

Power & Negotiation for Women

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Is it true that "women don't ask"?

The prevailing belief is that women do not ask for more by negotiating. This has often been cited as a driver of the gender pay gap. The notion that women don't ask is grounded in two-decade-old research led by Linda Babcock of Carnegie Mellon University.ⁱ Recent research partially backs it up. In 2025, the Wall Street Journal reported on research by Patricia Cortes of Boston University (BU).ⁱⁱ Of roughly 900 recent BU business undergraduates surveyed:

- 12% of women and 20% of men negotiated their job offers.
- Those who negotiated increased pay by 10% on average.

Other studies are challenging the belief that women don't ask.

In 2024, Laura Kray (UC Berkeley Haas) and Jessica Kennedy (Vanderbilt Business School) and Margaret Lee (UC Berkeley Haas) published an Academy of Management journal article outlining studies of MBAs and alumni from a "top U.S. Business School".ⁱⁱⁱ

Here are their key findings:

- Survey 1 (~1K MBAs): 54% of women vs. 44% of men negotiated their 1st post-MBA job
- Survey 2 (~2K Alumni): 64% of women vs. 59% of men negotiated for promotions or greater pay

Despite asking *more* frequently than men, the survey found that employers *rejected* women's attempts more often

Why are women rejected more often when negotiating for pay or promotions?

To better understand this and what can be done about it, let's explore power's role in negotiation.

Bias & Power

It has long been observed that when women act assertively (as one often must when negotiating for higher pay or greater authority), they are frequently judged in ways men aren't for the same behavior.

Adam Galinsky of Columbia Business School has shown through research that many such gender differences are actually "power differences in disguise". By controlling for power in a wide range of experiments, Galinsky has shown that many differences between genders, including in negotiation, are eliminated.^{iv}

Based on this work, Galinsky coined the **low-power double bind**. In it, people who are perceived to have low power are afforded a *narrower* range of acceptable behavior than people who are perceived to be powerful. When you have power, you are given more freedom in how you act; when you lack power, that range tightens, and you can be punished (e.g., by being rejected for having the audacity to ask for more).^v

Assertiveness is traditionally viewed as a "high-power" trait. Because women are often unfairly perceived as having lower power in corporate settings, they more often face backlash when utilizing it.

As Galinsky notes, the solution to this problem is that "**many gender differences will be eliminated when women have more power**".^{vi}

Let's explore what some of the world's leading experts recommend as strategies for breaking free of the low-power double bind.

How can you get more power in negotiation?

Your Greatest Source of Power in Negotiation

When experts talk about someone's power in negotiation, we often focus on their alternatives, particularly their **Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA)**. The concept of a BATNA was coined by Harvard's William Ury and Roger Fisher in arguably the all-time best-selling negotiation book, *Getting to Yes*.^{vii} The takeaway is that if someone offers you anything worse than your BATNA, then you should feel empowered to demand more.

This is intuitive, as the following mini-case demonstrates

Mini-Case: The Power of Alternatives

Imagine you have been working at Company A for a while, and you want to negotiate a raise or promotion.

Question: Would you feel more confident negotiating with Company A if:

A) You just received a highly attractive job offer from Company B (let's assume this is your BATNA).

B) You did not have the other job offer in hand?

The answer is A, of course! Worst case, you can leave to work for Company B if Company A does not offer you something that you value at least as much as Company B's offer.

Four points on BATNAs

1. **You always have a BATNA.** If you don't have a job offer in hand going into a salary or promotion negotiation, your BATNA might be to maintain the status quo until you can get one. While you always have a BATNA, whether it is strong depends on your situation.

2. **Your counterpart also has a BATNA.** If they have a poor BATNA (e.g., less suitable candidates in a salary negotiation with an employee for an important role), they have less power, and vice versa.

3. Info about BATNAs is valuable. Information is a major source of power in negotiation. This is particularly true when it comes to BATNAs. If you can identify not only what the other side's BATNA is but what it is worth to them (via research or at the bargaining table), you are in a better position to capture value.

4. BATNAs are dynamic. You can improve your BATNA (and your power) by working to generate attractive alternatives (e.g., by networking, maintaining marketable experience and skills, applying to other roles). You can sometimes also weaken your counterpart's BATNA (e.g., by developing useful experience and skills, tacit knowledge, and relationships that are hard to replace).

For more practical strategies on breaking free of the low-power double bind, see **Exhibits I, II, & III.**

What about experience?

While power is crucial for the reasons we have discussed, there is no substitute for experience. A landmark meta-analysis by Jens Mazei and coauthors found that the gender gap in economic outcomes is three times larger among novice negotiators than among experienced ones.^{viii} Put plainly, practice is a powerful way to narrow the gender gap in outcomes.

As you gain experience, it will become less daunting and mysterious. You will learn to recognize common tactics, interpret concessions accurately, and defend your position without letting the conversation become a referendum on your likability.

You will also learn to prepare more effectively for negotiations. Research is essential, whether you're learning about your counterpart's interests and constraints or gathering data to support your request. For example, before a compensation negotiation, talk to peers, consult sources such as Levels.fyi and Glassdoor, and review your firm's policies on promotion requirements.

How Can You Build Your Negotiation Muscle?

To bridge the gap between research and reality, treat negotiation as a skill that requires consistent conditioning. We recommend a three-pronged approach: formal education, low-stakes practice, and disciplined reflection.

1. Formal Education: Start by taking a simulation-based negotiation course or quality workshop. At CNCM, companies frequently bring us in to run hands-on workshops for their teams, and we can custom-build simulations tailored to specific upcoming negotiations. Whether you train with us or utilize the excellent programs at top universities, simulation-based training is essential. Feel free to reach out, as we are always happy to share recommendations on the best places/courses to learn, even if it isn't from us.

