

A large, white, stylized question mark is positioned on the left side of the image. The background is a blurred photograph of a person's hands, one of which is extended palm-up, suggesting a gesture of offering or negotiation. The overall tone is professional and contemplative.

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Attacking Culture One Negotiation at a Time

Deborah M. Kolb & Jessica L. Porter

It has come like a thunderbolt.

Some of our most esteemed companies in the new economy woke up and discovered that their workforce was overwhelmingly male (70% at Google, for example) and it was difficult to find more than a handful of women at the top. These companies recognize this is a big problem, and they plan to do something serious to change it, at least if we go by the amount of resources devoted to remedying the imbalance. Intel, for example, has committed \$300 million over the next 5 years to make the company “more representative of talent in the U.S.,” i.e. less male and less white. The challenge is what to do.

Certainly, firms in the high tech industry have a pipeline problem—women and minorities are underrepresented in engineering and other technical fields. Recruiting efforts can help get people in the door. The real challenge is to retain them and channel them into more senior ranks. To do so, organizations will have to confront aspects of their organizational cultures—the unseen barriers—that make it challenging for people who are different to succeed.

We use the term *2nd generation gender bias* to describe these unseen barriers. These biases are not intentional, but instead arise from cultural assumptions and organizational practices that can inadvertently put women at a disadvantage.

Since they are unintentional and often invisible, these biases can be hard to address. The first task is to identify them in your organization. There are certain places to look—unconscious bias in hiring and promotion, opportunity structures that channel women and men into different functions, conceptions that an ideal worker is available 24/7, among others.

Once we've identified them, the next challenge how can we alter them. In our book, *Negotiating at Work: Turn Small Wins into Big Gains*, we explain that when individuals negotiate a change in practice they create what we call *small wins*. These small wins for individuals can aggregate and begin to chip away at institutional barriers. Let's consider a few examples.

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Career Paths

Career paths in the modern corporation typically require mobility, often including overseas assignments. When male breadwinners could be counted on to make the move with their family trailing behind, that was no problem. But for Carla, a procurement manager in oil and gas, it was a problem. Her boss assumed that because she had a family and a husband with a job in Dallas, she would not be interested in an overseas role. In order to get a bump in her career, she had to negotiate to get the role, which she did.

She knew she needed to be strategic in her negotiation. After all her boss was not expecting the negotiation and probably already had somebody else in mind for the role. Carla not only had to show her boss the value she would bring to the role, she had to anticipate and be ready to respond to his reasons for saying no to her. He agreed to give her the role, but Carla had more up her sleeve.

Indeed, she had a family and had no interest in living in East Africa for 3 years. In the context of our global economy, Carla thought that there was no reason to move her family there. Instead she negotiated a flexible office arrangement where she spent a few weeks in Africa punctuated by long spells in Dallas. Knowing this would be a stretch, she negotiated performance criteria to gauge how well the plan would work. They also agreed that it would be a pilot.

After three months it was clear that her experiment worked. Not only did Carla excel in her job, but also she created small wins. In the future, it could not be presumed that a woman would not take an international role. Further, she modeled a new way of doing international roles that would work better not only for women but for men as well. Carla's negotiation had put a crack in the barrier that women were not available for international roles.

Unconscious Bias In Hiring and Promotion

Many organizations have schooled their managers in the ways that unconscious bias seeps into decision-making. Both women and men tend to associate men with careers and the workplace and women with caretaking and family. While recognizing we hold these biases may be helpful (though new research suggests we may become more biased as a result), we need to go beyond recognition and reveal how biases play out in organizational structures and processes. One way is in hiring and promotion. "Hire like me," is common shorthand for this practice. Rosabeth Kanter noted many years ago that at more senior levels of organizations, people are not crystal clear about the talents needed for a particular role. Absent that clear criteria, we tend to prefer candidates who remind us of ourselves. Despite efforts to create diverse slates for positions, "hire like me" is more common than we like to think.

“Hire like me” was the challenge Julia, manager of a sales division in a media company, faced when she heard that the regional role in sales was opening up. The rumor was that the division head was poised to appoint Jack, a sales manager whom he knew in previous roles. Based on her experience and her performance in the divisional role, Julia thought she was a good candidate, but she was not on the screen for it. In order to be considered for the role, she would need to negotiate. But her first challenge was daunting—how would she get the decision maker to the table to negotiate with her?

She knew she would have to make her potential value visible to him—to find ways to let him know about her performance with clients and customers. She would also have to allay concerns he might have that, because she has a family, she might not have the time to devote in the evenings to be with clients. But what was crucial was not that she persuade him that she’s a better candidate than Jack—though it would be nice—but rather that she negotiate with him about the success criteria for the role. She did this, and together they were able to develop a clear set of criteria for the regional role. With those criteria in hand, the division head could make a better-informed hire. It was a small win for Julia but also created a potential moment of learning for the division head. This is important because to the degree that others learn from this experience there is a possibility of a bigger gain—that leaders clearly clarify the experience, skills, and talent they are looking for in leadership roles.

