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Improve Your Negotiating Skills

August is prime time to enjoy a national favorite pastime — watching baseball. As you cheer for your team, recall that 25 years ago this month, Major League Baseball (MLB) players went on strike to protest salary caps imposed by owners. The 1994 World Series was cancelled, owners and players suffered financial losses, and fans reluctantly turned to preseason football for entertainment. The two sides reached an agreement only after months of tense, often adversarial bargaining and the intervention of federal mediators.

You may not get involved in high-stakes negotiations like these, but, your career success can still depend on your negotiation skills. For instance, you may need to compromise with a client on project terms, reach an agreement with regulators on a compliance issue, or navigate a salary discussion with your boss or direct report. In each case, achieving agreement with the other party depends on the interpersonal and communication skills you bring to the table. Follow this advice to sharpen your negotiating expertise.

Have a negotiation mindset. Many of your interactions with others are actually negotiations. “People don’t realize that when someone needs something from you, you have a right to collect an IOU,” says Kevin Shulman, President of Shulman Associates Sandler Sales Training. “So, if your boss asks you to stay late one day, you can ask to knock off early or come in late another day.”

Know what you want. Before you go into a negotiation, prepare a list of things you want to get and things you are willing to give up. “If you haven’t thought this out beforehand, you’re flying blind and going to get beat,” says Shulman. In addition, “you must have good training in the subject matter you are negotiating,” says Jamal Al-Rubaye, assistant professor, Univ. of Technology, Baghdad. Such training enables you to negotiate with a better understanding of nuances and potential outcomes.

In any negotiation, says Shulman, “Have the mindset that you deserve what you are asking for. Because you do.”

Plan your negotiation strategy. “I’ve seen people use a pile driver approach where they are very insistent, push their position and are unreasonable. Then, there’s another strategy, where you seek to build consensus with the other party,” says Jason Meisner, practice group leader, Coughlin Duffy LLP. “When you get people to buy in, it becomes everybody’s plan. Nobody walks away with hurt feelings because you’ve brought everybody together.”

Understand the other party’s stance. Dale Carnegie

advises in his book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, “Other people may be totally wrong. But they don’t think so. Don’t condemn them. Try to understand them.” This is an effective tactic to use in negotiations. Consider what the other person wants from this deal. What do they have to gain or lose?

Distinguish between position and objective. A direct report, for example, may ask for a \$25,000 raise. “That’s their position, but you may not have the budget for such a large raise,” says Meisner. “When you determine their objective is to make more money, you can work together to find an incentive or compensation solution that meets their objective and keeps you on budget.”

Be an active listener. When the other party is talking, focus on them and not on what you will say in response. Pay attention to their body language and ask questions for clarification. This will help you understand what they value and areas where they may be open to compromise.

State your case clearly. Practice before your meeting and have notes on hand so you can concisely state your desired outcome and reasoning. Be prepared for questions and to restate your case to help the other party understand your position.

Avoid unilateral concessions. Skilled negotiators know not to give something up without getting something in return. For instance, if a customer wants a price cut during contract negotiations, you can counter with a longer project timeline or reduced work scope.

Reign in your emotions. The MLB negotiations were often tense and emotional. Similarly, you may get angry or frustrated with the pace or direction of a negotiation. When this happens, take a break. Doing so can help you process your emotions and come back to the table with a clear head.

Preserve the relationship. Though you may not see eye-to-eye with the other party on every issue, treat them professionally and with respect. “If you’re in a continuing relationship with the other party, sometimes a ‘pay it forward’ mentality needs to be a factor,” notes Meisner. “Agree to give up a little bit today with the understanding that you’ll get a little bit tomorrow.”

Be open to creative solutions. When you understand the other party’s position and objectives, and have clearly stated your own, you are better positioned to collaborate. “You open the door to figuring out if there are alternative solutions that satisfy both of your needs. This can deepen your relationship and creates a win-win dynamic,” says Meisner.

CEP