

Business Better (Season 2, Episode 2): Conversations with Women in Leadership, with Special Guest Selena Rezvani, Author and Consultant

Speakers: Emilie Ninan and Selena Rezvani

Steve Burkhart:

Welcome to Business Better, a podcast designed to help businesses navigate the new normal. I'm your host, Steve Burkhart. After a long career at global consumer product's company, Bic, where I served as vice president of administration, general counsel, and secretary, I'm now of counsel in the litigation department of Ballard Spahr, a law firm with clients across industries and throughout the country. This episode is part of our women in leadership series and features an interview with Selena Rezvani, author of *Pushback: How Smart Women Ask--and Stand Up--for What They Want*. She's also a consultant who specializes in leadership and development programs. Today's topic is negotiations and self advocacy. Understanding your goals and those of your partner or adversary are critical to success in every negotiation. Much can be learned from Selena's advice about self worth, productivity, the U-shaped curve, GPS, and being curious, not furious. For closing comments about facing plants and linking are sure to make you pause and chuckle. Speaking with Ms. Rezvani is my Ballard Spar colleague, Emilie Ninan, a partner in our Wilmington, Delaware and Washington, DC offices, and co-chair of Ballard Spars finance department. So now let's join Emilie and her guest, Selena Rezvani.

Emilie Ninan:

Selena. Thank you so much for joining me today. I'm not actually sure how we were introduced, but I received your Quick Confidence newsletter, and so it may have been mutual contacts on LinkedIn. Regardless, I'm looking forward to delving a bit more into the topics of self-advocacy and negotiation. And here at Ballard, we are also thrilled that you've agreed to do a webinar for us during women's history month in March. So our conversation today will serve as a little preview for people of what to expect then as well.

Emilie Ninan:

Selena, I want to start by asking you about your story. Give us some background on where you grew up and what you wanted to be as a little kid. And what was the path that lead you to become the author, speaker, and consultant you are today?

Selena Rezvani:

Thank you, Emilie. And I'm so glad we got connected. However, those magical beings in the LinkedIn universe did that for us. And I'm really excited for our March event.

Selena Rezvani:

Yeah, I like to tell people I grew up in Ukrain-istan-idelphia because I'm half Ukrainian, I'm half Pakistani, and of course, where did I get raised? Philadelphia. And the thing is, I definitely grew up learning to defer to authority, to be humble, to take just enough, maybe others can relate to that or were raised a similar way. To be accommodating to others, that was a big one in my house. And the problem was, by the time I reached the work world, I realized many of those traits didn't help me in important situations, in certain high stakes moments. For example, putting forward the unpopular idea in a meeting, not just going with the flow, but being willing to be the different voice, or telling my boss, I was drastically underpaid, and really standing firm in my conviction. And I think so many of those experiences helped me kind of find my voice over time and gave me a passion and a mission to help other women embrace their power, find their own inner advocate, because every good thing that happened to me in my career, self advocacy played a role in it. And I want to spread that kind of exciting vehicle to find opportunities in other people's lives.

Emilie Ninan:

Okay. I didn't know you were from Philly. I am as well. So we'll have to talk about that.

Emilie Ninan:

So Selena on social media and other platforms, you talk about confidence, negotiation, and self advocacy. What issues are you focused on currently and has the pandemic changed the questions you're being asked today?

Selena Rezvani:

I really like that question, Emilie. I do love talking about these topics, because I think no matter how senior, or successful, or established you are, you can always improve at resolving issues and conflicts, or proposing exciting new ideas, right? We all want to be better at these things. Where I've evolved my thinking more recently is around advocating healthy boundaries. I've been so inspired by public figures, by friends and peers, individuals who've asserted their boundaries. Right? Think about Simone Biles or Naomi Osaka, are just a few example of people who made really bold moves this year to advocate their own self care, their mental health, their needs. And I think helping people with this notion that your worth is not tied to your productivity, it's become really important to me. It's something I need to reinforce in myself. You can be ambitious and enjoy what you do. So many of us get on a roll, right? But sometimes that advocacy conversation you need to have is between you and you, about healthy boundaries. And so I think that's a place my thinking is evolving.

