

Staying on track

Map out these four information categories to stay focused during negotiations

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Question: I have a tendency to lose my focus in a negotiation either when the other party does something I don't expect or when there are lots of issues put on the table. Do you have any recommendations for helping me maintain my concentration?

Answer: When negotiating, there are four general information categories you want to map out: position, interest, alternatives and issues. Before entering into the negotiation, it's important that you define your stance on each of those categories first. That will free your mind so you can focus on the other party's communication.

To begin, it's advantageous to write each of those words on a piece of paper and bring both your responses and that paper to the negotiation. Then, as the dialogue unfolds, you can direct your notes to the appropriate category. It's to your advantage to write down the other party's language as precisely as possible.

Let's investigate the first category – position. A position is the stated requirement one side demands from another. When and how they state their position gives you tremendous insights when developing an effective strategy. For example, did the other party begin the negotiation by stating a bold and unreasonable position? If so, they are either playing hardball or they are trying to assess how you respond to pressure tactics. Many experienced negotiators know that the more pressure they exert early on, the greater the concessions they receive.

Let's be clear about this, stating an unreasonable position early in a negotiation is a power play. The intent is to intimidate you, thereby lowering your expectations. Depending on the history of your relationship with the other party, what's at stake and the ideal resolution that you desire, consider the following countermoves if this happens

to you:

1) Ignore. Do not respond. Continue interacting with them without showing discord. Since the other party is expecting you to be unsettled, your lack of response will cause them to become unsettled. This is not what they expected. You now have a shift in the power, use it wisely. Ask questions about their position in a non-confrontational way. You want to uncover information so you can make an informed assessment and determine viable options.

2) Acknowledge and redirect. Respond by saying, "It's nice to deal with someone who puts it right out there," and then continue your dialogue as if nothing happened. They will be puzzled. When you did not react as expected, you demonstrated the ability to maintain your position of power. That will cause them to revamp their strategy.

3) Acknowledge and probe. Pause for a moment and look at each committee member in his/her eyes for just a brief moment.

Emotionally "own" your space. Take a deep breath, sigh again and then, with your head nodding up and down say, "This seems very important to you." Pause and observe their reactions.

Follow up with a direct question to each key person. To illustrate, "Jerry, having a 24-hour delivery schedule is important to you because ...," letting Jerry complete the statement. Their responses will disclose the intent behind their position and give you critical information to determine the appropriate next step. It's not uncommon for a committee to have members who are not in agreement. Uncovering the discrepancies of their positions gives you strategic advantage.

The next category you want to uncover is the other party's interest. An interest is what the other party really desires. In most negotiations, each party comes to the table with both a need and a want. To distinguish, a need is "a must have," whereas a want is a "like to have." The difference between the two is the bargaining zone for making demands and concessions.

There are often priorities associated with interests. Some are more important than others. Understanding both your priorities and the other party's is a vital step to developing a mutually acceptable solution.

Alternatives are viable options each party might find appealing. Before entering into a negotiation, it is difficult to determine all viable

alternatives since the other party's position and interests are unknown. Engaging in a fact-finding/discovery process helps formulate possible acceptable alternatives.

In Max Bazerman's book, *Negotiating Rationally*, he says, "Fall in love with three options, not just one." Why? Because when you become emotionally attached to only one option, the probability of negotiating rationally rapidly decreases. To the extent that a party is committed or excited about one alternative more than another, his/her bargaining position is significantly weakened. By having more than one option, it becomes easier to walk away, if the stakes become unreasonable.

Often times, it is difficult to assess the other party's alternative strategies prior to engaging at the bargaining table. That's why it is critical to take time to determine your own alternatives, preferences and walk-away position. When you don't have to think about your own position, your mind can concentrate more intently on the other party.

Finally, understanding the other party's hot buttons or issues is critical to securing a mutually agreeable solution. Sometimes the smallest concession for you can be the biggest deal maker for the other party. For example, let's say a company just downsized its maintenance department from five team members to one. The

project engineer has stressed the absolute need for top quality. By offering the project engineer a five-year warranty rather than a three-year may be the alternative that gives you a strategic advantage.

It can be difficult to maintain your concentration especially when multiple players are involved in the negotiation. How effectively you capture their information correctly and process it, will influence your ability to present a viable solution.

The beauty of this process is in its simplicity. No need for workbooks, or special handouts. In a moment's notice, you can have it ready. It has been our experience that when used well, your listening skills go to a whole new level. You are able to capture more subtle messages and often times, the best solutions include these critical elements.



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