

Disclose your deadline

Pressure can help bring resolution

Question:

I recently participated in a contentious negotiation that dragged on and on and on. I didn't impose a deadline because I was afraid that I would be forced to make concessions. Is there a better strategy to manage this type of situation?

Response:

I was always taught that if you disclose your deadline, you give up your power. I too have participated in negotiations that dragged on forever. Because of my training, I did not disclose or impose a deadline; instead I let it play out.

But new research from professor Don Moore of Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business challenges this notion. Results from his study show that when you set a deadline, even an arbitrary

one, you gain strategic advantage because it puts pressure on everyone to reach agreement.

"But," you might say, "If I disclose my deadline and my counterpart doesn't have the same pressure, they'll string me out until I find myself forced to make concessions."

However, Moore's research doesn't support this. In fact, his study shows that negotiators who reveal their deadlines to the other party achieve better outcomes than those who keep their deadlines secret.

Professor Moore's findings were an eye-opener for me. I was taught NEVER to disclose your deadline; NEVER give the other party information that could exploit your position; and NEVER make the first move. His findings challenge this rationale, and in fact, encourage you to disclose your deadline because it motivates the other party to make concessions and reach agreement.

It's common knowledge that some negotiators intentionally drag out a negotiation – they deliberately want to wear down the other party. From experience, they know that over time, negotiation fatigue sets in and issues that were significant early on, become less critical. The battle-worn party recalibrates their goal and simply wants to find sufficient common ground to secure mutual agreement and move on.

If you suspect that the other party is

intent on deliberately prolonging the negotiation to gain control of the deal, then set an arbitrary deadline.

The recognition that deadlines affect all parties equally allows you to use them and avoid costly stalling tactics. Moore noted as part of his study that the National Basketball Association team owners resolved the 1998 players' strike to their advantage by setting an arbitrary yet firm final deadline.

And finally, be careful not to confuse deadlines with time costs. Moore cautions that in a legal settlement negotiation, for example, your mounting attorney fees are your issue and not the other party's concern. Rather than complaining about the rising financial investment, try to move up your court date. This will impose a mutual deadline.

As with most negotiations, the only person who will really know what strategy will be most effective and when is you. You know what's most important about this negotiation, what's at stake, and what options are viable to pursue.



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