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Being outspoken about your accomplishments isn't selfish; it's smart

Jen Heemstra on self-advocacy and how to go about it

by Jen Heemstra

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One of my goals this year has been to be more steadfast about self-advocacy. It feels as though we are taught (especially as women) to not speak up for ourselves and to always go out of our way for others. Do you have any tips for how to realize that you need to self-advocate, as well as how to get started and do so in a way that's productive for you and doesn't come across as selfish to others? –Anonymous

First, congratulations on setting a goal to be a better self-advocate and for striving to do this in a way that honors the quality of your work while still being authentic to your values! The knowledge and wisdom that you gain as you navigate toward this goal will benefit you and your career and enable you to act as a mentor and role model to those around you.

Self-advocacy can take on many forms, such as negotiating the vacation time we need to stay mentally healthy, promoting our research or other accomplishments, or asking to be considered for a job opportunity or nominated for an award. These are all good things, so why do so many of us back down or procrastinate when it comes to self-advocacy? I think there are two main causes for why many of us resist advocating despite the clear benefits—personality and socialization.



Credit: Yang H. Ku/C&EN/Shutterstock

Let your needs and accomplishments be heard.

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With regard to personality, we're each wired in a unique way, and for some people that includes being uncomfortable with attention or preferring work or activities that are less visible. Through that lens, self-advocacy may feel inauthentic or uncomfortable.

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Social pressures also play an inescapable role, especially for women and people of color. For those of us who were taught by our family, friends, or culture that it is poor form to put our needs first or pat ourselves on the back, advocating for ourselves can feel like it carries the potential cost of our reputation or relationships. Yet I think it's fair to say that the majority of us wish we could be more outspoken when it comes to discussing our wants and accomplishments. So how can we learn to be more proactive with self-advocacy?

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One thing that I've found to be particularly helpful is to take cues from what I see others doing. As an example, I used to think that media outlets found their science stories only by scrolling through recent publications and that approaching a journalist about my work would be considered shameless self-promotion. However, as I talked with both scientists and journalists, I learned that while many stories do originate from the newly published literature, it is also completely normal for researchers to reach out and alert journalists to their work. Perhaps not surprisingly, I also found out that men seem to do this much more often than women, at least in chemistry. Since learning all this, I have intentionally become more active in reaching out to journalists and my institution's communications office when we have a research paper that I think has broad public appeal. Similarly, I was fortunate to have mentors who taught me that it is appropriate—and usually necessary—to ask to be nominated for awards and other recognitions.

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If you still struggle with the idea that it's selfish to advocate for something that will benefit you personally, you can mentally reframe the request to think about who else you are benefiting. If you advocate for taking your vacation time during a specific month, your family could enjoy a memorable trip together. If you advocate for a promotion, the increased salary could ease the burden of college tuition for your children. Or, in my example above, if I advocate for a journalist to cover our research, that attention benefits the students who did the work and the entire lab. When you view your request with this wider lens, it allows you to see how your self-advocacy could actually be unselfish, in that you are taking yourself out of your comfort zone in order to ask for something that will benefit the people you care about. Additionally, in doing this, you will serve as a positive role model to those around you as they learn how to advocate for their own needs.

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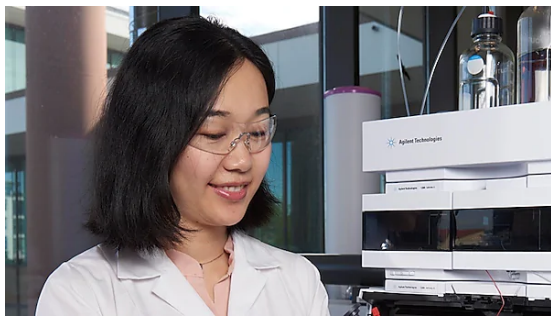
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As in all things, when it comes to self-advocacy, some approaches are better than others. The thing that separates productive requests from nauseating selfishness is not necessarily what you are advocating for but how you do it. No matter what you want to ask for, there is a way to frame the request with truth and humility instead of hyperbole and ego. One way to do this is by focusing on gratitude instead of entitlement. It's also helpful to remember that even though you may not get what you are asking for, you do have the right to make the request. Finally, you can take a step outside yourself and ponder the question, "If I saw others asking for this, would I think any less of them?" If you wouldn't disrespect them for advocating for themselves in that way, then you can proceed without losing respect for yourself either.

Jen Heemstra is an associate professor of chemistry at Emory University who shares advice on Twitter [@jenheemstra](#). Find all her columns for C&EN and ask her questions at [cenm.ag/officehours](#).

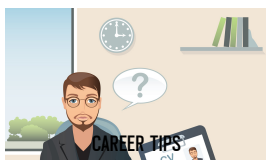
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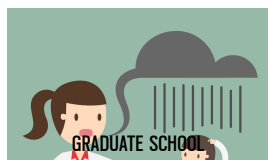
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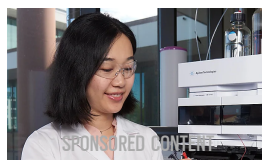
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D Novak

(January 10, 2020 9:00 AM)

I just wish this had been the perspective when I was starting out. It was considered boorish to brag about oneself and one's accomplishments

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