

INTRODUCTION

Women Don't Ask

A few years ago, when Linda was serving as the director of the Ph.D. program at her school, a delegation of women graduate students came to her office. Many of the male graduate students were teaching courses of their own, the women explained, while most of the female graduate students had been assigned to work as teaching assistants to regular faculty. Linda agreed that this didn't sound fair, and that afternoon she asked the associate dean who handled teaching assignments about the women's complaint. She received a simple answer: "I try to find teaching opportunities for any student who approaches me with a good idea for a course, the ability to teach, and a reasonable offer about what it will cost," he explained. "More men ask. The women just don't ask."

The women just don't ask. This incident and the associate dean's explanation suggested to Linda the existence of a more pervasive problem. Could it be that women don't get more of the things they want in life in part because they don't think to ask for them? Are there external pressures that discourage women from asking as much as men do—and even keep them from realizing that they can ask? Are women really less likely than men to ask for what they want?

To explore this question, Linda conducted a study that looked at the starting salaries of students graduating from Carnegie Mellon University with their master's degrees.¹ When Linda looked exclusively at gender, the difference was fairly large: The starting salaries of the men were 7.6 percent or almost \$4,000 higher on average than those of the women. Trying to explain this difference, Linda looked next at who had negotiated his or her salary (who had asked for more money) and who had simply accepted the initial offer he or she had received. It turned out that only 7 percent of the female students had negotiated but 57 percent (eight times as many) of the men had asked for more money. Linda was particularly surprised to find such a dramatic difference between men and women at Carnegie Mellon because graduating students are

INTRODUCTION

strongly advised by the school's Career Services department to negotiate their job offers. Nonetheless, hardly any of the women had done so. The most striking finding, however, was that the students who had negotiated (most of them men) were able to increase their starting salaries by 7.4 percent on average, or \$4,053—almost exactly the difference between men's and women's average starting pay. This suggests that the salary differences between the men and the women might have been eliminated if the women had negotiated their offers.

Spurred on by this finding, Linda and two colleagues, Deborah Small and Michele Gelfand, designed another study to look at the propensity of men and women to ask for more than they are offered.² They recruited students at Carnegie Mellon for an experiment and told them that they would be paid between three and ten dollars for playing *Boggle*TM, a game by Milton Bradley. In *Boggle*, players shake a cube of tile letters until all the letters fall into a grid at the bottom of the cube. They must then identify words that can be formed from the letters vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. Each research subject was asked to play four rounds of the game, and then an experimenter handed him or her three dollars and said, "Here's three dollars. Is three dollars okay?" If a subject asked for more money, the experimenters would pay that participant ten dollars, but they would not give anyone more money if he or she just complained about the compensation (an indirect method of asking). The results were striking—almost *nine times* as many male as female subjects asked for more money.³ Both male and female subjects rated how well they'd played the game about equally, meaning that women didn't feel they should be paid less or should accept less because they'd played poorly. There were also no gender differences in how much men and women complained about the compensation (there was plenty of complaining all around). The significant factor seemed to be that for men, unhappiness with what they were offered was more likely to make them try to fix their unhappiness—by asking for more.

In a much larger study, Linda, Michele Gelfand, Deborah Small, and another colleague, Heidi Stayn, conducted a survey of several hundred people with access to the Internet (subjects were paid ten dollars to log on to a website and answer a series of questions).⁴ The survey asked respondents about the most recent negotiations they'd attempted or initiated (as opposed to negotiations they'd participated in that had been prompted or initiated by others). For the men, the most recent negotiation they'd initiated themselves had occurred two weeks earlier on average, while for the women the most recent negotiation they'd

WOMEN DON'T ASK

initiated had occurred a full month before. Averages for the second-most-recent negotiations attempted or initiated were about seven weeks earlier for men and twenty-four weeks earlier for women.

These results suggest that men are asking for things they want and initiating negotiations much more often than women—two to three times as often.⁵ Linda and her colleagues wanted to be sure that this discrepancy was not produced simply by memory lapses, however, so the survey also asked people about the *next* negotiation they planned to initiate. In keeping with the earlier findings, the negotiations planned by the women were much further in the future than those being planned by the men—one month ahead for the women but only one week ahead for the men. This means that men may be initiating *four* times as many negotiations as women. The sheer magnitude of this difference is dramatic, especially since respondents to the survey included people of all ages, from a wide range of professions, and with varied levels of education. It confirms that men really do take a more active approach than women to getting what they want by asking for it.