There is another way clarifying realistic criteria for leadership roles might chip away at an unseen barrier. Often when we post a position we do so aspirationally—we describe what our ideal candidate would look like. Yet we know that some people will more easily elide those skills and experiences they lack and put themselves forward anyway. In one company we work with, the hiring manager noticed that with aspirational postings, men put themselves forward for the position (despite gaps in their resume) but women did not. Posting a realistic, as opposed to aspirational, position description resulted in a much wider pool of applicants without impacting the level of actual qualifications of the candidates. Looking for these kinds of small wins are important if we want to ensure that our most talented leaders are hired and promoted—which is not happening now. Making criteria clear and relevant to the roles we want to fill could help.

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Invisible Work, and a Lot of It

Consistently, studies show that women tend to outperform men in 360-degree leadership evaluations on dimensions like developing others, building a team, and collaboration, and perform equal to men on strategic dimensions like having a global perspective and connecting to the outside world. Despite this, they are less likely than men to be seen as having high potential for leadership. In part, research suggests, this may be because the collaborative, behind-the-scenes work is not as highly valued. Companies tend to ignore or undervalue behind-the-scenes work—like avoiding crises (as opposed to heroically dealing with them after the fact) or building a team—what we call “invisible work.”

A new set of studies now suggests that women are more likely to get asked to help out at work on projects and tasks that have only tangential relation to their existing roles. Those who ask expect a yes, and women, we’ve learned, feel compelled to assent. There are a number of implications to this surfeit of extra work. Not only does it mean potentially longer working hours, but certainly means that it takes time away from her “real” job and that time away can have performance repercussions.

That is what happened to Anita. She is a regional corporate communications manager for a large manufacturing company. A leader in another group asked her to help out with a problem

they were having with a large contract in another region. With a reputation as a helper, Anita agreed even though it would mean essentially working long hours to do her own work and help with this other project. Her efforts paid off for the other group. She helped save the contract and got kudos all the way up to the CEO. But her success became a problem when the other group always seemed to need her help and she found herself doing two jobs. This is not an unusual dynamic, we have learned from our work with women's leadership groups.

Anita resolved that she would turn the next ask into a “yes, and” negotiation. Of course she could have always said “no” the next time they asked, but she saw this as an opportunity to expand her role and visibility. She put together a proposal for her boss to add another region to her portfolio with a promotion. Although she could show the benefits of doing so, her boss was reluctant as it would mean a reorganization and increased costs. He told her to wait.

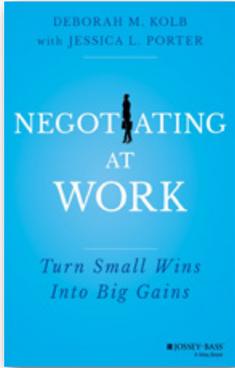
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And she did wait, until the next time the request to help came when she introduced her “yes, and...” strategy. Yes she would help, and in order to be able to help she needed the leader to support her in negotiations with her boss. Implied in this request was of course an indirect threat—she couldn’t keep doing the work unless he was willing to help. It is what we call using an “iron fist in a very soft velvet glove.” And it worked. He wanted to help because he valued Anita’s contributions. He did support her negotiation and her boss ultimately expanded her role with the attendant title and compensation. Allies help.

Women can get trapped doing extra and invisible work. Not only does it take time away from their “real” work, but it positions them more as helpers than leaders which can make them seem less suited for senior leadership roles. A challenge is that people expect a woman to say yes so she risks being seen as uncooperative if she says no. But it is also important to notice that this kind of helping and invisible work is important to an organization, but it needs to be valued. That is why these situations are ripe for negotiation. For Anita, this was a small win, but it was also a bigger gain. For her boss and the leader in the other region, they could no longer see her work as having no cost. Together they put a clear value on invisible work—something that is good for the people who do it and for the organization that benefits. It has the potential to lower another barrier.

As our best companies seek to make their companies more diverse at all levels, seeing the barriers that get in the way of that goal is important. We have touched on three. There are others. Mothers and people who make use of flexible policies suffer penalties in pay and promotion. Research by Catalyst and others suggest that women are more likely to be segregated in support roles like Human Resources and Marketing that are not as likely to lead to senior leadership. And women may be more likely to be assigned risky change agent roles that make them highly visible. Once we recognize these second generation issues, there are many actions companies can take to remedy them. But we should not overlook what individuals can do to **negotiate small wins that can lead to bigger gains.** 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS | **Deborah M. Kolb, PhD**, is a foremost expert in the fields of negotiation, leadership, and gender issues, a sought-after speaker; and a highly-regarded author. Dr. Kolb is the Deloitte Ellen Gabriel Professor for Women in Leadership (Emerita) and founder of the Center for Gender in Organizations at Simmons College. She was former executive director and is currently co-director of the negotiations in the Workplace Project at the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School. For more, visit [DeborahMKolb.com](#). **Jessica L. Porter** has advised organizations worldwide, including many in the Fortune 500, on gender and leadership. For more, visit [JessicaLPorter.com](#).

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