Emilie Ninan:

Last year, I had the delightful opportunity to interview Lois Frankel, who wrote *Why Nice Girls Don't Get The Corner Office*. And I had read her book probably 15 years ago, and that's really how I discovered how much deference I gave to age and experience and how that probably wasn't helping me in the workplace. And I know you mentioned that earlier as well, but you refer to yourself as a recovering good girl. What do you mean by that? Why was it a barrier to negotiating for you?

Selena Rezvani:

Yeah. Well, let me first just say Lois is incredible and I'm one of her biggest fan girls. I think she is really the definition also of women helping women. She has personally helped me in my career and wrote the forward for my book, *Pushback*. So, I can't say enough good things about Lois and how much I admire her. But the recovering good girl thing is real. It's real. For me, it looked like some something similar to what you said, Emilie, being deferential, always thinking I need to be communal and think always with that community mindset. Of course that's important and there's a time and place for that, but there are also times and places for you to discuss and surface your own needs.

Selena Rezvani:

Going with the flow, I mentioned that, that was a big thing that was hard for me to do. Some of these attributes don't help you get your needs met, right? And they don't help you have relationships with open lines of communication. Because here's another thing about when you don't advocate, when you just go with the flow, let's say with a boss, you don't give the other person a chance to cure your pain, to help you get your need met. So whether that's a piece of equipment you feel you need to have a home office that works, or it's a bigger request. Hey, I'd really like more responsibility, And I'd like a different quality of assignments coming my way, not just the kind of grunt work assignments. If you don't say that and you keep it to yourself, right, the other person can't improve. They can't do anything about it. And so I think that was a really important realization for me as well is wait, you give people a chance to make it better when you do this.

Selena Rezvani:

But the other thing is, one of the things I've researched is that women's happiness over the course of their lifetimes is u-shaped. It's u-shaped, which means we're happiest in our young adult careers, and we're happier 50 plus and over. And I'm a big believer in doing the most we can to flatten that in middle age or in between. To not settle for suboptimal or this doesn't work so great for me, but I'll go along with it. I'll be okay with it, but instead asking for what you need. So one of the things I

believe is that the best negotiators in the world, they don't have this one ninja move, Emilie, that they use. It's more of a mindset. They believe everything is up for revision. Everything is discussable. Everything is open to tweaking or changing. And I think that's a great mindset that can help you, certainly has helped me overcome that recovering good girl thing. That wait, let's discuss this. Let's not settle so quickly.

Emilie Ninan:

So as you've sought to flatten out your own u-shape of happiness, tell us about the most meaningful thing you've ever negotiated.

Selena Rezvani:

Yeah. There's a few in my life, in my personal life and career, but one stands out above all for me. And like a lot of teenagers, I had big dreams to go to college one day, but in my family, we lost my dad very suddenly in my teenage years. And that was devastating on a million levels, but we struggled more financially from that point onward, and college didn't look like such a sure thing on the horizon.

Selena Rezvani:

Well, fast forward to college, I got into one I really loved, they offered me some financial aid and my wonderful mom said, I will scrape together what it takes to cover the rest of your tuition. And she did. Single moms are amazing, by the way, and my mom totally was for me. And I was excited to get that financial aid package for year two, and lo and behold, Emilie, it was way smaller. The aid dollars they were offering. And my mom said, "Honey, I can't swing it. I can't do this and send you back." And I realized I needed to be my own advocate in that moment, and I appealed that financial aid package. I wrote a long appeal letter to the financial aid office. And I said, please keep me here. Please. Here are the ways I would like to contribute to the community. Here are the million jobs I will take on from admissions, to the cafeteria, to make this worth it to you.

