

It pays to find your voice

thenational.ae/business/money/it-pays-to-find-your-voice-1.395809

Felicity Glover

November 17, 2012



illustration by Gary Clement for The National.

I learnt a valuable lesson last weekend, but didn't realise it at the time. Thinking about it now, it wasn't my proudest moment - either as a supporter of women in the workplace or as the mother of a young girl.

Let me rewind.

Last weekend, my nine-year-old daughter came to me with an idea.

"If I do my chores, can you pay me Dh10 in pocket money for each one?" she asked.

"So if I do five chores a week, then you have to give me Dh50."

I thought it was amusing. Not that she'd finally remembered her five times tables, but because she was negotiating a "pay rise" and yet avoids her chores like the plague. And then wonders why she's not getting any pocket money.

But, as we say in our house, you don't get money for nothing. Unfortunately, that ethos is taking a while to sink in. So she continues to get no pocket money for, well, doing nothing most days.

Keeping her bedroom tidy, packing her schoolbag and taking care of the stray kitten she has adopted are just a few of her daily responsibilities.

It's hard to gauge how much a child's pocket money should be these days - it's not like there's an industry standard to turn to on this one.

My daughter, though, reckons she's worth Dh10 a chore (just between you and me, I think she is priceless), or a minimum of Dh30 a day. So seven times Dh30 is Dh210 a week, or a grand total of Dh840 a month.

That's a lot of money for many people in the UAE - and way too much for a nine-year-old child to receive in return for doing just a few chores a week, if they do them at all.

It's also a far cry from my first job as a dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant when I was a teenager. Sure, I worked just four hours a week on a Friday night, but all I received was A\$2 an hour (that's Dh7.65 at today's rate) for my efforts. That amounted to \$8 a week, or \$32 a month. Suffice to say, I do my best to avoid doing the dishes these days. And will never get out of bed for \$2 an hour again. But I did learn the value of money and how hard it can be to earn it.

But back to the negotiating table.

"What if you do all your chores for Dh20 a week - or Dh80 a month?" I shot back. "And you don't get paid if you don't do them."

I neglected to add that my so-called counter offer was nothing more - or less - than our original agreement.

But I think my daughter knew that: "Oh, OK," she replied.

And that was the end of our first "salary" negotiation exercise. She went back to her Littlest Pet Shop toys and I didn't think about it again.

Until a few days later, that is, when I read a working paper explaining why there continues to be a gender pay difference in the workplace.

Unfortunately, I didn't recognise in my nine year old what many women tend to avoid in the workplace: negotiating their salaries.

So kudos to my daughter, but not to me - who acted like an unapproachable, dismissive, tight-fisted employer.

The working paper, by Andreas Leibbrandt from Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, and John List, from the University of Chicago in the United States, asked the question: do women avoid salary negotiations?

Their findings are based on a field experiment they conducted that "randomises nearly 2,500 job-seekers into jobs that vary important details of the labour contract".

And what they found is interesting.

"We find that when there is no explicit statement that wages are negotiable, men are more likely to negotiate than women," they said.

"However, when we explicitly mention the possibility that wages are negotiable, this difference disappears, and even tends to reverse.

"In terms of sorting, we find that men in contrast to women prefer job environments where the 'rules of wage determination' are ambiguous.

"This leads to the gender gap being much more pronounced in jobs that leave negotiation of wage ambiguous."

My first thought? Why do women wait to be told that it is OK to negotiate their salary? Are they being polite? Or do they take it on face value that if a company doesn't state if a salary is negotiable, then there's no point in even trying?

Men don't seem to think so and will take a shot at it anyway. Nothing ventured is nothing gained, as they say.

And so it's back to the negotiating table for me. Not to give my daughter that pay rise, but to let her know that we'll be reviewing her request in three months' time. And to help her learn that all-important art of negotiating.

After all, I don't want her to be backwards in coming forward when it comes to workplace bargaining in the real world - even if it might be years away.

fglover@thenational.ae