

Asking Pays Off: Negotiate What You Need to Succeed

By Deborah M. Kolb, Ph.D.



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New leaders fail at an impressive rate. That's because many people don't know how to negotiate for what they need to improve their odds for success.

What happened the last time you faced a new leadership opportunity? Whether you were called on to head a team, a task force, a practice group, a legal department, or a company, chances are you negotiated the perquisites of the appointment—your title, vacation, and bonus. But did you look beyond these basics and negotiate for what you would need to succeed in the new role?

All new leaders will be tested in their roles and need to negotiate to improve their odds of success. Yet people often fail to address issues critical to their ability to perform on the job: their fit with the role, support that could legitimate their appointment, and the resources that could push forth their agenda.

In our research, we have found that women who negotiate conditions for their success as leaders had higher performance reviews, were more likely to be offered leadership development opportunities, and were more satisfied with their jobs and less likely to leave their companies than women who did not negotiate conditions for their success.¹ Yet women, and indeed all leaders, often overlook valuable opportunities to jump-start their leadership because of three faulty assumptions: (1) “My choice is either yes or no,” (2) “My appointment speaks for itself,” and (3) “I can pick up the slack.” Before you can build a

strategic campaign to negotiate the conditions you need to perform well in a new role, you must learn to overcome these flawed assumptions.

Assumption One: “My choice is either yes or no.”

When offered a promotion, a job, or a stretch assignment, most people weigh the opportunity as a yea or nay. Suppose you have been asked to consider taking over an underperforming unit that has great potential in your company. You are interested, but given some complications in your personal life, you do not think it is feasible. Reluctantly, you turn down the assignment. Or maybe you have been asked to lead a task force on performance management. You are not crazy about the particular assignment, but there are so few leadership opportunities in your department that you feel you have to accept.

This assumption about choice frames your decision in categorical terms: “Yes, I accept” or “No, I don’t.” In the process, it forecloses other possibilities: “Yes, but . . .” or, even better, “Yes, and . . .” Self-perceptions of your own weakness often lead to this dichotomous thinking. In fact, however constrained your decision may seem, there are multiple points you can negotiate to make the role a better fit with what you want, who you are, and what you bring to it. But to recognize those possibilities, you have to view yourself as well positioned to negotiate. How? By gathering good intelligence about your value and your areas of vulnerability.

Strategy One: Negotiate the “fit.”

You have been offered a leadership opportunity because you have what the other side needs. When negotiating the terms of your acceptance, communicating the value you bring to the role is a prerequisite for getting what you want. That clarity can come from gathering good intelligence about why you were tapped for the position in the first place. It also helps to know what gaps others may perceive in your skill set or

résumé. From this data, you can begin to identify changes to the job description that would make it a better fit for you.

Alex Poole, a sales executive, was offered a promotion she did not think she could refuse; at her level, few other opportunities would come up. But with young children at home, she knew she could not take on the travel that went with the position.

By gathering intelligence from her network, Poole learned that her superiors viewed her as the right person for the job because of her experience in global channel distribution. Armed with that knowledge, she negotiated a restructuring of the unit. Two deputies already in place would take on new responsibilities and devote time to global customers. At headquarters, Poole would develop strategy and meet with customers only when her expertise was needed.

By negotiating the terms of an ostensibly nonnegotiable offer, Alex produced an alternative that worked for everyone: Customers received hands-on attention, key staff members gained important experience, the company put its channel distribution in capable hands, and Poole’s home life remained stable.

Assumption Two: “My appointment speaks for itself.”

Most new leadership roles involve some stretch, which means that a person is rarely a perfect fit for a role. You may have some experiences that are exactly on target, but there are always gaps in a résumé. The question is, will people focus on your value or your vulnerabilities? All too often, people assume that their appointment speaks for itself. It is rare when individuals are a perfect fit for a specific leadership position, though they might have some experiences that are exactly on target. For instance, if you have successfully merged several large groups before, the task of consolidating departments builds on those experiences. Or, if you have managed top-performing offices, you are a natural candidate when the firm needs a new regional managing partner.

Yet, no résumé is squarely on point. Sure, you merged those groups, but they were not being consolidated after an acquisition; do you have the requisite operational expertise? And, yes, you managed offices in markets where your firm had an established presence—but not in this new region.