Selena Rezvani:

And to my shock, to my happy shock, they changed that. They kept me there for not just year two, but for year three and for year four, also. And they gave me all those jobs as well. So, I think I learned in that moment that asking for what you want can sometimes change the course of your life, and that even though you can have loved ones, and sponsors, and mentors, and people rallying for you, nobody is going to ask on your behalf. You really have to be your own vocal champion. And boy was that a good lesson to learn as a young woman at 18.

Emilie Ninan:

Yeah, that's wonderful that you... It's too bad that you had to learn it that way and for that reason, but it's a great lesson. I'm sure you carry in your lifetime was a wonderful and important outcome as well. I'm a strong believer that almost any skill can be learned. I'm not sure all those skills are transferable, but you say that self advocacy is a transferable skill. How so?

Selena Rezvani:

It is. I believe that as business professionals, as legal practitioners, right, there are so many ways you advocate every day. Ways you are already doing this, whether it's advocating for project priority to move your project up the list. Maybe something you're working on firm wide or an internal initiative, right? Certainly to advocate for clients and the quality of an item they're going to get. The approach on a project. A direct reports development. All kinds of things, a more realistic timeline. The truth is, we are all doing this all the time. My question for those listening is what if you brought that same ferocious advocacy you bring to delighting clients and internal customers and stakeholders to those areas that could benefit you. Things like your title, your performance rating in some cases, the projects you're assigned. And certainly things like pay and promotions. I think one of the important ways we make a bridge to negotiating more often is by claiming some credit for the ways we're already doing it. And I think when we see that connection, it's much easier to negotiate even more often and even more strategically, which is what I'm all about teaching.

Emilie Ninan:

So in negotiation, sometimes our proposals fall flat because they come across as benefiting only one party. How can we show the other side that there is a mutual benefit?

Selena Rezvani:

Yeah, well, that's a really important point, because I think one of the things we don't want to do in a negotiation, or when we're trying to persuade somebody is to make the conversation feel like me, me, me, right? Can I have? Here's what I want. Here's what I plan to do with it, or what I'll get. That's not exactly a way to entice somebody who's busy and has many competing priorities. So I think a better way is a framework I love to share with people, and it's called GPS. GPS, just like what you have in your car or in your phone, right? And what that stands for is goals, passions, and struggles.

Selena Rezvani:

So how can you, before that negotiation ever happens, right? As you're thinking about what you want to propose, whether it's a flexible work arrangement, a brand new role that doesn't exist yet at your organization or something smaller, how can you stand in the shoes of your counterpart and ask yourself what is a goal of theirs that I could further with the same proposal? Or what's a passion or a cause they care deeply about? Right? That I could make a connection to. Or what's a struggle? What's a pain point that I could, in some way, alleviate with my request? You don't need to hit all three of these things, but just taking the time to ask these questions before any strategic conversation can go a long way to flipping that conversation from me. Me, me, me, to we, and that's powerful.

Selena Rezvani:

I want to give you just a really quick example of someone who did this, a woman named Sonya, she worked in financial services and her boss would complain to her, in a good natured way, about some projections he had to come up with every two weeks. And so he had to come up with this set of numbers and give some analysis to the senior leaders in his organization. Here's what we can expect, here's what the fluctuations mean. And guess what? When it came time for Sonya to ask for more responsibility, she asked to assume those projections, and part of her pitch was, look, I know this is a goal you're on the hook for, and I know it's a burden on your time. Right? And so think about how yesable she made her request by thinking about the other person's GPS. Okay?

Selena Rezvani:

And by the way, no one was shocked when about 18 months later, she got a promotion to a VP level, right? Because suddenly she was the one sending around the really smart analysis, getting visibility with senior leaders in her organization. So such a really crucial step, I think when you're going to ask for something and propose something new and different, think about their GPS.