The more than 100 interviews we conducted in the process of writing this book—with men and women from a range of professions (including full-time mothers) and from Britain and Europe as well as the United States—supported these findings.⁶ When asked to identify the last negotiation in which they had participated, the majority of the women we talked to named an event several months in the past and described a recognized type of structured negotiation, such as buying a car. (The exceptions were women with small children, who uniformly said, “I negotiate with my kids all the time.”) The majority of the men described an event that had occurred within the preceding week, and frequently identified more informal transactions, such as negotiating with a spouse over who would take the kids to soccer practice, with a boss to pay for a larger-size rental car because of a strained back, or with a colleague about which parts of a joint project each team member would undertake. Men were also more likely to mention more ambiguous situations—situations that could be construed as negotiations but might not be by many people. For the most part, the men we talked to saw negotiation as a bigger part of their lives and a more common event than the women did.

One particularly striking aspect of our findings was how they broke down by age. The changes brought about by the women’s movement over the last 40 years had led us to expect greater differences between older men and women than between their younger counterparts. And

INTRODUCTION

indeed when we discussed the ideas in the book with younger women they often suggested that the problems we were studying were “boomer” problems, afflicting older women but not themselves. To our surprise, however, when we looked exclusively at respondents to the web survey who were in their twenties and early thirties, the gender differences in how often they initiated negotiations were similar to or slightly *larger* than the differences in older cohorts (with men attempting many more negotiations than women).⁷ In addition, both the starting salary study and the *Boggle* study used subjects who were in their twenties. This persuaded us that the tendency among women to accept what they’re offered and not ask for more is far from just a “boomer” problem.

The Asking Advantage

But just because women don’t ask for things as often as men do, is that necessarily a problem? Perhaps directly negotiating for advantage—asking for what you want—is a male strategy and women simply employ other equally effective strategies to get what they want. This is an important point, but only partly accurate. Women often worry more than men about the impact their actions will have on their relationships. This can prompt them to change their behavior to protect personal connections, sometimes by asking for things indirectly, sometimes by asking for less than they really want, and sometimes simply by trying to be more deserving of what they want (say, by working harder) so they’ll be given what they want without asking. Women also frequently take a more collaborative approach to problem-solving than men take, trying to find solutions that benefit both parties or trying to align their own requests with shared goals. In many situations, women’s methods can be superior to those typically employed by men (we explore the advantages of women’s different approaches and styles in the last chapter of the book). Unfortunately, however, in our largely male-defined work culture, women’s strategies can often be misinterpreted and can leave them operating from a position of weakness. And in many cases, the only way to get something is to ask for it directly.

So let’s look at the importance of asking.

First, consider the situation of the graduating students at Carnegie Mellon, in which eight times as many men as women negotiated their starting salaries. The women who did not negotiate started out not just behind their male peers, but behind where they could and should have

WOMEN DON'T ASK

been. With every future raise predicated on this starting point, they could be paying for this error for a long time—perhaps for the rest of their careers.

Liliane, now 46, is an electrical engineer and a successful software designer in New England's competitive high-tech industry. Although she earned excellent grades in college, she was so insecure when she started out in her field that she felt she didn't even deserve to be interviewed for an engineering job—she was only “faking it.” Despite her doubts, she quickly received an offer from a highly regarded company. When the company's personnel manager asked her what kind of salary she was looking for, she said, “I don't care what you pay me as long as you give me a job.” A big smile spread across the personnel manager's face, she remembers. She later learned that he gave her the absolute bottom of the range for her position, which was 10 to 20 percent less than her peers were earning. It took her ten years to fix this inequity, and she only did so, finally, by changing jobs.

