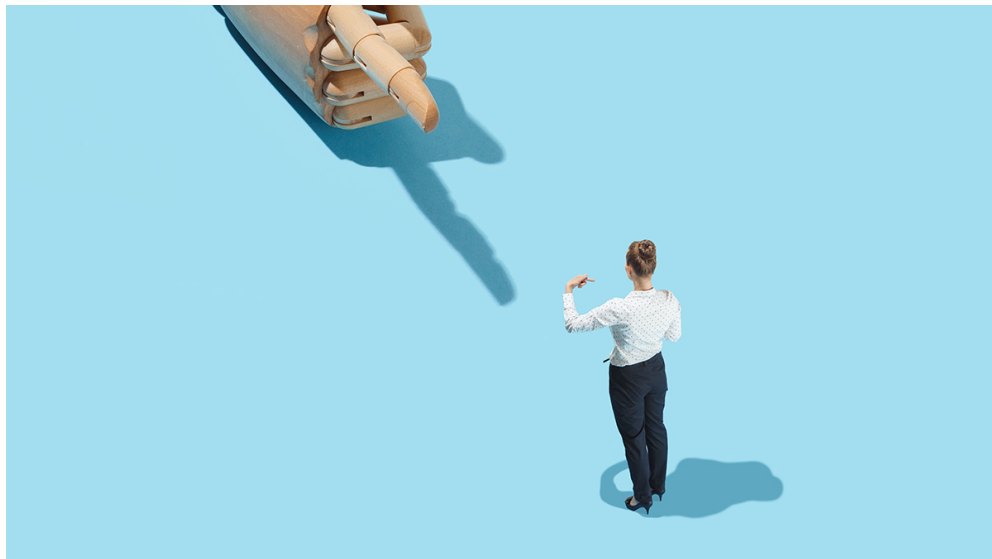




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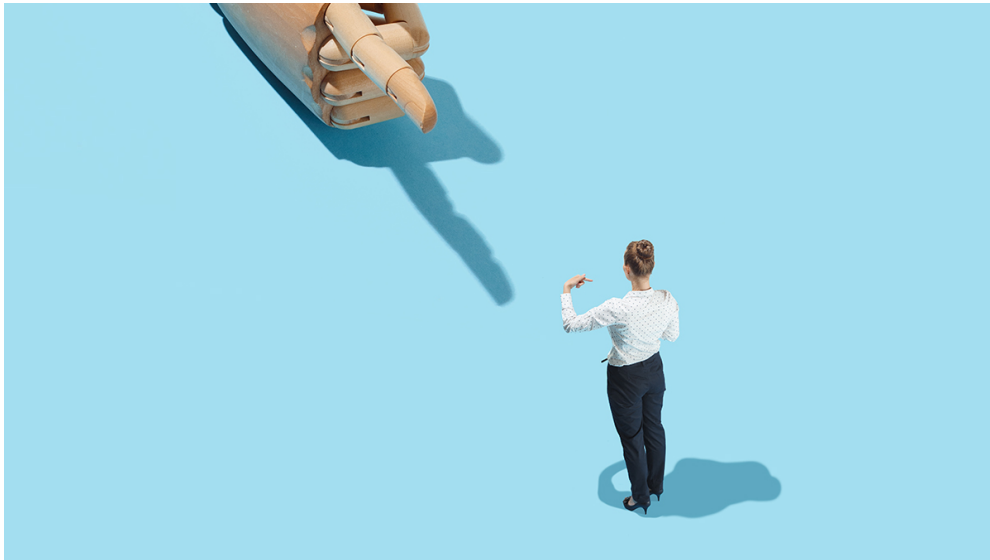
# 3 of the Most Common Challenges Women Face in Negotiations

by Mara Olekalns, Ruchi Sinha, and Carol T. Kulik

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**Small negotiations are woven through the fabric** of our everyday working lives. Managers negotiate to secure resources for their teams, create new positions, or retain existing ones. Employees negotiate to gain more flexible work arrangements, access development opportunities, or define new roles. We use negotiations to help our selves, our team members, and manage our work as we move towards our goals.

