

Overcoming the Mental Barriers to Equal Pay

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After helping hundreds of women executives achieve their goals, I know that the gender pay gap has two sides.

The most confident woman won't climb very high if an organization is structured to stop her, but that's not always the issue. Even in companies that strive to pull women up, women still have to push — by asking for what they want. The most inclusive firm in the world won't lavish its most coveted rewards on someone who fails to stand up for herself.

At a time when keeping the best people has become even more important, many corporate leaders are questioning their assumptions about productivity and what really drives it. If the evidence says that the old rules are actually hurting a company, the bosses had better be nimble enough to change the rules before they lose their stars.

A similar flexibility is crucial for women who aspire to senior positions. Every woman ought to look closely at her attitudes about work, decide which ones are holding her back, and then put them aside.

I do work with clients who set out for the C-Suite only to face external obstacles. But in the case of a brilliant executive from Texas, the major hurdle was her own reluctance to envision herself in the job she deserved. I dare say these internal barriers are just as common as the external kind. To get to the top, she had to break some of her rules: the deep-seated assumptions and behaviors that often keep bright, talented women out of a company's upper ranks, like settling for the "helper" role in a major deal, for instance, or not taking the lead to drum up new business.

I'm not asking women to relinquish their values, but to unlearn certain notions that can masquerade as such. Women limit themselves if, deep down, they believe that self-promotion and a will to win are wrong, or at least unbecoming. We recently advised a client who, incensed by her failure to get a raise, was shocked both by the candid appraisal she got afterward, and by the fact that demanding the raise had actually improved her boss's image of her as someone who had what it took to lead.

Like her, many women go into a job expecting to be treated “fairly,” as they define it; they assume their quietly stellar efforts will be noted, and justly rewarded, by those above. Never count on either. Instead, step up and ask for what is rightfully yours. You won’t always get it, but you will get more than you would with silence. In this, pay is like so many issues women must tackle in Corporate America. My advice? figure it out and go for what you want. We can no longer afford to sit back and wait.

Others have crunched the numbers regarding [how much a worker loses over a career](#) by not negotiating a slightly higher salary at the start. The money you leave on the table will continue to grow, of course — but in someone else’s account. And that someone else is probably male. Surveys suggest that an overwhelming majority of men ask for higher salaries, and often get them, whereas [only a small fraction of women challenge an initial offer](#).

In one sense, there is no pay gap when you first sit down at the table. But there may be one when you stand up. If so, don’t let timidity be the reason why. One key to confidence is being prepared. Study the available resources and consult your advisors. Define what you want and polish your case for how the company will benefit by giving it to you. View it as practice for the kind of negotiating that business executives do all the time.

The ability to earn what you’re worth arises from a set of skills that will improve with diligent effort — by any woman who sets out to master them.

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Editor’s Note: see more on this topic at [our special section on women and the pay gap](#).

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