Emilie Ninan:

That's a great example. Thank you. You warn people that if you dislike the terms now, you'll hate them later. Tell us more about that.

Selena Rezvani:

Well, if you sense all is not right with, let's say the deal terms, or something that you're working out with a vendor, a contract, or a job offer. You sense something's off, that twitch in your solar plexus is telling you all is not right here. Maybe you don't know what it is, at a minimum buy yourself more time and trust that sense that this doesn't feel good. This doesn't quite feel fair or reasonable. I think sometimes that urge, if you are a recovering people pleaser to say, okay, or yeah, sure we can do it that way, happens. Sometimes before we even realize it. And I think it's so important to really trust, again, that twitch that says, no, no. I need to think this through more, or I'm feeling uncomfortable about this. And like I said, buy yourself, more time at

a minimum to think it through and come back with maybe your objections, or a better solution, a better request that could meet everybody's needs.

Selena Rezvani:

I did this, by the way, in one role, I made this mistake, and I had actually gone into a new job situation. I had interviewed for a job, and I liked the role, but I didn't like the pay very much. I thought it should be higher. I thought that would be fair. And I negotiated for higher pay and they were insistent, this is not negotiable, it is what it is. Kind of take it or leave it. And in that moment, I kind of told myself, well, the culture is not nice enough, and the people seem nice enough, and this role looks pretty well suited to me. I kind of justified it, and guess what? My resentment didn't decrease over time in being underpaid. I felt it more. And that's what I mean by if you don't like the terms now, you're only going to hate them later. It doesn't usually work the other way where you say it'll grow on me.

Selena Rezvani:

Now, the good thing in that situation was I was able to renegotiate my role, and including my pay after about 13 months in that job. And I'm really glad I did. So, when you do get a no, the first time around, part of my advice is hold that lightly. Don't see it as the end of the road and the end of the conversation. See it really like a pivot and an invitation for you to either make a different request, or to come back and ask at another time.

Emilie Ninan:

And then when you say buy yourself more time, are you talking about a response that says, let me think about that, or let me come back to you tomorrow, or how would you have bought yourself more time?

Selena Rezvani:

Sure. So, one of them could simply be saying to the recruiter I was working with, I hear you telling me you can't move on the dollar amount. You asked me to get back to you tomorrow, I'd like to ask for more like the next week to consider that decision, because this changes the parameters for me. That's what I'm talking about in terms of buying yourself more time. And I say that because in your career, for anyone listening, there's going to be what I call exploding offers. Right? Which is when people put tremendous pressure on you to answer a negotiation like yesterday. And the pressure they put on you is this whole thing will go away if you don't give me an answer. And it's a tactic, right? It makes it hard for us to really look at the whole picture, or the entire offer. And to really give it the careful thought it might deserve, and I would encourage you to push back on that and advocate for the time you need. Expect that you're going to be hurried in your career at times, whether it's from a recruiter or somebody else who makes you feel like that might go away, and tell them, I'd really be comfortable with a timeline more like X.

Selena Rezvani:

One other quick example of that, Emilie, that I think happens a lot. And I think happens a lot to women, is what I call the kind of drive by negotiation, where somebody stops you in the hallway and maybe you're like gathering up your stuff and walking out to go. And it's like, hey, something just came up and I need you to stay late. In that moment there can be a huge urge to say, okay, what do you need, and do it. But sometimes that's a place where you can buy yourself some time, and elongate the window so that you don't just say yes. And it might, I look like saying, oh, okay. I can hear you that, that sounds like a stressful situation. I need to check my workload and then come right back to you and let you know if I can do it. Or I need to look at my calendar and let you know if I can fit this in right now. Or in some cases, it's, I need to talk to my partner, right, to let you know if this is even something I can do and honor tonight. So that's another way we can elongate that window of negotiation and not feel pressured to just work with the time window we've been given.