In a recent field study, my colleagues I examined how women experience these everyday negotiations. We interviewed 84 women about a significant negotiation that they had been through in the previous year. Our interviewees worked in metropolitan cities, primarily in large organizations with more than 500 employees, and most frequently in health (23%) or government (21%). The majority (81%) had an undergraduate qualification, and their ages ranged from 29 to 64 years. In their interviews, they told us what the negotiation was about, who they negotiated with, and how the negotiation affected their relationship with the other person.

Twenty-two of the women told us about their experience negotiating pay or promotions, but many also talked about the smaller negotiations with coworkers and managers that punctuate their workdays. Other than pay and promotion, the three most common kinds of negotiations were for:

- **Work resources:** to gain support for a new position within the organization, restructure their team, change reporting lines, extend a handover period, or obtain a system upgrade
- **Professional development:** to attend conferences, reduce work days in order to study, or become involved in higher level executive meetings
- **Work-life balance:** to adjust work arrangements, restructure a position to fit their family needs, return to work after maternity leave, or request phased retirement

To conclude the interviews, we asked each woman to describe a challenging moment in the negotiation, and around half of the respondents, what advice they would give to other women before a negotiation.

Many of the women talked about negotiation as if it is a battlefield on which a lack of information or clarity on what you (or others) want is a disadvantage. Because of this, they stressed the need to develop core negotiation competencies, such as the ability to plan thoroughly and set goals beforehand. They also talked about the pitfalls of being too aggressive (or not aggressive enough), the challenge of recovering from negative feedback, and the importance of recognizing and taking advantage of opportunities to negotiate.

Based on these concerns, we identified three unique challenges women face during negotiations:

- balancing self-advocacy and communality
- managing difficult emotions
- overcoming interpersonal resistance

Through our research, we have identified evidence-based recommendations to help women develop new skills and build the confidence and resilience you need to overcome them.

### **Challenge #1: Balancing self-advocacy and communality**

The women we interviewed were often reluctant to self-advocate for their career advancement in negotiations. Many told us that just having the confidence to ask for more was challenging. Their reluctance may come from a well-founded fear that if they did ask, they would incur backlash. Research shows that women who initiate negotiations do come across as pushy, unlikeable, and undesirable team members, and the women in our study expressed their discomfort in creating this impression.

Sasha, a 39-year-old manager in the government sector, told us, “Getting to the point is one thing, but being very demanding and aggressive is another — and it isn’t seen as favorable.” Jen, a compliance

and quality manager agreed. “I had to basically point out that I manage people better than my male colleague...which goes against every part of what I would have liked to do,” she said. Sue, a senior manager in the health industry, confirmed this sentiment, saying, “As women, we don’t have great role models when it comes to standing up for ourselves. We tend to put the needs of others before our own.”

### **How can you overcome the challenge?**

For women, effective self-advocacy requires a balancing act. They often need to come across as neither “too” assertive nor “too” caring. To achieve this balance, women are often advised to harness gender stereotypes by overtly displaying warmth and concern for others during negotiations. But this strategy can backfire when the woman appears overly accommodating, and in many cases, acting out of character can increase her stress and anxiety.

You will be more effective if you balance your displays of warmth and assertiveness during negotiations. We suggest you first show that you understand the needs of the other person, and then make a more assertive, self-advocating ask.

Open a negotiation by laying out the broader issue from the other perspective, or by showing how your ask will benefit both you and your team. For example, you might frame the ask for an additional staff member as a resource that will help your team perform more efficiently (rather than help you personally), or you might frame a salary increase as fair compensation given your contributions to the team (rather than as an individual want). A carefully worded ask will help you manage the tension between self-advocacy and communality.

## **Challenge #2: Managing difficult emotions**

Negotiations can stir up a variety of emotions in many people, regardless of their gender. But in our study, a large number of women expressed feeling reluctant, anxious, and worried before starting a negotiation because they feared it might end poorly.

