

Gender Wage Gap Reflects the ‘Ask’ Gap

Women Don’t Ask for a Raise as Often as Men Do

By

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Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella received a lot of backlash regarding his comments on women asking for pay raises. What is the best way to ask for a raise? Executive coach Patricia Mathews offers tips on Lunch Break. Photo: Getty

When [Satya Nadella](#), the CEO of Microsoft Corp., was asked Thursday for advice he’d give women who don’t feel comfortable asking their boss for a raise, he offered a Zen-like response used by managers for millennia.

“It’s not really about asking for the raise,” he said, “but knowing and having faith that the system will actually give you the right raises as you go along.”

In other words, do a good job and you’ll be recognized. That advice has been offered at one time or another to employees in every industry. And it has the ring of truth.

But maybe that’s just not so.

Mr. Nadella’s comment set off a small storm because it was made at a function about women in computing. To some, Mr. Nadella seemed to suggest that women should submissively stay quiet, and effectively keep a back seat to male pay. This wasn’t his intention at all, Mr. Nadella later told [Microsoft](#)’s staff in an email: “Without a doubt I wholeheartedly support programs at Microsoft and in the industry that bring more women into technology and close the pay gap.”

That pay gap fired up the controversy around Mr. Nadella. In a March survey by Citigroup and LinkedIn, fully a third of women respondents said the biggest indicator of progress for women in the workplace would be the elimination of gender wage disparity.

Depending on how you measure it—and this is also a subject of debate—the gap ranges from roughly 10 to 25 percentage points across the U.S. workplace. And the reason for it? Economists and sociologists have a long list of explanations, including job choice, career interruption, experience levels, who’s in a union, hours worked, discrimination, available child care, and more.

But asking for a raise? That’s a contributor too. Women don’t ask for a raise as often as men do.

At Work

- [What Satya Nadella Got Right About Raises](#)

Condé Nast's Glamour magazine recently surveyed 2,000 men and women about this topic. Just 39% of women said they asked for a higher salary when starting a new job. That compared with 54% of men.

Of those in existing jobs, 43% of women said they had ever asked for a raise, compared again with 54% of men.

How much does the failure to ask for a raise contribute to the gender pay gap? Hard to tell. But that "ask" gap between men and women is somewhat reflective of the wage gap. Because when women do ask their boss for more money, an overwhelming percentage appear to get it. Glamour's survey found the figure to be 75%.

The Citi/LinkedIn survey had similar results. It found that 27% of women had asked for a raise in the past year and 84% of that number got it. In 2013, the numbers were 26% asking and of that 75% getting.

"Women still feel underpaid," the Glamour survey noted. "Forty-four percent think their salary would be higher if they were a man."

They may be right. And one reason for that, just one reason, is they're leaving money on the table. One survey found that the percentage of women who have never asked for a raise also exceeds that of men.

Experts on gender issues have a number of compelling explanations for this. Clearly companies can also do more to encourage all employees—men and women—to feel comfortable in salary negotiations. There's no simple solution.

But many career counselors would give a blunt answer to the question Mr. Nadella bungled. Their response: Put your best case forward and ask for the raise. Many men also feel uncomfortable having that conversation with the boss. But in the roller derby of workplace competition, where resources are finite, making your case is key to getting ahead.

Even Mr. Nadella acknowledged this in a rethink of his original comment. "I answered that question completely wrong," he said in his email to staff. And then he offered what might be the best advice for future millennia:

"If you think you deserve a raise, you should just ask."

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