Emilie Ninan:

You mentioned earlier that when you get a no answer to kind of hold it lightly and go back to it at a later time, do you have any other advice for getting past roadblocks or the dreaded no answer?

Selena Rezvani:

Yeah, it is dreaded, isn't it? So much of the time when I ask people, what stops you from doing this, and asking for what you need, that's it. It's no. I'm afraid of that rejection, and what it could mean. And so, one of the things I encourage people to do is to get comfortable asking diagnostic questions, get curious, not furious, is another way to think about this if you get a no. Maybe somebody says to you after you pitch an exciting role where there's tons of value in creating this role in the organization, and they say something to you, like you're not ready. I don't think you're ready for that. Or timing's not great. There's this vague, no, that we can get sometimes. Being willing to say something like, well, can you share more about your rationale behind that? Or I hear you telling me I'm not ready. Can you say more about what ready would look like? Right?

Selena Rezvani:

One of the women I interviewed for my book, Pushback, I have such admiration for her, her name's DeeDee Wilson, and she was a CFO at Nike when I interviewed her. And she said, I was told at one point you're not CFO material. And she said, not only is that psychologically kind of crushing feedback, but she said, it's not actionable. There's nothing I can do with that. And she said, my advice to others is to really insist on objective criteria. Somebody gives you a no, or a vague no, really peel that onion back and try to get to the real reason, or something that you can take action on. And that's exactly how she got her promotion to CFO. She said, what exactly am I lacking? Financial acumen, people management skills, visible projects within the organization? And she said, I project managed my way to that promotion.

Selena Rezvani:

And so, I think that's a great piece of advice. If you're not getting that objective criteria, keep going, keep asking those meaty questions. So you can diagnose what the real issue is, right, because we don't have a chance to fix it if we don't know what it is. So push for that. Push for that important data.

Selena Rezvani:

One more thing we can do when we get that no is, work on our pitch. Work on our pitch, think about, can I tweak this 25 degrees differently to make the value shine through? Or can I consult with somebody even further along on the road than I am to make this proposal stronger or better? I know I was really crushed in my own career when I got a painful no. I was interviewing to be a global spokesperson for a large tech company. And I was so excited about the impact I could make, but I didn't get it. And I got one of those polite, no thank you emails. It was great to meet you, Selena. We're going to go in another direction, but stay in touch. And after licking my wounds, and having some rosé and lots of Milano cookies, I went back to them and I said, "Hey, I know that didn't work out, but here's an idea for a different way we could partner. What do you think?" And you know what, Emilie, just like that, they said, "Yes." So it goes back to that idea of hold your noes lightly. Don't see them as written in cement and final. Be willing to be tenacious.

Emilie Ninan:

Well, you have given us so much to think about. A lot of great takeaways about giving people a chance to make things right, to hold your noes lightly, to be curious, not furious. So thank you so much for your time and I want to be respectful of it. So I'm going to end with this question. Selena, knowing what you know now, what advice would you give your younger self?

Selena Rezvani:

Wow, thank you for the gift of that question, Emilie, because it's thing to think about, I think, and look back. I'd say be more experimental. Don't be so scared to get it wrong. Wink at your faults, and make more face plants. That's where you're going to learn.

Emilie Ninan:

Easier said than done, but we will try, we'll try.

Selena Rezvani:

We'll do it together.

Emilie Ninan:

Well, Selena, thank you again for joining me today. I look forward to chatting with you again on March 9th during our webinar, Negotiate like a Boss, How to Be a Fierce Self Advocate. Until then, stay well.

Steve Burkhart:

Thanks again to Emilie Ninan and Selena Rezvani. Make sure to visit our website, www.ballerspahr.com, where you can find the latest news and guidance from our attorneys. Subscribe to the show on Apple Podcast, Google Play, Spotify or your favorite podcast platform. If you have any questions or suggestions for the show, please email podcastballardspahr.com. Stay tuned for a new episode coming soon. Thank you for listening.