
Bragging Rights: Self-Evaluation Dos and Don'ts

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Most lawyers are expected to submit self-evaluations as part of annual compensation review processes. Although the process varies from firm to firm and from legal department to legal department, one thing is constant: women lawyers should approach their self-evaluations with the same planning, determination, and effort they put into their client projects. In this article, I offer some observations and provide some suggestions gleaned from my experience as Chair of my law firm's Gender Diversity Committee, Member of our Management and Compensation Committees.

At my firm, our Compensation Committee recommends to our Management Committee compensation for all of our lawyers. Self-evaluations are part of this compensation process. To fulfill my responsibilities during my three-year term on our Compensation Committee, I carefully reviewed more than 1,000 self-evaluation memos submitted by my partners. In reviewing them, I was struck by the differences between those self-evaluations submitted by men and those submitted by women. Indeed, it got to the point where I would know, without looking at the name, whether the memo was submitted by a man or a woman. The self-evaluation memos submitted by men were self-laudatory and carefully recounted their strengths and successes. This was not the case for my women colleagues. Men (as a group) were much more comfortable than women singing their own praises; sharing their achievements; and clearly making their career and compensation expectations known to their supervisors. Men easily wrote sentences that started with phrases such as "I accomplished X" or "I successfully completed Y." On the other hand, women (as a group) not only were generally unwilling to state and explain their successes but actually downplayed their overall contributions.

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How could there be such a huge disparity between the self-evaluations of my male and female colleagues at the same stages of their careers and professional development? They all had the same superior educational backgrounds. They all worked on the same types of projects. They were all offered the same sorts of professional development opportunities. So, what could explain these striking differences?

Gender Differences

As I reflected upon this, I read about biological, psychological, and environmental gender differences. What I learned was that some gender differences are rooted in brain development, while others are culturally ingrained from an early age, and still others might be tied to personality differences. From early childhood,

boys are observed to be much more comfortable than girls in tooting their own horns and "talking up" their successes. They are observed to be much more comfortable than girls with bragging about their strengths and totally ignoring or downplaying their weaknesses.

These gender differences—whatever their source—carry over into our professional lives. While men and women have the same intellectual capacity, potential for success, and brain capacity, gender differences do exist in behaviors and instincts. Numerous scientific studies have shown that men are drawn to seeking status and rank, while women are drawn to belonging, building consensus, seeking harmony, and being part of a "team." It is these gender differences and instincts that were being played out in the self-evaluation process.

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I shared my observations and concerns with a female managing director friend at a major investment bank, and she raised them with her male boss. He immediately saw the truth in what I had identified. He said that year after year (during their firm's annual promotion cycle), only male promotion candidates would seek him out—some candidates on a daily basis—to tell him why they should be promoted and why "this" was their year for promotion. In most promotion cycles, not one woman candidate would make such a promotion "pitch." I am certain that the women candidates wanted to be promoted just as much as the men. Yet, unlike their male colleagues, they were not discussing their career goals with their supervisors. For whatever reason—biological, psychological or environmental—these women were simply not comfortable telling their supervisors about their professional objectives. I truly did not see any other way at the time. The firm was all that I knew; I had been there for my entire legal career.

Getting to a Level Playing Field

To compete on a level playing field—for plum assignments, fair compensation, and equal promotions—women lawyers must change. We must confidently explain our achievements and advertise our interests in—and qualifications for—promotion. We must recognize that our supervisors and colleagues cannot—and do not—automatically know our thoughts, feelings, desires, and accomplishments. We must force ourselves to step out of our comfort zones and proactively develop and use self-promotion skills—that are second nature to many of our male colleagues—to enumerate our accomplishments and to clearly articulate our career and compensation expectations. Our male colleagues have always been doing this. After observing these shocking gender differences in the

self-evaluations of my partners, I prepared a list of “Dos and Don’ts” for my women colleagues. It is a “how to” guide to prepare self-evaluations. These “Dos and Don’ts” have now been incorporated into our firm-wide professional development program, but my original purpose can be met by sharing them in this article. I very much hope that these “Dos and Don’ts” will provide food for thought before your next round of self-evaluation memos. I also hope that this article will help empower you to cultivate the necessary self-promotion skills critically needed by all of us to survive and thrive in today’s highly competitive legal environment.

