

Reprinted from the July/August 2011 issue of *The Financial Manager* magazine

Gathering Your Ammo

Don't wait for your next performance review to make your case for a raise. Start the discussion now. **By ANN CARLSEN**

Now that the job market is looking up, employees are emerging from their hyper-productive foxholes and surveying the landscape. It has been a buyer's market for the last several years, but change is in the air for a couple of reasons.

First, many companies that focused on managing the expense side of the ledger by cutting headcount are now starting to appreciate the hard-working people who keep the business running. Employers recognize that an improving job market means these essential troops are about to have more options. And as business picks up, smart companies will use the resulting budgetary flexibility to keep valued performers on board.

That means it's time to start thinking about your next raise. It's sad but true that if you just accept what's offered rather than negotiating for more, you may sacrifice more than half a million dollars over the course of your career.

Don't make the mistake of waiting for your next performance review to make your case. By then, it's too late: your boss will already have planned the budget. But supervisors evaluate employees informally every day. Start the discussion now: ask your boss what it will take to get you to the right salary level. Ask for help mapping out a path and a timeline.

Likewise, don't wait until your review to discuss your job performance. You don't have to be obnoxious to promote yourself. Look for reasons to keep your boss up to speed on what you're doing. Ask for her input on a project. Periodically, provide a list of your "missions accomplished" to keep him or her informed. By year-end, the memory of first- or second-quarter achievement may fade. So take steps throughout the year to stay memorable (in a good way, of course).

Now is also the time to prepare for salary discussions by marshaling essential facts and figures.

COLLECT MARKET INTELLIGENCE - Many executives don't know what their particular market segment is paying, or the appropriate salary range for their level of experience. Commit yourself to learning your value on the open market. It will take work to uncover salary information for your industry and profession, but that's no excuse for remaining uninformed.

To research salary, talk to people in your personal network and to executive recruiters. Pay attention to advertisements for similar positions to yours. Review the annual industry salary surveys conducted by organizations like the Cable and Telecommunications Human Resources Association.

DEFINE YOUR MEASURABLE VALUE - Whether or not you're in a revenue-producing position, everyone adds value to the organization, in terms of money saved, losses prevented or opportunities pursued. Be prepared to discuss the value you add. Make it a habit to think about the benefits you bring to the company.

ASSESS YOUR NEEDS AND PRIORITIES - You can negotiate for more than money. If your boss can't give you the raise you demonstrably deserve, he or she may be able to give you what you want in other ways. Everyone has different priorities – start with what's most important to you.

Here are a few things to consider: more vacation time; educational and career development opportunities (including tuition reimbursement); a company vehicle; membership dues to professional organizations or athletic clubs; stock options, flex time and job sharing.

Once you're armed with information, plan your attack. The engagement begins with mental preparation. If your mother told you it's not polite to talk about money, or if you're anxious about negotiating, recognize this conditioning and deal with it rationally. Pretend that you're an agent, negotiating for your most important client.

Despite all the warrior references in this column, don't assume an adversarial stance. You'll get further by building on points of agreement than by demanding benefits that your boss can't negotiate.

Timing is important: the best time to ask for a raise is after you successfully complete an important project or receive an award or other positive recognition. Request a meeting with your boss before or after working hours, but avoid Mondays and Fridays. For some reason, you'll have a better chance of success Tuesday through Thursday – it's a statistically verifiable mystery.

Above all, prepare your boss for your request; demands and ambushes will only put him or her on the defensive. Approach the negotiation with a flexible, open attitude. If you're confident and come prepared, salary negotiations can be a victory for both sides.

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