

Articles

"Ask and You May Receive"

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One of the questions I'm frequently asked by young women lawyers is, "How can I get (fill in the blank with "more money," "better work assignments," "a flexible work schedule," "maternity leave") without torpedoing my career?"

The answer, as perceptive readers might have guessed, is, "It depends."

Every firm is different, and within each firm, each office and practice group may have varying cultures. So, an attorney looking to improve her lot, whether it's ramping up her professional life (partnership or more money) or scaling it back (making her schedule more complementary to her family's demands), needs to start doing some homework to lay the groundwork for negotiation.

Women attorneys looking for these types of benefits should give herself at least two to three months to prepare before making a formal proposal.

She must meet one prerequisite, however, before embarking on any of this: Attorneys looking for this kind of leverage should already be one of their firms' MVPs. If that's not the case, she should spend the next six months to a year dazzling her superiors with the quality of her work, her professionalism, her problem-solving abilities and her overall legal skills. To have any pull in negotiation, an attorney should be one of the top two or three lawyers in her class.

Superiors aren't dazzled by flirting or other use of the so-called "feminine wiles." Despite conventional wisdom telling women to use their "God-given assets," a recent study by New Orleans' Tulane University found that women who flirt or otherwise act provocatively at the office win fewer pay raises and promotions than women who don't.

So, assuming you're an indispensable part of the team, the first step is doing some homework. What are the firm's policies, written and unwritten? Also, get a handle on the firm's economic picture, how salaries are determined and what its overhead expense are. Don't forget a visit to the library and/or bookstore. A quick Internet search can probably reveal 20 different books that address particular issues.

If it's maternity leave or flex-time you're interested in, it pays to discreetly survey the mothers in your midst. Find out about their experiences and how they fared. If their experiences weren't favorable, don't give up hope. They themselves could have been the problem.

If no role models exist nearby and there don't seem to be any policies allowing for maternity leave or flex-time, prepare to be a pioneer. This is not all bad. It means you – and the policy you're proposing – are a blank slate. You won't have to work twice as hard to make up for a previous person's failings.

While doing the necessary homework, listen, and then listen some more. Pay close attention and try to get a sense of what the firm values most. If it's financial performance, go into negotiation prepared to make the case that you are – and will continue to be – a financial asset to the firm. If the firm prides itself on its camaraderie and supportive culture, weave that into the argument as well.

Doing homework also will help narrow the focus to your own bottom line. Is the bonus you have in mind too much, or even too little? Are you ready for what partnership entails? Is a 30-hour workweek going to be sufficient to cover the firm's overhead?

If it's a reduced work schedule you're after, look at your job – and all its components – with fresh, objective eyes. What parts of it can be delegated completely? What can be done from home? How can the job be structured to achieve flexibility, but also ensure that the work gets done in the same way and at the same level of quality it is now?

Articles

Lack of Confidence

Get all the ducks in a row before requesting a meeting with supervisors. That means 1. being ready to prove your MVP status (hopefully they will already be aware of your indispensability, but don't make any assumptions, and be ready to back up any claims you make), and 2. having a proposal in hand.

When asking for a bonus, have a solid figure in mind and be ready to quantify why that figure is appropriate (previous bonuses, billables, client kudos). If you're looking for a reduced work schedule, try to anticipate the firm's objections and answer them. How many hours will you work? What do you propose for salary? What kind of benefits do you expect? What if the firm needs you on your day(s) off? All these and many other questions can be deal-breakers (or makers). Come in ready to answer them.

One of the main reasons women lawyers don't get what they want at work – whether it's better hours or more money – is that they lack the confidence to ask.

Most men think nothing of asking for a raise, a promotion or an assignment to a particularly high-profile deal. Most women, on the other hand, are too afraid to ask for a new office chair, let alone more money or time off. And this is regardless of skill level, age or relative worth to a firm.

A recent study by Catalyst showed that gender-based stereotypes still keep women from the highest levels of leadership in corporate America. The study showed that men consistently viewed other men as stronger in some of the most important leadership qualities – problem-solving, inspiring, delegating and “influencing upward,” i.e., influencing higher-ups. This is despite the fact that several independent studies showed no difference in leadership styles between men and women.

In general, men in leadership roles don't see women as “take charge” types. I can't help but see the correlation between that stereotype and the fact that women frequently don't ask for what they want. If more women could work up the gumption to ask for what they want – after, of course, doing all the relevant homework and formulating a realistic, business-based proposal – there's no end to the barriers we could knock down.

So, going back to the question posed at the top, “How can I get (fill in the blank) without torpedoing my career?” I have to respond that the very act of going after what you want will do wonders. Good luck.

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