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Ungluing the sticking point

Four strategies to advance a negotiation through a bottleneck

Question:

When a negotiation is stalled because of a single point, how can I move the discussion forward?

Answer:

Negotiations are often deadlocked as much by individual personalities as they are by actual issues that the two parties cannot agree on. The most hair-pulling type of personality is the indecisive person. Such a person debates every issue from every conceivable angle before making a decision.

The indecisive feel that by forcing you to justify your position, they expose all the nitty-gritty issues that they might otherwise overlook that would cause them to make a bad decision.

A simple approach in handling their dispute over inconsequential points is to ask them, "What do you think we should do here?" Since indecisive people don't want to make decisions of any kind, they often stop objecting out of fear that you will ask them for their opinions.

Some negotiators do that deliberately, hoping that you will become impatient and will make concessions you wouldn't ordinarily make if the discussion were moving at a sensible pace. Remember, at the bargaining table, patience is not only a virtue but, also, a money saver.

If, however, your negotiation is stalled over an issue rather than a personality, consider these four strategies for advancing the discussion:

1) Go through the back door

Put the issue in a holding pattern until later. Discuss and reach agreement on other less controversial items. This approach may make it relatively easy to resolve the difficult issue for several reasons.

First, with the other issues resolved, there's

more at stake for not reaching agreement on the difficult point. Generally speaking, people don't like to negotiate. Once they have invested significant time in a discussion, they are more interested in finding a solution than walking away feeling that they wasted their time.

Second, by resolving the other issues up front, you may have removed the initial problem that was creating the impasse. At the very least, you may have minimized its importance.

Third, by not dwelling on the problem, you may have come up with other creative solutions to resolve the issue.

2) Recess

Adjourn the discussion. Allow each party some breathing room to reassess their positions. You may want resume later that same day or at another time. Either way, be sure to agree upon the time and location for resuming the discussion.

It's always an asset to take a recess whenever things aren't going your way. This gives you a chance to regroup and rethink your strategy and approach. It may also give you a chance to conduct research about something that came up during the negotiation discussion.

In a large-scale meeting, taking a recess gives both you and the other party private time to talk with team members. That may be important if new information has surfaced that the team needs to review and strategize.

As a general rule, taking a recess every 90 minutes is good medicine, particularly in lengthy negotiations so battle fatigue doesn't set in.

3) Discuss in detail

To overcome a bottleneck, discuss the issue in great detail from the other party's position. If you find their arguments to be legitimate, brainstorm creative solutions for reaching agreement. Even if you don't reach an agreement, the other party feels validated by your effort to understand their point of view.

4) Illustrate

Put facts and figures, agreements and dis-

agreements in black and white. Use a piece of paper, a flip chart, chalkboard, whiteboard or whatever is available. Capture first the items on which you have reached an agreement. Then, itemize the issues still remaining. Oftentimes when people see the progress that they have already made, their intention shifts to wanting to close the deal.

5) Play the imagine game

To activate creative thinking and problem solving, ask the other party, "I know this is not the case, however, if we were to imagine just for moment ..." Don't be fooled by the simplicity of this question. It's really very powerful. It invites the other party to examine possibilities without feeling accountable. The initial words, "I know this is not the case", removes all responsibility from the response and allows the creative juices to flow. This is a good tool to use with your team when ideas are stifled and energy is low.

Whatever the cause of your bottleneck, it's important to find smart ways to resolve the problem. Whether you work around the bottleneck or through it, it's important to give yourself thinking room. Take a recess. Play the "imagine game". Illustrate your agreements in black and white.

It takes great patience and emotional discipline to be a successful negotiator. Taking deep breaths and 90-minute breaks is a key to maintaining your energy, focus and problem-solving skills.

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