

Keys to Effective Negotiation

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Every person has the capacity to negotiate well. Basic skill development increases a negotiator's confidence to engage and manage conflict instead of avoiding it. Effective negotiators recognize that maintaining or improving relationships has more value over the long haul than a "quick win" that strains the relationship. They respect the right of others to have their own, and usually different, perspective on the situation and their own values and beliefs. They focus on the issues at hand without getting personal (working hard on the problem while taking it easy on the people). They recognize the importance of informed decision-making instead of relying on hunches. They explore a variety of options instead of either/or thinking. Agreement requires both people to find some satisfaction. Mutual agreement is the bedrock on which commitment to perform as agreed is based.

Three important parts of communication

There is a reason Mother Nature equipped us with two ears, but only one mouth. Effective negotiators do more listening than talking. They understand there are three parts to communication: the message, transmitting the message and receiving the message. They take care to be sure they do each of these well.

THE MESSAGE: If the issue is worth addressing, it is worth taking the time to craft an effective message.

- Concentrate on the factual information it is helpful to share. Keep your opinions to yourself. State your concerns instead of making demands.
- Invite the other person into a dialogue. Do not give ultimatums. You will just get ultimatums right back.
- Do not assume you know the motives or intention of the other person. It is usually skewed by your own perceptions and distracts you from more accurate interpretations.
- Let the other person know you are seeking "common ground" (Your child's welfare is usually good common ground).

TRANSMITTING THE MESSAGE No message is effective if the other person is not listening. You are responsible for delivering the message in a way they will listen to it.

- Speak without putting the other person on the defensive. When others get defensive they feel judged or attacked. They stop listening and start reacting. Avoid the word "you." Use "I" and "we" instead
- Avoid making accusations or challenging their motives
- Speak without sounding like a preacher or dictator
- Do not put words in their mouth. Be patient. They will eventually tell you what they are concerned about and/or what they need.

RECEIVING A MESSAGE: Concentrate on what is *actually* being said by the other person. You need to know this information in order to find a way forward.

- Show you are interested in hearing the message by making respectful eye contact. Put down distractions. Assume a neutral or inviting stance (body language).
- Withhold judgment or planning your comebacks
- Reflect back what they said to be sure you heard it correctly. Try not to “spin” their words.
- Try to clarify what you don’t clearly hear. Ask the other person to say more about it.
- What concern, need or interest is being expressed by the other person? (Note: You don’t have to agree with what they say, this is about being aware of how they perceive things to be so you can work with the information to craft an outcome you can both live with).

Five Tips from Effective Negotiators

1. **Pick battles wisely** – Is this issue worth the time and effort? Is the timing right? What are the costs for taking this on? What opportunities are lost if it is avoided?
2. **Keep an open mind** – Do not rush to judgment. Gather information first, then decide what it means.
3. **Identify what it’s like** to be in the other guy’s shoes - What are their needs and interests? These have to be addressed to reach an agreement.
4. **Communicate clearly** – Ask for information. Be clear about your own needs. Decisions should be based on the best information available to you.
5. **Seek opportunities for mutual satisfaction.** Seek a win/win if possible. Otherwise seek an outcome that provides the maximum satisfaction possible with the least resentment or cost to either side.

How agreement is reached

Step 1: At least one person in a dispute decides to manage the conflict in a positive and constructive way. Competing to win is what people fall into when they become frustrated. Competing is the least effective way to reach agreement.

Bridge Building: finding a happy medium

Consensus: seeking areas of joint agreement

Teamwork: joining forces to solve a problem

Step 2: **Find common ground.** Reframe the “issue” in a way both people are interested in talking about it. For parents, what’s in the best interest of their child is an essential common ground. For example, how I am going to have time with the child on a holiday is a unilateral approach. How the child will celebrate a holiday is an issue both parents have an interest in discussing.

Step 3: **Be patient.** It takes a while to gather information and talk about various options before the best answer becomes apparent. Stay positive and stick with the conversation in hopes of finding the best solution for all involved. If it only works for you, the other person will resent the outcome, and vice versa.

Step 4: **Consider three or more ways** the problem can be resolved. If only my way and your way is considered, it’s back to the competing mode, which is not effective.

Step 5: When the answer starts to emerge, explore how this is workable for each person and how each person will make it work. A test run may help identify other factors that need to be addressed. Keep it practical. Make the agreement specific by identifying the role and responsibilities of each person involved. Be willing to revisit this issue as circumstances change.