Quantifying—in terms of dollars and cents—the loss to Liliane and women like her from not negotiating their salaries produces sobering results. Take the following example. Suppose that at age 22 an equally qualified man and woman receive job offers for \$25,000 a year. The man negotiates and gets his offer raised to \$30,000. The woman does not negotiate and accepts the job for \$25,000. Even if each of them receives identical 3 percent raises every year throughout their careers (which is unlikely, given their different propensity to negotiate and other research showing that women's achievements tend to be undervalued), by the time they reach age 60 the gap between their salaries will have widened to more than \$15,000 a year, with the man earning \$92,243 and the woman only \$76,870. While that may not seem like an enormous spread, remember that the man will have been making more all along, with his extra earnings over the 38 years totaling \$361,171. If the man had simply banked the difference every year in a savings account earning 3 percent interest, by age 60 he would have \$568,834 more than the woman—enough to underwrite a comfortable retirement nest egg, purchase a second home, or pay for the college education of a few children. This is an enormous “return on investment” for a *one-time* negotiation. It can mean a higher standard of living throughout one's working years, financial security in old age, or a top-flight education for one's kids.

The impact of neglecting to negotiate in this one instance—when starting a new job—is so substantial and difficult to overcome that some

INTRODUCTION

researchers who study the persistence of the wage gap between men and women speculate that much of the disparity can be traced to differences in entering salaries rather than differences in raises.⁸

Another estimate of a woman's potential lost earnings from not negotiating appears in the book *Get Paid What You're Worth* by two professors of management, Robin L. Pinkley and Gregory B. Northcraft. They estimate that a woman who routinely negotiates her salary increases will earn over one million dollars more by the time she retires than a woman who accepts what she's offered every time without asking for more. And that figure doesn't include the interest on the extra amount earned.⁹ Even in such a small matter as the *Boggle* experiment, the gains to asking were great. Everyone who asked for more money received ten dollars, more than three times as much as those who didn't ask and received only three dollars.

We all know that few employers will pay us any more than they need to. They're prepared to spend extra to get an applicant they want, but happy to pay less if they can. Assuming applicants will negotiate, they routinely offer less than they're able to pay.¹⁰ But if we fail to ask for more, it's a rare employer who will insist that we're not being paid enough. A recent study shows that this is true even at institutions with a committed policy against discriminating between men and women. This study describes a man and a woman with equivalent credentials who were offered assistant professorships by the same large university. Shortly after the two were hired, a male administrator noticed that the man's salary was significantly higher than the woman's. Looking into it, he learned that both were offered the same starting salary. The man negotiated for more, but the woman accepted what she was offered. Satisfied, the administrator let the matter drop. He didn't try to adjust the discrepancy or alert the female professor to her mistake. The university was saving money and enjoying the benefits of a talented woman's hard work and expertise. He didn't see the long-term damage to his institution and to society from not correcting such inequities (which we explore later in the book), and she didn't know how much she had sacrificed by not negotiating the offer she'd received.¹¹

Other new research emphasizes how important asking can be. Deepak Malhotra, who is now a professor at the Harvard Business School, assigned every student in a negotiation class he was teaching at the Kellogg School of Management to "go negotiate something in the real world." The students were then asked to write a report about what had happened. All of the students were part-timers who worked during the day and took classes at night. Of the 45 students in the class, 35 negoti-

WOMEN DON'T ASK

ated something for themselves (the purchase of an antique, the rental fee for an apartment, the salary for a job) and ten negotiated something on behalf of an employer (a contract with a consultant or supplier, a work agreement with a client). The median amount of money saved by the students who negotiated something for themselves was \$2,200. The median amount saved by those who negotiated something for their employers was \$390,000 (and these are just the medians; some people saved much more). More significant than the amounts saved, however, was the answer the students gave when asked to name the most important tactic that enabled them to achieve such extraordinary results: “Choosing to negotiate at all.” They reported that the biggest benefit of completing the exercise was learning that they could negotiate for things (such as rental fees) that they never knew were negotiable.¹²

Because Molehills Become Mountains

We’ve demonstrated how negotiating your starting salary for your first job can produce a gain of more than a half-million dollars by the end of your career. This one example illustrates a truth that has become better understood in recent years—that even small initial differences can quickly turn into big discrepancies over time. As a result, the cumulative effects of the gender gap in asking can be enormous. In the realm of social equity, small inequalities between men and women, between racial groups, or between heterosexuals and homosexuals have been shown to accumulate rapidly and dramatically to one group’s advantage and the other’s disadvantage.

