

## **Negotiation Skills: Preparation, Participation, and Patience (1,440 words)**

After the negotiation is over, and the paperwork is signed, we sometimes question our negotiation skills and wonder if we could have done better. There are certain behaviors to improve the odds in our favor. There is also a certain process we need to anticipate and follow to assure the best outcome. Effective negotiators know there are three phases to negotiation: Pre-play (gathering information), Inter-play (face-to-face discussions) and Post-play (options when there is a deadlock or impasse).

Let's take a look at some effective negotiation behaviors. Effective negotiators work to satisfy the interests of all involved. Effective negotiators believe that getting more information before and during the negotiation process increases the chances for finding creative solutions. Continued conversations are necessary and valuable to search for an optimal solution. An effective negotiator encourages discussions to clarify the other person's thought and not just their own. During the discussions, effective negotiators listen to the other party, acknowledge their points and their feelings, agree where they can, and show the other party respect. Conflict is the natural by-product of open and honest communication. It shouldn't be something we fear.

Negotiation can be fun. It is certainly interesting. Make sure you do your homework in advance, be attentive during negotiations and take good notes, and be prepared to accept an alternative to your maximum plausible position. Take these steps and you will feel satisfied with your performance.

**Pre-Play Requires Preparation:** Sometimes the first few minutes of the negotiation process are awkward and the conversation gets off to a slow start. People are not sure what the other side is up to. They may not be sure how to start. The key is to be better prepared.

This is sometimes called pre-play in negotiation. Pre-play, or the pre-negotiation tactics, are the intelligence gathering activities you should have engaged in to make sure you are properly prepared. The key in pre-play is to gather as much information as possible about the other party, their history, their current situation, interests, needs, wants, desires, mission statements, value statements, industry trends, and their future intentions. Gather as much of this information as possible from a wide variety of sources so that you have a broad understanding of the negotiation situation and can project confidence in the conversations. Intelligence gathering includes talking to everyone you can think of and investigating for information. Contact trade associations, vendors, suppliers, competitors, and gather as much "intel" as you can. You wouldn't want to take a test without studying in advance. Then why would you negotiate without doing your homework?

It's important to do significant preparation to guarantee significant results. Knowing who, what, when, where, and why, in advance, can spare you and your organization from mistakes during the negotiation. You will never save or lose money faster than through negotiation. Pre-play information gathering activities will provide you the information you need to develop a sound plan for negotiation success.

**Inter-Play Requires Participation:** You may play a key role in negotiations at work. You may even enjoy the negotiation process and the give and take. So, after the small talk, how do you get the negotiation underway?

Simply start the conversation like any other. Negotiation is simply a discussion aimed at reaching an agreement. It isn't something to be afraid of. Invite the other party to go first, "Tell me what you are thinking." It is important to listen first and to understand their positions, reservations, and hesitations. The other party will probably also share their needs, wants, and hopes. It is important to listen first because you will have more credibility when you respond and they will believe you are taking their perspective in mind in your response. If you listen first you can also now bracket your offer based upon their initial position. If they say 10, and you need 9, you can counter with 8, and it is amazing how often you end up agreeing in the middle.

However, if you do have to start and share your thoughts first, keep these two tips in mind. Ask for more than you expect to get and imply flexibility. Asking for more than you expect to get is often referred to as your maximum plausible position. The ideal numbers, terms, and conditions. There are some good reasons to do this. You might just get it, it provides negotiating room, and it helps prevent deadlock. The second step is to imply flexibility by saying something like, "We may be able to modify our offer, however, based upon our current understanding of quickness, quantity, and quality, this is where we are at and what we are thinking."

Don't worry about making a mistake. Nothing has been signed. Just carry on the conversation. Negotiation should not be something to worry about. No stress required. Just search for a few shared interests, have some open and honest conversations, and occasionally set aside some time to think.

**Post-Play Requires Patience:** Sometimes a person feels like a failure when they can't close the deal. People are disappointed when the negotiation is deadlocked and at an impasse. I think it is a good sign. I think it means you have negotiated as strongly as you could.

What does a person do when negotiations grind to a halt? Say something like this, "It is a shame that this is all going to collapse when we have worked so hard and we were so close to agreement." Simply stating something like that can jolt the negotiation forward. Sometimes, simply describing the situation, the history of the conversations, the offers, the counter-offers, and the current status, can unleash new conversations and unearth some new possibilities. It may have been a misunderstanding. It may have been a misinterpretation. There could have been a piece of information that was missed during intelligence gathering.

Here are some strategies to consider that can help break the deadlock. Take a break and change your activity. Change a few of the team members. Change the environment, the seating arrangement, the setting, or the location. Offer to facilitate a joint brainstorming session to produce low cost options. Discuss terms, guarantees and language alternatives. Offer "subject to" agreements such as "subject to management approval" or "subject to accounting department approval." Suggest a cooling off period of a day or two to review positions and interests. It's okay to reach an impasse or a deadlock. Try to change the emphasis, change the social tone, or

explore your other options.

Post-play is what you do when the negotiations have stopped. Be calm and confident. Relieve the pressure with some alternative strategies to resume the conversations. Mix it up a little bit. Move people around. Make it fun. Humor heals. Extend a helping hand and a cooperative intention. Deal?

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