



Faulty Assumptions: Recognizing Missed Opportunities to Negotiate Conditions for Leadership Success

What happened the last time you were given a leadership opportunity —be it of a team, a task force, a unit, a division, a company? Did you negotiate? Maybe you negotiated about the perquisites of the appointment—the title, vacation entitlement, and the financial package. But did you negotiate beyond that for the prerequisites you would need to be successful in that role? Our interviews with over 100 new women leaders, who had taken on these roles, either within their own organizations, or coming from outside, suggests that people let opportunities to negotiate over the role itself slip by.¹ They fail to negotiate over some of the very matters that can impact their ability to perform – their fit with the role, the support to legitimate their appointment, and the resources to move their agenda.

Our research suggests that new leaders often overlook these opportunities to negotiate because they get trapped by assumptions about whether negotiation is possible and what they can (or need) to negotiate about. Recognizing these assumptions is a first step to positioning incumbents to negotiate what they will need to get themselves off to a good start in a new leadership role.

Assumption #1: *My choice is either yes or no.* There is an understandable tendency when people are offered a promotion, a job, or an assignment to weigh it as a yeah or nay. You are offered a great opportunity in your company to take over an underperforming unit that has great potential. You are interested, but given your life situation at the moment, you don't think it is feasible. So reluctantly you say no. Or maybe you are asked to lead a task force on performance management. You know it will give you visibility, but you don't think it will really serve your long range goals so you say no. Perhaps your company is going through a merger and you feel grateful just to have a job, so negotiating is out of the question. Or you are offered a promotion. You are not crazy about it, but at your level, there are so few choices, you feel you have to accept.

This assumption frames the decision-making in categorical terms —Yes, I will accept; No, I won't—and forecloses the possibility of “Yes, but.” However constrained the initial choice about taking on the role, there remain multiple points that can be negotiated to make the role a better fit with you who are and what you bring. But in order to do that you have see yourself as well positioned to negotiate. Tendencies to see oneself in a weak position often leads to this dichotomous thinking about yes I have to take the job or no I can't. To counter these tendencies, good intelligence about your value and areas of vulnerability is critical.

¹ Deborah M. Kolb, Judith Williams, Carol Frohlinger, *Her Place at the Table: A Woman's Guide to Negotiating 5 Challenges of Leadership Success*, Jossey-Bass/John Wiley, 2004.

Negotiate the ‘fit’ People are willing to negotiate with you about a position, because presumably you have what they need. So in negotiating over that new role, you need to be clear about that value. And that clarity can come from gathering good intelligence about why you were tapped for the position. It also helps to know where people see gaps. From this intelligence you can begin to identify what changes in the role being offered would make it a better fit for you, what you bring, and where you are in your life.

Helen James, a technology sales executive knew she could not say no to the promotion she was offered. At her level there would be few other opportunities, but she also knew that she would not be able, given her family responsibilities, to do all the travel that went with the position. The two people who held the role previously had been fired for non performance and she learned, by consulting her network, that people saw 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. The two deputies, who were already in place, would take on new responsibilities and spend most of their time with global customers. By negotiating terms of an ostensibly non-negotiable offer she produced an alternative that was good for everyone: Key staff members got important experience, the quality of her home life improved, and the company saw its channel distribution in capable hands.

In another situation, it was a safety net that was negotiated. Jane Brown, a marketing executive in an information technology organization was pressured to make a leap into the new start-up profit making subsidiary. Her tenure with the organization made her a good candidate to keep the parent organization and subsidiary connected. But it was risky on a number of fronts—the technology was new and not tested and the senior leadership, not wholly trusted, would need to move quickly if the subsidiary was to succeed. She was reluctant, but rather than say no, she negotiated. Given her value in the parent organization and her potential contribution in to the new organization, she negotiated a contingency agreement that would enable her to return to the parent, if the subsidiary failed to meet its targets.

Good intelligence is a prerequisite to negotiating about a role. Absent good information, potential incumbents forfeit the knowledge they need to negotiate conditions that promise success. To see the role as negotiable is to ask yourself what would make it work for you.

Assumption #2: *My appointment speaks for itself.* With a new assignment in the offing, it is only prudent to try to negotiate the conditions that will make you successful. A critical aspect of that effort involves assessing your value. But the thought process can be a slippery slope. It is an easy slide from thinking you are the right person for the job to concluding that you are the only logical person to take it on. Pretty soon the assignment seems inevitable and any gap in experience or qualifications dwindles to inconsequential proportions.

It is rare that a person is ever a perfect fit for a specific leadership position. You have some experiences that are exactly on target—you’ve managed several large technology projects and so leading the unit is a logical next step. Or you’ve run several departments in human resources and so when the firm needs a new vice president of HR, you’re a natural candidate. You successfully developed mid market financial instruments and so you are the prime candidate to run a firm that specializes in that market. But there are always gaps in that resume. Sure you ran those technology projects, but you did as a manager, not as engineer. So there can be questions about whether you have the requisite technical expertise. Sure you know human resources, but only from the corporate side and not in the units. Yes, you know the mid market, but are a novice in venture funding which the firm also does.

A leadership appointment seldom “speaks for itself”; others in the organization may mount some quiet and not so quiet opposition. Given the always lack of a perfect fit, you can expect that there will be people who are cheered and encouraged by your appointment, but there will also be doubters. Perhaps they do not think your credentials stack up against theirs or those of a valued

mentor. Perhaps they enjoyed productive relationships with the previous incumbent and worry about the disruption. Or perhaps that gap in experience does not seem so narrow from their perspective. The question is will people focus on the value you bring or the places where you are vulnerable?