To illustrate this phenomenon, three psychologists, Richard Martell, David Lane, and Cynthia Emrich, looked at what would happen if men in an organization consistently received slightly higher performance evaluations than women.¹³ (In chapter 4 we explore the dynamics of how this can occur even when there are no real differences in performance or productivity.) The researchers constructed a hypothetical “pyramid structure” organization, in which many people labor at the bottom levels of the organization and successively fewer people are promoted upward to the organization’s top levels. In this type of organization, people with the highest performance evaluations tend to be promoted more quickly from lower levels to higher ones. They also tend to go further—to get promoted higher up the ladders of responsibility and power than people with lower evaluations. The researchers noted that even when differences in the performance evaluations awarded to

INTRODUCTION

men and women were miniscule (as low as 1 percent), and men and women started out in identical positions in the organization, it didn't take long before the overwhelming majority of people at the highest levels were men.

This is what sociologists call “accumulation of disadvantage.” As the psychologist Virginia Valian writes in her book *Why So Slow: The Advancement of Women*: “It is unfair to neglect even minor instances of group-based bias, because they add up to major inequalities.”¹⁴ The bottom line is that even if women were asking for comparable things and were equally successful at getting what they ask for when they *do* ask, this simple difference in the “asking propensity” of men and women would inevitably lead to men having more opportunities and accumulating more resources. But women don't ask for comparable things—they ask for less when they do ask, and they usually get less, too. The net result is a huge imbalance in the distribution of resources and opportunities between men and women. Because women ask for what they want less often than men do, and therefore get what they want much less of the time, the inequities in our society, and all the problems they create, continue to pile up. Or, as Virginia Valian has written, “molehills become mountains.”¹⁵

More than Money

The penalties for not negotiating extend far beyond the merely monetary, too. As Pinkley and Northcraft demonstrate,

Applicants with identical experience and performance records but different salary histories are rated differently by employers. If your compensation record is better than others, employers will assume that your performance is better too. . . . Accepting less will imply that you have less value than other new hires.¹⁶

In many cases, employers actually respect candidates more for pushing to get paid what they're worth. This means that women don't merely sacrifice additional income when they don't push to be paid more, they may sacrifice some of their employers' regard too. The experience of Hope, a business school professor, tells this story clearly. When she completed graduate school, Hope was offered a job at a prestigious management consulting firm. Not wanting to “start off on the wrong foot,” she accepted the firm's initial salary offer without asking for more.

WOMEN DON'T ASK

Although she feared that negotiating her salary would damage her new bosses' impression of her, the opposite occurred: She later learned that her failure to negotiate almost convinced the senior management team that they'd made a mistake in hiring her.

Similarly, Ellen, 44, a senior partner at a large law firm, was checking the references of an experienced paralegal named Lucy whom she wanted to hire. One of Lucy's former supervisors described a long list of Lucy's strengths and recommended her highly. But when Ellen asked about Lucy's weaknesses, the supervisor said that Lucy could be more assertive. Ellen asked if she meant Lucy needed to be more assertive on behalf of the firm's clients. The supervisor said no, Lucy was terrific at tracking down any information that could benefit a client's case. What she meant, the supervisor explained, was that Lucy needed to be more assertive on her own behalf. "She could be a lot more assertive when it comes to her own professional needs and rewards," the woman explained. This supervisor felt that not asking for more on her own behalf was a professional weakness in Lucy—and a serious enough weakness that she mentioned it when providing an otherwise glowing reference.

Women also make sacrifices in their personal lives by not asking for what they need more of the time. Miriam, 46, an architect, is also married to an architect. But whereas her husband works for an internationally known firm and travels regularly for his job, Miriam works for herself. And because they have two children, she restricts herself to residential projects in her home state. When her children were small, her husband was out of town two to five days a week, and she was taking care of the children pretty much by herself. Although she enjoyed a lot of artistic freedom in her work and built up a successful practice constructing two- and three-million-dollar houses (houses that won awards and were featured in design magazines), the demands of her family life felt crushing. "I just felt like this is the way that life is for me and there is not anything that I can do about this." Now she wonders "if there would have been ways of asking for more help" instead of "working and working until I fell apart." The problem was that "asking didn't really seem like a possibility, but I'm sure that it was."

