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How to Negotiate Like a BO\$\$

An interview with Professor Jenny Ross

edited by GWIS's Jessica McIver

JMcl: What is your current position and background?

JR: I am currently an Associate Professor of Physics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I have two kids and a husband who is also a faculty member in my department. My career trajectory has been virtually "perfect" in that I went straight from undergrad at Wellesley College majoring in Physics and Mathematics to graduate school in Physics at UCSB to postdoc at the University of Pennsylvania to a tenure-track faculty position. My husband and I both got tenure last year, and so my career trajectory is likely to continue "perfectly" until retirement. I put "perfect" in quotes because it is a ridiculous notion. Each person's career path is their own and will be perfect for them. My research program is in biological physics, and I try to make the lab fun and productive.

JMcl: How do you negotiate? Can you isolate the key steps or strategies you use?

JR: I have never had any formal courses in negotiating, and I am not a naturally aggressive or even outgoing person, but I have been able to "fake it until I make it" and now it is easier to feign ease at being more straightforward with what I want and need. Also, I think about negotiation logically. In a compromise or negotiation of anything, you have an end goal, think of it as the mean of a Gaussian distribution. That goal cannot be your starting position. You must ask for more. You must be 2-3 standard deviations higher than your end goal. Why? Because the person you are negotiating with may be 2-3 standard deviations lower, and you want to end up at your goal.

I spent a summer before my first year in graduate school in Beijing, China working at Tsing Hua University on Plasma Physics. In Beijing, you can haggle for anything. In this situation, the more you look like you do not want the thing, the lower the price goes. Their tactic is to always ask you for a price you want. As soon as you say your price - they have you because they will basically meet you in the middle. If your price is still above their minimum, they have you. As long as their price is below your maximum, you can come to an amiable agreement. That is how negotiating works in my mind.

JMcl: Can you give us an example of a successful negotiation you have done? What difficulties did you overcome?

JR: When coming to UMass, I negotiated for my husband's position. I had a good position to negotiate because I had two other offers and I had a year left in my postdoc position paid for. So, I could do what I threatened in China - walk away. There was more to this negotiation than it seemed because one of the issues was that the

department didn't know how to work on getting a spousal accommodation. Thus, I turned to a network of women at UMass to help the department learn how to go to bat for me. In this way, negotiating for a tenure-track job is a bit weird, because the person you are talking to - the department chair - is in turn negotiating with the dean and/or provost above him/her. Really, the department chair should be your advocate and be on your side. He/she should be helping you negotiate, so don't be afraid to ask. If you get a weird vibe, that is probably a bad sign.

At one of the other positions where I was getting an offer, the department chair was very helpful. He basically told me that, in academia, anything is negotiable. Anything. That means you can negotiate items that seem odd. At some schools, they can help with housing - especially in expensive cities, like LA or NYC. They expect you to ask for help with housing or request university-owned housing. You can negotiate for better office furniture. You can negotiate for a great parking space. You can negotiate for a spot in the daycare.

So, my negotiation at UMass was good and bad. I succeeded to get my husband's job secured, although he did not get to negotiate his start up. I also succeeded in getting a lot of the start-up costs for my new lab that I needed. I had to get a lot of equipment that in a different department would have already existed as multi-user equipment. I didn't get very much salary, and I didn't negotiate for it, which was a mistake.

JMcI: Is there any advice on negotiating you wish you had heard as a graduate student?

JR: I was very bad at negotiating my salary. I knew it was important, but I felt like I was negotiating my husband's salary and his whole job, and I shouldn't look too greedy. I think that was a mistake. Even starting a few \$1000 ahead would have been better. I think this is very typical for women. Further, society tells us that women who ask for more money (even equal pay) are greedy and that is somehow less tolerable in women than in men. Men who ask for more money are not as likely to be thought of as greedy. There is some advice I have heard recently that I think is good to help overcome this: When you need to negotiate for more money - don't think you are negotiating it for yourself, but rather for your family. You need more money so that your family has a better life. I think that would have helped me.

I didn't have any trouble negotiating for what I needed for my lab, because it was, in effect, not just for me, but also for the department and the lab, which is bigger than just me. If I could have framed some of the other aspects - salary and other personal needs - in a bigger context, I think I would have been more successful negotiating for those things the next time.
