate the importance of negotiations to their career success. Our findings indicate that more attention needs to be given to understanding the lower propensity of women of color to undertake negotiation and the workplace dynamics that influence their choices. Further, our findings indicate that

institutions providing training in negotiation should offer a variety of training modalities. Nevertheless, we must not only rely on women to be the bearers of change when it comes to fixing the inequalities that still exist. Beyond women taking advantage of opportunities to increase their negotiation skills, other structural changes are also needed to dismantle the persistent inequalities and power imbalances that continue to shape women's career decisions and trajectories toward success.

Author Dr. Paula Gutlove is Professor of Practice at Simmons School of Management. Author Hannah Riley Bowles is Senior Lecturer at Kennedy School of

Government, Harvard University. Author Patricia Deyton is Associate Dean and Director of the Center for Gender in Organizations and Professor of Practice at Simmons School of Management. Author Jamie Potter is an undergraduate student at Harvard College. Author Lauren Wallester is Coordinator at the Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.

Endnotes

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Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO)
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Simmons School of Management
300 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115 USA
Tel: 617-521-3824 Fax: 617-521-3878 E-mail: cgo@simmons.edu
www.simmons.edu/som/cgo