Missing the Chance

Besides not realizing that asking is possible, many women avoid negotiating even in situations in which they know that negotiation is appro-

INTRODUCTION

priate and expected (like the female students in the starting salary study). In another one of Linda's studies, 20 percent of the women polled said that they never negotiate at all.¹⁷ Although this seems unlikely (perhaps these women think of their negotiations as something else, such as "problem-solving" or "compromising" or even "going along to get along"), their statement conveys a strong antipathy toward negotiating among a huge number of women. (In the United States alone, 20 percent of the female adult population equals 22 million people.)

That many women feel uncomfortable using negotiation to advance their interests—and feel more uncomfortable on average than men—was confirmed by a section of Linda's Internet survey. This part of the survey asked respondents to consider various scenarios and indicate whether they thought negotiation would be appropriate in the situations described. In situations in which they thought negotiation was appropriate, respondents were also asked to report how likely they would be to negotiate in that situation. Particularly around work scenarios, such as thinking they were due for a promotion or a salary increase, women as a group were less likely to try to negotiate than men—even though they recognized that negotiation was appropriate and probably even necessary.¹⁸

These findings are momentous because until now research on negotiation has mostly ignored the issue of when and why people attempt to negotiate, focusing instead on tactics that are successful once a negotiation is underway—what kinds of offers to make, when to concede, and which strategies are most effective in different types of negotiations.¹⁹ With few exceptions, researchers have ignored the crucial fact that the most important step in any negotiation process must be deciding to negotiate in the first place.²⁰ Asking for what you want is the essential first step that "kicks off" a negotiation. If you miss your chance to negotiate, the best negotiation advice in the world isn't going to help you much. And women simply aren't "asking" at the same rate as men.

A New Perspective

Our goal in this book is to explore the causes of this difference between men and women, using "asking" as a lens through which to examine how women negotiate life in the broadest sense. In the following pages, we will examine why many women often don't realize that change is possible—why they don't know that they *can* ask. We will look at the

WOMEN DON'T ASK

social forces that school women, from the time they are very young, to focus on the needs of others rather than on their own needs. And we will show how our shared assumptions, as a society, about what constitutes appropriate female behavior can act as a kind of psychological strait-jacket when a woman wants to assert her own wishes and desires.

Despite recent gains made by women in many realms and the comparative openness of Western democracies to progress, our society still perpetuates rigid gender-based standards for behavior—standards that require women to behave modestly and unselfishly and to avoid promoting their own self-interest. New generations of children are taught to abide by and internalize these standards, making them less likely as adults to rebel against these common beliefs. In addition, women who do rebel against these standards by pushing more overtly on their own behalf often risk being punished. Sometimes they're called "pushy" or "bitchy" or "difficult to work with." Sometimes their skills and contributions are undervalued and they're passed over for promotions they deserve. Other times, they're left out of information-sharing networks. Experiencing this treatment themselves or seeing other women treated this way, many women struggle with intense anxiety when they consider asking for something they want—anxiety that can deter them from asking at all or interfere with their ability to ask well.

In addition, even when women do negotiate, they often get less than a man in the same situation might get. Sometimes this happens because women set less aggressive goals going into their negotiations than men set and sometimes it happens because both men and women in our society typically take a harder line against women than they take against men in a negotiation. They make worse first offers to women, pressure women to concede more, and themselves concede much less. This doesn't simply limit the results women produce when they do negotiate. If the benefits from negotiating are likely to be small and the process promises to be difficult, many women feel less incentive to ask in the first place.

By exposing the social forces that constrain women from promoting their own interests and limit them from getting more when they try, we hope to make it easier for women to do things differently. We're convinced that for behavior to change women must understand, at a very deep level, the forces that shape their beliefs, attitudes, and impulses. Simply telling women what they should do differently without helping them understand the root causes of their behavior will make women feel anxious and inadequate, we suspect, but won't help them achieve

INTRODUCTION

meaningful change. So in the pages that follow we explore the many causes and ramifications of this newly recognized problem.

Working from this foundation, we also describe in every chapter ways in which women can resist and even retool their early social training, reframe their interactions with others, and overcome the low sense of entitlement, fear, or extreme caution that can keep them from taking full advantage of their talents. We don't mean to imply that this problem has a simple solution, however—that women just need to wake up and ask for things more of the time and the problem will go away. Women tend to hesitate before asking for what they want not because of a silly blind spot that's entirely their own responsibility but because they are taught early on that pushing on their own behalf is unfeminine, unattractive, and unwelcome—not to mention ineffective.

