

Top of your game

Follow these seven steps to prevent anxiety from ruining a negotiation

By **Christine McMahon**, for *SBT*

Question: Do you have any recommendations for reducing anxiety prior to a negotiation?

Answer: When negotiating or making a presentation, people often experience a feeling of angst. Their mouths become dry, they become short of breath, and their voices either tremble or sound squeaky. While such a feeling is attributable to anxiety, it is usually extra adrenaline that is being released into the body to make sure you have the extra energy you need to be effective.

Negotiating requires increased physical and mental acuteness. To be on top of your game at the bargaining table, you must simultaneously process the other party's verbal and non-verbal messages, listen to the meaning behind their communication, and be strategizing an appropriate next move.

That all places significant energy demands on your body. The additional adrenaline surge gives you the extra stamina you need to have staying power.

When this happens, take a few moments to relax your body. Breathe deeply through your nostrils and exhale as fully as possible through your mouth. Repeat that several times; it will calm your body and restore your emotional balance without sacrificing your adrenaline rush.

If however, anxiety is what you are experiencing, distinguish the type of anxiety you are feeling. The most common type is called "state" anxiety. It's our body's natural reaction to challenging situations and is the nervousness and apprehension we feel prior to a perceived challenging or important situation. While it can make our insecurities rise to the surface it does not prohibit us from attempting to be successful.

There is another type of anxiety which is called "trait" anxiety. This is a personal characteristic that diminishes our effectiveness and, in fact, can immobilize some people. To illustrate, while most people are uncomfortable speaking in public, people with trait anxiety can not function in public situations. They become incapacitated and thus are

ineffective. Professional support must be sought.

If you have "state" anxiety, follow these seven steps to gain control and bolster your confidence:

1. Don't wait until the last minute. Last minute cramming wears you down. When you are tired, you lose your edge. Build time to reflect on your strategies, tactics and positioning statements. Work through different options. Play them out in your mind. Consider different solutions and their potential receptivity and impact. The more you can map out ahead of time, the greater your thinking capacity when negotiating.

2. Don't set unrealistic demands on yourself. Give yourself every opportunity to walk away from the bargaining table with an acceptable solution. To accomplish this, avoid negotiating from a single position. Enter the negotiation being open to more than one possible solution. You don't want to risk coming across as strong-arming the other party. You want to be perceived as inflexible — even if you are not.

To set yourself up for success, before engaging in the negotiation, start by developing three levels of possible outcomes. For the first level, define your walk-away position. For the second level, define your target outcome. For the third level, determine what your ideal solution would look like. This will give you a range of possible options to work with depending on the other party's positioning.

3. Don't concentrate on your mistakes. From time to time, we all make mistakes. Don't stew over them or carry them from one negotiation to another. Learn from your mistakes and emotionally move on.

4. Don't negotiate when you can't think. When your brain isn't working, take a recess. Get up. Go for a walk. Drink water. Studies show when you change your physiology, your ability to be creative also changes. Refresh your body and you will be surprised how quickly your brain will kick back into high gear.

5. Don't just listen, take notes. During a negotiation it's can be challenging paying attention, processing, thinking and responding at the same time. Now add to that, taking notes. Sounds overwhelming, but it's not impossible.

In fact, by taking notes, you become more focused in hearing what the other party is really saying. Because you are "seeing" what the

other party is saying, you capture the nuances or hidden messages that may have slipped by otherwise.

You gain a strategic advantage, especially when there are many players present. Write down everything that has to do with policies, positions or challenges. Sort through their comments to identify inconsistencies in their positions. You might find a casual statement made early on by one person to be the clincher that seals the deal in your favor.

6. Keep a checklist of the key points. When there's a lot at stake and tension is thick, it's not uncommon for people to purposefully digress and try to distract you. Keeping a checklist of the key points you want to address will help you redirect the conversation back to its original focus.

7. When engaged in team negotiations, develop a signal for shifting the conversation to relieve a player who needs time to think. It's true, people develop an almost intuitive sense about how to read the people they work with over time. However, there are times when everyone is so engaged in the discussion that they miss important cues. Team members need to agree to a signal prior to entering in the negotiation, that tells the rest of the team, they need a breather to

think. This will avoid cost mistakes.

The more you know about the situation and the players you are negotiating with, the higher your confidence level. Block time to prepare. Work through scenarios. Know your options. Project the other party's possible responses. Resolve not to be shaken. When you can't think, take a break.

William Ury, author of *Getting to Yes* said, "You surrender your initiative when you fail to prepare." When negotiating, you will always face some unknowns. So the more prepared you are, the more in-control you will feel and the less anxiety you will experience.



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