The Suggested “Dos”

- Carefully read and follow the instructions before beginning your memo.
- Lead with your strengths: identify them before starting to write your memo.
- Dig out “golden nuggets” about yourself. Keep an organized file of your accomplishments.
- Pull together the information about your client and administrative projects before you start your memo.
- Examine firm and department marketing materials to refresh your understanding of firm and department goals.
- Reconcile your instinct for humility with the need to promote yourself.
- Showcase your accomplishments in a straightforward way, with authenticity, pride and enthusiasm.
- Mention issues (such as health-related, leaves of absence, or family problems) in the back of your memo or as an appendix, unless they account for a significant amount of your time, in which case address them at the beginning of your memo.
- Lead with a discussion of larger clients or more important assignments.
- Provide a context for the projects you discuss in your memo.
- State the dollar value of your transactions/trials or the benefits received by your clients.
- Save e-mails and letters praising your work, turnaround time, or other areas. Quote that praise directly in your memo when you discuss the work you did for that client or project. Consider attaching a copy of the originals at the end of your memo.
- Include any cross-selling you have participated in and mention the type, quantity, and value of the projects you were able to secure from clients and other attorneys at your firm.
- Let other lawyers in the firm know who you are and what you have accomplished throughout the year, not just at compensation time.
- Reference clients you work with.
- Discuss who you work with: partners, peers, junior lawyers, and staff. Your interactions can help showcase your professional development.
- Step into the spotlight. There is nothing worse than credit theft on the job!
- Discuss your management skills, including strengths and areas for improvement.
- Ask a more senior colleague or friend to comment and make suggestions on your memo after you’ve carefully thought out, written, and edited it.
- Ask yourself: If I didn’t know myself and I read this memo, would I know me?

The “Don’ts”

- Don’t turn your memo in late!
- Don’t assume anything! Be explicit! Don’t assume the readers already know your successes and their significance to your practice and clients.
- Don’t use emotional words (such as “disappointed” or “hope”).
- Don’t use vague terms or sweeping generalities that leave no impact on the readers.
- Don’t be afraid to take full credit for your accomplishments.
- Don’t attribute your accomplishments to others.
- Don’t allow your memo to exceed four pages. If it does, edit and tighten it up.
- Don’t exaggerate—but be sure to cover the key points without modesty.
- Don’t spend a lot of time focusing on activities you’re involved in outside of the firm.
- Don’t let your numbers do the talking. Highlight your responsibilities and accomplishments, while tying them to your numbers and explaining where your numbers don’t show important contributions.
- Don’t spend time discussing peripheral activities. Stay on track, discussing your core responsibilities or “mission critical” accomplishments.
- Don’t wait until the last minute to start writing your memo! If you do, you will not be able to put your best foot forward. •

Words and phrases to consider using in preparing your self-evaluation:

- “This has been a year of phenomenal growth for my practice because of X.”
- “The projects I’ve taken on have greatly increased my ability to do the following: _____.”
- “I have expanded my practice in the following ways: X, Y, and Z.”
- “I have supplemented my experience by doing the following: _____.”
- “I took on a lead role in this trial/transaction by handling the following: _____.”
- “I have worked with a large number of associates, partners, and staff to _____.”
- “My assignments are completed in a timely and efficient manner.”
- “I work independently.”
- “I seek out assignments from other offices and departments.”
- “I have immersed myself in _____.”
- “On this transaction/case, I have effectively handled _____.”
- “I took on a key role when I did _____.”
- “I have successfully completed a _____.”
- “I have been very active in _____.”