So we want to be clear: This book is not simply a study of an inexplicable female failing that can easily be corrected. It is not about ways in which women need to “fix” themselves. It is an examination of how our culture—modern Western culture—strongly discourages women from asking for what they want. (The situations of women in other parts of the world bear many similarities to those of women in the West, but they're beyond the scope of this book). We hope it will help individual women improve their circumstances and increase their happiness. But even more, we hope it will provoke social change on a larger scale by inspiring everyone—in the workforce and at home—to think differently about how women can and should behave. To this end, we also include suggestions for how managers in the workplace and adults both at work and at home can change their behavior toward the women around them. Until society accepts that it is a good thing for women to promote their own interests and negotiate on their own behalf, women will continue to find it difficult to pursue their dreams and ambitions in straightforward and effective ways. And we'll show that preventing women from doing so involves substantial social and economic costs for us all.

Affirming the Right to Ask

Can women learn to recognize more hidden opportunities in their circumstances—and can the world learn to accept women who ask? Can women overcome their anxiety and find effective ways to negotiate—and can people stop taking a harder line when they negotiate with

WOMEN DON'T ASK

women? Luckily, the answer to all of these questions is yes. Recognizing more opportunities for negotiation in your circumstances is a skill that can be learned—in many cases quite easily. In the three years we spent writing this book, we discussed our ideas with many women who went out and applied them in their lives, with dramatic results (many of their stories appear in the chapters that follow). Research also shows that certain kinds of training can help women become more effective negotiators (and can substantially decrease their anxiety) by increasing their sense of control over the negotiation process and teaching them to anticipate roadblocks, plan countermoves, and resist conceding too much or too soon. Rather than merely imitating men (which often doesn't work), women can learn to ask *as women*. They can find their own “negotiating voices,” develop more ambitious goals—and get good results.

Society can also change. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point*, describes how New York City dramatically reduced its crime rate in a very short time by making crime seem less permissible in the streets of New York. The city did this by cleaning up those streets—eradicating graffiti, replacing broken windows, removing garbage—and by cracking down on even the most minor crimes, such as fare-jumping in the subways. Through these seemingly small changes, the city was able to achieve a profound cultural shift: It was able to change people's behavior. People with the same deprived backgrounds or bad motives—whatever drives people into crime—stopped committing criminal acts simply because small changes in their environment signaled that such behavior was no longer appropriate there. As Gladwell writes, “We like to think of ourselves as autonomous and inner-directed, that who we are and how we act is something permanently set by our genes and our temperament.”²¹ Instead, he shows, “We are actually powerfully influenced by our surroundings, our immediate context, and the personalities of those around us.”²²

Similarly, changing the context and the cultural environment in which women live and work can change the behavior of the people who live and work with them, making certain ways of responding to women seem less permissible. This type of change can be achieved by a few people in a group consciously deciding to treat men and women more equally—and by their example influencing the behavior and beliefs of others. It can be achieved by men in positions of power making a commitment to mentoring talented women. It can be achieved by a lot of people paying closer attention to the different ways in which they treat men and women and raise their male and female children.

INTRODUCTION

Gladwell calls rapid, large-scale social changes (such as the crime reduction in New York) social “epidemics.” As *The Tipping Point* demonstrates, epidemics of social change are rarely the result of a single, unified effort by millions of people. Because subtle adjustments in their circumstances can strongly influence people’s beliefs and behavior, even small changes sometimes have a “multiplier” effect. Or, as Gladwell writes, “big changes follow from small events.”²³ We hope this book will prompt an epidemic of small changes and lead to a genuine loosening of the constraints that bind women.

This is not to say that change on a larger scale is not possible as well. One organization, the international accounting and consulting firm of Deloitte and Touche, which employs about 29,000 people in the United States and a total of 95,000 worldwide, has already demonstrated that with hard work and commitment large-scale cultural change is also possible. In 1991, Deloitte and Touche decided that it had a problem concerning women. Only 5 percent of the firm’s partners were women, and even though it had been hiring large numbers of women since 1980, by 1991 only 8 percent of the new candidates for partner were female.²⁴ A task force formed to look into the problem discovered that so few women were coming up for partnerships because most of them were leaving before they qualified for partner. The average annual turnover rate among female managers was huge: 33 percent. The task force also calculated that every percentage point in turnover translated into an estimated 13 million dollars for costs such as recruitment, hiring bonuses, and training. Although the members of the task force assumed that women were leaving Deloitte and Touche to stay home and have children, they quickly learned that this was not the case. Women were not leaving to stay home but were moving to other firms. When polled, women cited Deloitte and Touche’s male-dominated culture as a big reason for leaving: The company was just not a comfortable place for women to work. The task force also found that within the firm, both men and women wanted the freedom to balance work and family better. No one wanted what was then the standard 80-hour work week.