Given the elusiveness of a perfect fit, you can expect that some will be cheered by your appointment, while others may mount a quiet—or not-so-quiet—opposition. They might think your credentials do not stack up against theirs or those of a valued mentor. Perhaps they enjoyed productive relationships with the previous incumbent and worry about the disruption.

Negative or ambiguous first reactions are perfectly natural. But if left unchecked, they can easily undermine a new leader's ability to command authority and promote an agenda. The task of providing a rationale and support for an appointment would naturally fall to those making the hiring or promotion decision, but you cannot assume that those reasons are self-evident. Visible support needs to be negotiated.

Strategy Two: Negotiate for a persuasive introduction.

New leaders need powerful introductions from key leaders to create a compelling rationale for their appointment. When the CEO of a growing medical-supply company appointed Janis Smyth as the first senior vice president of administration, there was concern that operational department heads, who preferred the loose way the company had been run, would resist new policies and procedures. Smyth negotiated with the CEO over the support she needed for the new role. The CEO agreed to meet with each operational leader individually to provide the strategic rationale for the appointment. By doing this, he not only lent support to Smyth in her new role but also made it clear that any resistance to the change would interfere with plans to manage growth.

Assumption Three: "I can pick up the slack."

In the early stages of a new leadership role, you need resources—money, personnel, and time—to get the job done. In today's organization, the challenge is to do more with less. New leaders in resource-constrained contexts have a natural tendency to want

to show that they can meet tough standards. But doing so not only trains others to expect that you will continue to do without; it also overlooks the symbolic importance of garnering resources. In the time between an appointment and evidence of clear results, your colleagues and superiors will watch and decide whether you carry influence in the organization. One indication of influence is the ability to secure resources.

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What's more, respecting resource constraints can carry unintended consequences. Suppose you agree to grow a new line of business with only your boss's vague promise of funds to support the initiative. You charge ahead, figuring you can get what you need later on. But even when the line proves to be a huge success, no additional resources are forthcoming. Understaffed and underfunded, your team struggles to stay afloat. Resentment grows, and the project and relationships suffer.

Strategy Three: Negotiate for small wins.

The ability to garner resources can position the new leader as someone who gets things done. Even when financial resources are scarce, do not rule out the possibility of negotiating creatively for them. Resources determine what can be accomplished in a new assignment, but their effect is also symbolic. Staff members attach themselves to people who can get things done, and the capacity to procure resources is good evidence of that ability.

The fact that people have multiple interests at stake means that you can negotiate for high-value, yet inexpensive, resources. For example, the deputy branch chief of a large government installation discovered that her department had a much smaller travel budget and much less

computer equipment than a comparable unit. In negotiations with the branch chief, she made a pitch for a modest budget increase as well as for greater equality between departments. Her minor victory demonstrated to her unit that she was a go-getter with their interests at heart.

Sometimes your allies may be in a better position to secure resources for you. After a series of layoffs, for example, the director of client services at a strategic-consulting firm was finding it difficult to staff engagements. The functional leader was unwilling to incur hiring costs before revenues accrued; as a result, the few people on each job were overworked and stressed. When a major client was unwilling to sign a contract without specific staff commitments, the director enlisted the relationship manager to help make the case to the functional leader. The relationship manager, who had a clear stake in meeting the client's needs, was able to persuade the leader that revenues would cover hiring. To the team's relief, the director got the resources necessary for the engagement.

New leaders fail at impressive rates. Although your prehiring negotiations are no substitute for on-the-job performance, you can boost impressions in the early stages of a new role by making sure that you are a good fit, that support is strong, and that you have sufficient resources committed to the task. And when you do, it is a win for you and a win for your organization. ●

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Endnote

1. DEBORAH KOLB, JUDITH WILLIAMS, & CAROL FROHLINGER, *HER PLACE AT THE TABLE: A WOMAN'S GUIDE TO NEGOTIATING FIVE CHALLENGES TO LEADERSHIP SUCCESS* (Jossey-Bass 2004); Deborah Kolb & Jill Kickul, *It Pays to Ask: Negotiating Conditions for Leadership Success*, Briefing Note 23, Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons College School of Management (2006).