



Career Advice for Women and Men

Mentoring Theater took a twist on [gender roles], with some male thespians acting in stereotypical female roles and some women acting in stereotypical male ways.

How to Manage a “Hard Ask”: Negotiating Up and Down the Hierarchy

You love being a scientist. Let’s re-state that: You love doing science but not some of the non-science activities that are often a part of any job. And while some of those ancillary duties can be a chore and a bore (e.g., committee work), what you really dread are those situations where you have to ask for something—situations like pressuring your peers or staff to meet an important goal or negotiating with higher-ups to obtain a salary raise for yourself. Making those situations even less palatable are all-too-evident examples of success in these non-science areas by others who may have used an aggressive approach that would be uncomfortable for many women and some men. (See below, “Advice You Can Use.”)

To help us successfully cope with some essential parts of being a scientist that are not about data analysis, experimental design, or the other aspects of doing science, the WICB Mentoring Theater at the 2016 ASCB Annual Meeting focused on effective approaches to negotiate “the ask,” with special sensitivity to ways in which gender may affect the process.

Same Job, Different Gender

“Same Job, Different Gender: Insights into Professional Behavior” was the topic of the performance organized by Kirsten Sadler Edepli, Kathy Schmeidler, and Phyllis Hanson. The play consisted of two acts designed to highlight differences in approach and style in a situation where a faculty member has to ask

for something important. In these contrasting skits, characters “ask up” or “ask down” while requesting important things in more vs. less assertive styles.

These styles are often equated with gender-typical approaches, i.e., stereotypical male vs. stereotypical female. Mentoring Theater took a twist on this, with some male thespians acting in stereotypical female roles and some women acting in stereotypical male ways. The contrasting approaches led to a discussion and insights on how different interpersonal styles impact professional success, some of which are discussed below.

The actors, Sandy Masur, John Pringle, Valentina

Greco, Edward Munro, and Tricia Serio, formed a panel after the skits that provided additional insights in response to the audience’s questions and comments.

In Act 1, a female or male faculty member asked down to members of the lab to hurry up and do work needed to meet the deadline for resubmission of a manuscript. The lab members responded differently to the pressure from a lab PI depending on the PI’s gender and style and the lab member’s gender and style. In the case of an “agentic” (i.e., assertive) male PI, the lab members reorganized their lives and home schedules to meet the PI’s deadline. In contrast, when the PI was a (less assertive) female, it was the PI who rearranged her home schedule to meet the deadline.

In Act 2, the faculty member asked up to his or her department chair for a salary raise. In the two scenes, the fundamentals of each case



Kirsten Sadler Edepli



Phyllis Hanson



Sandra K. Masur



Kathy Schmeidler

were the same in terms of accomplishments and family situation, but the faculty members made different use of this information. In Scene 1, the faculty member came prepared with a list of the work-related successes that could warrant a raise, based upon institutional/departmental criteria, *and* had identified sources for the money to cover the raise. In Scene 2, although the faculty member was fulfilling the basic expectations, the faculty member had not identified sources for the additional funds. This faculty member raised family needs as a basis for being paid more, and rather than eliciting sympathy, this provoked the chair to view the issue as a red flag as to whether the faculty member would be able to follow through on expectations.

The lively discussion that followed drew on how these requests were posed. Audience members shared how they have formulated their important requests in their careers. Additionally, the subplot of women reorganizing their family and work schedule to meet a deadline initiated discussion on how to juggle the demands of being a scientist with that of being a parent.

Advice You Can Use

The advice that emerged from the performance and discussion is applicable to any gender.

Be very clear about expectations, whether negotiating with the boss or as the boss. For example, a laboratory management style where goals, timelines, and responsibilities are clearly articulated as part of each weekly lab meeting is useful to make sure that people are all on board.

When asking for a raise, do your homework! Make sure you know what others are getting or have negotiated. And if you are a woman, be sure you know what men in comparable circumstances are being paid. If you base your request on the salaries of other underpaid women, you will still be underpaid after the raise. Know going into the conversation whether you are merely meeting,

or are exceeding, expectations for your current salary (or rank).

Find resources for the ask. The easiest salary raise for a chair to grant is one where a faculty member 1) does something that is new and needed by the department and 2) is able to generate the revenue from which the raise can be paid (e.g., with a new grant). An example of the opposite would be a faculty member who seeks a raise based on having proposed (or even created) a new course that is neither needed nor wanted by the chair and that has no new associated revenue from which the chair can pay for the raise.

Be aware of stereotypes, implicit bias, and gender schemas; they are in play in every negotiation (the data are out there), and dissonance can work against you. For example, a woman playing to gender stereotypes as “nice” during negotiations can be punished with comments such as “she’s very nice, but probably not tough enough to be an effective leader.” On the other hand, an assertive woman can acquire labels like “bossy” and “pushy” (for a man the labels would be “boss” and “persuasive”). In this case, the request for a raise or career advancement has the potential to be perceived as selfish. What is the best way to minimize such perceptions? One option is to play to “enlightened” self-interest and back your case with evidence. Studies show that chances of success are improved if a woman frames requests for support or advancement with evidence that providing more resources to her will have the principal effect of benefitting the larger group and the institutional mission, rather than simply promoting her career.¹

We hope that these suggestions will make managing your ask more effective and less stressful. ■

—Kirsten Sadler Edepli, *New York University, Abu Dhabi*; Kathy Schmeidler, *Irvine Valley College*; Phyllis Hanson, *Washington University*; and Sandra K. Masur, *Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai*

Reference

¹Bernard TS (March 24, 2010). Moving past gender barriers to negotiate a raise. *New York Times*.

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