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### "To Get What You Want, Ask for It"

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Today's lesson is about looking out for yourself. No, I'm not advising knocking down children and the elderly to escape a burning building. This is about looking out for yourself on the job and in your life.

Many of the problems women encounter in their careers – lack of recognition for work that is as good as or better than their male counterparts, difficulty juggling work and family responsibilities, etc. – could be solved or at least improved if women stood up for themselves and asked for what they wanted. Strike that. For what they *deserved*.

The cost of not asking is more than financial – although that cost is significant. When women settle for middling raises or unchallenging work assignments, or when the stress of balancing work and family becomes so hard that they simply quit the work force entirely, the cumulative impact on all women in the workplace is staggering. It means fewer women in seats of power, and fewer women making laws and policies that might make the work world more livable for all of us – men and women, the childbearing and the childless alike.

A steady exodus of women from the workforce also is bad for business. It costs far more to find and train a new employee than it does to retain one that has already been trained. And, although firms know this and are making progress in recognizing the importance of retention, it's ultimately up to women to take charge of their careers and make them more rewarding and life as a working woman more livable.

Don't expect your life to improve just by wishing for it. Even the lottery requires buying a ticket. And don't expect it to improve just by working hard and being a great lawyer – although, as any regular reader of this column knows, being good at what you do is the price of admission for getting anywhere in this or any other profession. Women are notorious for deflecting credit, attributing their success to "luck" and "being in the right place at the right time." Rightly or wrongly, men aren't so ready to chalk their success up to serendipity. And neither should we.

If you're successful; if clients ask for you, personally, to handle their matters; if your motions get granted more often than the other side's, it's probably not because the judge like your sweater or you're just "on a roll." It's because you're talented and smart.

I have a secret about firms: They like talented, smart people. Talented, smart people get results and make clients happy. When clients are happy, they tend to ask firms to do more work for them. Firms like money, and they really like people who can help them make more of it.

#### Three Tips

So if you're good at what you do, and you're looking to improve your situation (either to climb higher or to accommodate your family obligations), here are some ideas to get you going:

*Ask for recognition.* When raise or bonus time comes around, arm yourself with your most recent successes. Give yourself a pep talk. Channel Muhammed Ali's overwhelming confidence for a few minutes. Then ask for what you want: more money, a better office, more challenging assignments – you name it. And be prepared to hear "no" (or some version of "no") at first. Learn to be a tough negotiator. The bookstores and library shelves are bulging with advice books for women these days. Go check them out.

*Take care of yourself.* One of the biggest enemies women face isn't discrimination; it's stress. Because women use more of their senses more of the time than men, we are more apt to feel overwhelmed by the various stimuli in our lives. The cumulative effect of all that stress is exhaustion and burnout, neither of which are career boosters. Everything you need to know about taking care of your self you learned in kindergarten: eat right, exercise and get a good night's sleep. Granted,

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finding the time do those three things isn't easy (after all, veggies don't steam themselves and Shepardizing doesn't work up much of a sweat). Which brings us to...

*Negotiate more flexible hours.* Yes, this is a tough one. And, yes, undertaking this type of arrangement doesn't exactly keep one on the direct part to partnership. But more and more women are sticking their necks out and asking for such accommodations. Chances are, they're getting such arrangements not because they asked nicely. They're getting them because they already had proven their worth to their firms and they made the case that their firms were better off with them than without them.

The alternative to asking for more flexible hours to accommodate family needs, of course, is quitting and staying home. For many women, that is the right answer. Everyone has to make choices that fit their own situations. But most women who quit plan to return to the workforce eventually, and, increasingly, many of them find that transition hard to make. (A May 6 *Wall Street Journal* article, "After Years Off, Women Struggle to Revive Careers," spelled out the difficulty these women face.)

By working out a flex-time arrangement, many women are able to have the best of both worlds: time to attend soccer practice and depositions. It still takes some juggling, but it's doable.

The truth is, our employers need us. And as soon as women recognize this fact, and learn to negotiate to get what we want, we'll all be better off.