The task force set about fixing these problems by conducting a series of workshops—attended by more than five thousand people in groups of 24—to talk about gender issues in the workplace. As a way for them to identify common assumptions made about women in the workplace, the teams were given scenarios to discuss. For example, in one, a man and a woman both came late to a meeting. Although the team members ignored the man’s tardiness, they automatically assumed that the

WOMEN DON'T ASK

woman was having child-care problems. In discussing the impact of this discrepancy in their responses, the team members realized that assumptions like this can negatively influence how a woman is evaluated. This led them to look more closely at how men and women at the firm were evaluated, and they discovered that men were typically evaluated on their “potential” while women were more commonly evaluated on their performance. The net result was that men were being promoted much faster than women. Other common practices looked at by the teams included a firmwide tendency to give men and women different work assignments (which make a big difference in who advances) based on unexamined and often unfounded assumptions. These included assuming that women wouldn't be comfortable in manufacturing environments or that women wouldn't want to travel too much—the latter a particularly career-damaging assumption at a company that relies heavily on travel to serve its clients.

Once people at Deloitte and Touche started looking at their assumptions about men and women, they began to see the implications of their beliefs—and how they made the atmosphere at the firm inhospitable to women and limited their advancement. The next step was to make changes. Prompted by the task force, all the firm's offices were required to produce annual reviews documenting how well women were progressing through their portion of the organization. They were also required to track the number of women recruited and retained by each office, and these numbers were widely circulated across offices. This basic accountability changed the way assignments were made and evaluations determined. Individual offices also started networking events and career-planning programs especially for women. Firmwide, the requirements for travel were changed, lessening the time that everyone—both men and women—was expected to be away from the office. The company also advertised that taking advantage of flexible work arrangements wouldn't hinder one's professional advancement within the organization. This dramatically increased the use of these programs by men as well as women.

By the year 2000, the number of female partners at Deloitte and Touche had almost tripled, from 5 to 14 percent—a huge gain in nine years. The firm had also eliminated the gender gap in turnover (now about 18 percent annually for both men and women), and saved close to \$250 million in hiring and training costs. Particularly heartening about this story is the evidence that the changes at Deloitte and Touche benefited both men and women—women because they could stay at

INTRODUCTION

the company, enjoy working there more, and advance at a better pace, and men because they too could take advantage of flexible work arrangements, reduced travel loads, and a more supportive work environment without negative repercussions. And the bottom line is that rather than costing money, the company actually saved millions of dollars—and stopped hemorrhaging talented people.²⁵ Building on this success, the company is pushing toward even more ambitious goals by 2005.

The experience of this one far-sighted company provides a wonderful model for how the rest of us, with a little commitment and persistent focus, can change our world. Gender equality, with the benefits it can bring to all of us, our sons as well as our daughters, will not be attainable unless our society has the courage, the resolve, and—perhaps most important—the information and the insight to make across-the-board changes. Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter explains it this way:

Individual trickle-up is not enough. . . . The whole social system must be changed if women in general, not just a hardy, pioneering few, are to gain economic power. The apparent openness of American society to the overachiever from an underprivileged minority group who can pull herself up by the pantyhose and succeed makes it too easy to assume that the problems and solutions are all individual ones. It makes it easy for those in power to point to the token overachiever as an example.²⁶

In other words, just because a few women manage to succeed despite the impediments our society erects in their paths doesn't mean that these impediments don't exist or that there's no problem. Kanter also says that "a vision of what is possible, a source of hope and inspiration, is the necessary ingredient for energizing change."²⁷ We hope that this book, by shining a spotlight on the barriers that prevent women from asking for what they want—and suggesting ways for those barriers to be removed—will play a part in providing that vision of what is possible.