2. Low-Stakes Practice: Meanwhile, find low-stakes environments to sharpen your instincts. These are easy to find: negotiate a better price for an item on Facebook Marketplace or take the lead when making dinner plans with friends. Complement this by observing others in action.

Keep in mind that negotiation is both art and a science; taking an improv comedy class is a surprisingly fun and affordable way to build comfort with the unexpected.

For high-stakes negotiations, ask a trusted friend, mentor, or advisor to role-play your counterpart and walk through the conversation as if it were real.

3. Disciplined Reflection: Finally, keep a negotiation journal to record what worked and what didn't. Ensure your notes are specific, actionable, and concise to turn every negotiation you get into or observe into a personalized set of best practices.

A skilled **negotiation coach** can help you define your goals, provide targeted feedback, and guide your post-negotiation reflection to identify lessons learned and areas for continued growth.

With that, we wish you success in your negotiations to come!

Exhibits

Exhibit I: Strategies sourced from Adam Galinsky (Columbia Business School)^{ix}

Leverage the “Mamma Bear” Effect

Research shows that women perform as well as men when advocating for others in negotiation.

When possible, emphasize how your requests benefit your team, a colleague, or the organization’s mission.

Perspective Taking

Work to understand the other side’s interests and perspectives.

Empathizing helps you generate solutions that are advantageous to you but that you can also frame as an advancement of their interests.

Offer Multiple Choices

Making a direct demand can trigger defensiveness from the other side. You can soften demands by offering 2 or 3 viable options to choose from.

Providing multiple options rather than an ultimatum gives your counterpart across the negotiating table a sense of agency, making them more likely to accept one of your proposals.

Recruit Allies

An effective way of simultaneously gaining visibility and allies professionally is by pairing a brag (mentioning an accomplishment or opportunity) with flattery (e.g., asking for advice on how to execute).

The “I got this opportunity (insert brag), can I get your advice?” formula allows you to showcase competence and accomplishments while appearing likable and cooperative.

Watch Prof. Galinsky’s TED Talk
[How to speak up for yourself](#)

Exhibit II: Building Strategic Power sourced from Jeffrey Pfeffer (Stanford Graduate School of Business)^x

Master Strategic Presence

Presence shapes how you are treated; carrying yourself with decisiveness and composure ensures others view you as an influential stakeholder.

Build Your Reputation

Do not rely on good work to speak for itself. Strategically develop a reputation for specific accomplishments so your value is known before you enter the room.

Network

Power moves through relationships. Invest in a broad circle of allies and information channels to create a foundation of support for high-stakes asks.

Exercise Influence

Power grows when it is used. Move past socialization that discourages making waves by setting agendas and making direct requests.

Challenge Conventions

Effectiveness in negotiation often requires moving beyond standard scripts. Do not confuse following the rules with being effective. Many high-stakes environments reward those who bend conventions to create new options and momentum.

Read Prof. Pfeffer's book, [7 Rules of Power](#) and watch his [MasterClass](#).

* Our recommendation: read [On Grand Strategy](#) (2018) & watch Harvard's free ethics course, [Justice](#).

Exhibit III. Advice from Beth Fisher-Yoshida (Columbia University)^{xi}

Start with self-awareness (name your “negotiator story”).

Notice the narratives you carry about who you are as a negotiator and where they came from. Then, identify which stories help vs. get in the way.

Disrupt negative self-talk and rewrite the script.

Fisher-Yoshida highlights how early “be a good girl / don’t make waves” socialization can shape behavior. She argues you can consciously replace those stories with ones that support better outcomes.

Ask for what you want and build confidence through small wins.

Don’t rely on “good work” to speak for itself. Practice requesting what you want, starting small, showing up, and building rapport over time.

Reframe self-advocacy to navigate the likeability/competence double bind.

Women are often formidable when negotiating **for others**, and that effectiveness can depend on conditions like being willing to risk not being liked, so reframe asks in terms of impact (team, clients, outcomes) while still advocating for yourself.

Expect bias (yours and theirs) and slow the pace.

Examine your own assumptions, read the other party’s bias signals, and **slow down** so you don’t react on autopilot. She also warns that biased low initial offers can “anchor” the whole negotiation range.

Read Prof. Fisher-Yoshida’s book

[New Story, New Power: A Woman’s Guide to Negotiation](#)

Sources

- ⁱ Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
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- ^{iv} Adam Galinsky, "Are Gender Differences Just Power Differences in Disguise?," *Chazen Global Insights*, Columbia Business School, April 13, 2018, <https://business.columbia.edu/insights/chazen-global-insights/are-gender-differences-just-power-differences-disguise>
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Roger Fisher and William Ury. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. 3rd ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2011.
- ^{viii} Mazei, Jens, Joachim Hüffmeier, Philipp Alexander Freund, Alice F. Stuhlmacher, Lena Bilke, and Guido Hertel. "A Meta-Analysis on Gender Differences in Negotiation Outcomes and Their Moderators." *Psychological Bulletin* 141, no. 1 (2015): 85–104. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038184>
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- ^x Jeffrey Pfeffer, *7 Rules of Power: Surprising—But True—Advice on How to Get Things Done and Advance Your Career* (New York: Harper Business, 2022).
- ^{xi} Author's Communication with Beth Fisher Yoshida; Beth Fisher-Yoshida, *New Story, New Power: A Woman's Guide to Negotiation* (Washington, DC: Bold Story Press, 2023).