Negative or ambiguous first reactions are perfectly natural. But if unchecked, they can easily undermine the new leader's ability to command authority and move an agenda ahead. The task of providing a rationale and support for an appointment would naturally fall to the key players in the organization who made the hiring or promotion decision. But they may never be asked if the newcomer assumes that those reasons are self-evident. Visible support needs to be negotiated. What you want going into the role is a persuasive introduction that makes the strategic case for the appointment.

Negotiate for a persuasive introduction Support from key leaders is critical, but what kind of support needs to be negotiated? New leaders need powerful introductions that create a compelling rationale for the appointment. When the CEO of a growing real estate development company announced the appointment of the Margaret Mason as senior vice president of administration, the first in the firm's history, it was done in a management meeting as a quick mention. The implications became clear as Margaret met resistance to her new policies and procedures. It seems the operational department heads liked things the way they were. So Margaret negotiated with the CEO over what was needed from him to support her in the new role. They agreed that he would meet with each of the operational leaders individually to provide the strategic rationale for the appointment. In so doing, he not only gave his support to the new VP, but also made it clear that to resist the changes would be interfering with his plans to manage growth.

It is not enough to negotiate a persuasive introduction, but to have one that links the appointment to a strategic agenda. When Carol Park was asked to lead a growing practice in her consulting firm, she thought it was an obvious next step given her impressive record in business development. However, she also knew that several of her peers thought the new position should have gone to them. Not usually one to negotiate, she expected resistance to her agenda if she lacked senior leadership support. As a condition of taking the role, Park negotiated with the firm's top management for the kind of introduction required. They tied her appointment to the new targeting team based approach and directly connected her accomplishments to this new strategy. While Park could have made her own case, the firm's chairman could surely do it more persuasively and that needed to be negotiated.

All too often people assume that their appointment speaks for itself. They fail to anticipate the questioning and covert resistance that can accompany a new appointment and make it difficult to lead in a new role. Negotiating with key leaders so that they publicly signal their support can help to reinforce the new leader in her role.

Assumption #3: *I can pick up the slack.* This assumption is about resources. In the early stages of a new leadership role getting the resources you need, be they financial, human, or simply time, is important on a purely practical level. You need them to get the work done. But in organizations today, the challenge is to do more with less. In a resource constrained context, it is quite understandable that new leaders would want to show that they can meet the standard. That is, if resources are in short supply, they will make do, picking up the slack, until they get the hoped for results and then the resources will surely follow. The problem with this assumption is that it overlooks the symbolic importance of garnering resources. In the space between an appointment and when results kick in, people are watching and making determinations about whether this new person carries influence in the organization. One indicator is the ability to secure resources.

That is the challenge that Martha Shaw faced when took over a new business line in her

company. In taking the assignment, Martha knew she would need funds to support the marketing effort and would need more staff to grow the venture. Preliminary conversations with her new boss were encouraging, but produced no definitive commitments. Excited about the opportunity, Shaw figured that she would get what she needed once she was in place and could demonstrate some results. It didn't quite turn out that way. Without the resources, Martha did the work herself as she found it difficult to attract people to work with her. They weren't sure the initiative enjoyed top leadership support if they were unwilling to resource it. And even though her results were impressive, new resources were not forthcoming. Her requests were denied in part because her own actions showed that she was getting along fine without them. She was doing all the work herself, without involving others in the firm and with limited resources. There was no reason for anyone to think that she would not continue to do so.

Negotiate for small wins. The ability to garner resources is an indicator of influence in organizations. They can go a long way to positioning the new leader as somebody who can get things done. Even when financial resources are scarce, creatively negotiating for them is still a possibility. If you appreciate that people have multiple interests at stake, it means that you can negotiate for things that might not be that costly but would have high value. For example, the deputy branch chief at a large government installation, discovered that there were major inequities between her department and its comparable unit in terms of travel budget and computer equipment. In negotiating with the branch chief, she was able to use the principle of equity between the units, as well as the modest increase to the budget as a way to negotiate for a more equal allocation of travel and hardware. Her small win demonstrated to her unit that she had their interests at heart and could get things done.

There are other times when allies who have a stake in the outcome may be in a better position to help get needed resources. Enlisting their assistance to make the case can strengthen yours. After a series of layoffs, for example, Sharon Marks, the director in a strategic consulting firm was finding it difficult to staff engagements. In a time of constrained resources, the functional leader was unwilling to incur the costs of hiring before revenues accrued. That meant that the few people working on engagements were continually overworked and stressed. When a major client was unwilling to sign a contract with out specifics on staff commitments, Sharon enlisted the relationship manager to help make the strategic case to the functional leader. It was a small win all the way around. The relationship manager had a clear stake in meeting the client's needs and was able to demonstrate the potential of the relationship. The functional leader was assured that revenues would cover hiring. And the director got the needed resources for the engagement to the relief of the shorthanded team.

When new leaders fail to negotiate for resources and figure that they can pick up the slack, they ignore the impact of their actions. Resources determine, to a large extent, what can be accomplished in a new assignment. But their effect is symbolic. As people look to new leaders at whatever level, they want to attach themselves to people who can get things done. Being able to negotiate creatively for those resources is a good indicator of that ability.

We tend to associate negotiation with certain activities when it comes time to take on a new assignment or job. That is the ripe time to negotiate salary, title, office space and some of the other perquisites that might go with a new position. While these issues are important, especially to us personally, they are only a small part of what can and should be subjects of negotiation in times of transition. New leaders fail at impressive rates. Negotiation is not a substitute for ability. However, incumbents can negotiate about the role itself, the public support for the appointment, and the resources to do the job. Faulty assumptions make it less likely that these important negotiations will take place.

To learn more about negotiation, the gender gap in pay, or the common obstacles women face at the bargaining table, visit the authors' website at <http://www.negotiatingwomen.com>. Take

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