Our respondents spoke to the challenge of managing frustration, anger, and hurt during and after these conversations. One woman recalled a negotiation she had with her long-standing work partner. During their discussion, she encountered resistance and responded with anger. “When the negotiation didn’t go well,” she said, “I became angry. We got in a big fight, if you want to call it that.” Because anger is the one emotion that women are not expected to express, she likely ended up doing more harm to the relationship than good. Another interviewee said the worst part about negotiating was becoming emotional during the conversation, and feeling hurt after. Several others discussed how failure at the end of a negotiation created negative emotions that blocked them from following up and making their asks again.

Drawing on their experiences, women identified the ability to distance themselves from their emotions as a necessary skill for being more effective. When giving advice, a few suggested that being less emotionally attached to a specific outcome, and adopting a task-orientation instead, might be the answer.

## **How can you overcome the challenge?**

Before the negotiation, one strategy in particular can reduce anticipatory anxiety. Harness your stress and use it to your advantage through defensive pessimism, which is when someone experiencing anxiety lowers their expectations and invests their energy in simulating different ways an interaction could unfold. For example, if you assume

that the negotiation will not unfold smoothly, you will be better prepared for any resistance you may encounter during it. As part of your preparation, ask yourself how and why the other negotiator might resist your ask and be ready to respond with additional information. Doing so will help you identify and prepare for the setbacks and challenges that could stand in the way of agreement. The more you prepare, the less anxious you will feel.

During the negotiation, self-distancing is a helpful tool for managing in-the-moment emotions like anger, anxiety, or frustration. Because emotions like anxiety and anger come up when our core identities are threatened, they are easier to manage when we understand our triggers. Pause a negotiation and step back from the trigger event when you sense these feelings coming on. Take some space to reflect on the underlying reasons for your emotions and formulate a strategy to address them. Keeping an emotion diary to document the events that set off your feelings, or discussing them with a trusted colleague can help. Over time, you will be able to identify your triggers and act preemptively to manage them.

After the negotiation, try to avoid carrying negative emotions. Focus instead on how you will leverage your experience to be more effective next time. Record the positive capabilities and strengths that you have displayed in the face of challenges, and reflect on the moments you were most proud of during your interaction. The goal of this exercise is to identify how you benefited from the experience and how you can use your strengths to get the result you want in the future.

### **Challenge #3: Overcoming interpersonal resistance**

Power plays, like questioning competence or dismissing ideas, are often used to influence or undermine others. These moves create resistance,

making it more difficult for individuals to advance their goals in a negotiation.

During our interviews, women gave examples of resistance such as a manager missing a scheduled negotiation, showing horror and surprise at an ask, or being volatile and unpredictable in order to create uncertainty and pessimism. Such interactions were seen as aggressive, and intended to derail or stall negotiations, putting women on the back foot and discouraging them from effectively stating their needs.

We know that women face more resistance in negotiations than men, and building capacity to persist despite it emerged as a clear theme in our interviews. Many women stressed the importance of “regrouping and trying again” rather than viewing obstacles as failures.

### **How can you overcome the challenge?**

Building grit is key. Recent research shows that successful people spend up to one and a half years negotiating and galvanizing support to reshape organizational policies and structures to meet their needs. This means that women will be more successful if they have the confidence to overcome obstacles and persist in the face of resistance.

The ability to display flexibility and creativity is a critical first step. Stop framing setbacks as “show stoppers” that close the conversation, and start framing them as opportunities to learn more about your counterparts. Ask “why” or “why not” more often. Every setback gives you knowledge about the forms of resistance you can expect in the future, and from whom. Use this information to develop a repertoire of constructive responses to resistance.



We identified two broad themes from our interviews. The first theme addressed women's need to boost their confidence by strengthening their core negotiation skills. The second theme, which we focused on, addressed challenges unique to women. These challenges acknowledge that women and men experience negotiations differently. They also show just how much gender stereotypes underpin women's experiences, both in how they perceive negotiations and are perceived as negotiators. Remember, though, they are not insurmountable. With careful planning, you can learn to better manage your emotions, come to the table resistance-ready, and actually get what you want.



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