

Salary: Don't Sell Yourself Short!

There is a sentence that sounds agreeable – and is strategically fatal: “Money isn’t that important to me.” I hear it frequently in job interview training when I ask about salary expectations. Women tend to say it more often than average. Most people do not enjoy hearing my response:

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“Well, that’s good news! Our employee Mr Müller is always complaining that he earns too little. Let’s give him 10,000 francs from your salary. That should fit your expectations perfectly – and Mr Müller will be pleased, because money is important to him.” At that point it becomes clear: the sentence sounds modest – but it is illogical.

And factually, it is usually incorrect as well. When I ask whether they would be comfortable if colleagues performing at the same level earned more, the answer is regularly a clear no. So money does matter after all. A more accurate formulation would be: “It’s not only about the money.” Yet even that sentence is better left unsaid – it weakens your negotiating position before the negotiation has even begun.

Negotiate your position

This is only one aspect of poor negotiation. One client gave a cautious figure in response to my salary question and visibly felt uncomfortable doing so. I asked about her current salary, which was slightly above her stated expectation. She justified the lower figure by explaining that she worked for an international corporation in Zurich and that this SME in the surrounding area would surely pay lower salaries.

And if not? Then she would have offered herself at a bargain price. Anyone who offers less

than their previous salary risks raising doubts about their own qualification.

The reason for undercutting oneself is usually fear – fear of being excluded from the recruitment process. In most cases, that fear is unfounded.

Quality has its price

First, salary negotiations follow the principle of value and countervalue. Your salary expectation is the price for your performance. It expresses how highly you assess your own value. If the expectations are too far apart, this may indicate that you either bring too little – or too much – for the role.

Second, stating your salary expectation is not the end of the negotiation, but its beginning. If the positions are not too far apart, you may reach an agreement by including non-monetary benefits, adjustments to the job profile and responsibilities, or performance-related pay components.

Thorough preparation is essential. As described in the article “What you can learn from a professional negotiator for your job application”, do not concern yourself with the other party’s expectations. Prepare your own position – with options for different scenarios.

And once you decide not to negotiate yourself down, you make it harder for your counterpart to do so as well. Strengthen your negotiating position, for example with the following response to the question about your salary expectations: “That’s an interesting question – because money matters to me.”

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