

Confidence comes with experience

Negotiating is an acquired skill

Question:

I would like to be more assertive during a negotiation. It's especially hard for me to be confident and self-assured when I know the negotiation will be confrontational.

Response:

Negotiating is not an inherent skill. We are not born great negotiators. Like most disciplines, negotiating expertise is the byproduct of knowledge acquisition, practice and feedback. This can only be developed over time.

Inexperienced or ill-prepared negotiators confuse their lack of success with an inability to be effective. In fact, it's not that they lack the capacity, rather it's that they lack knowledge and competency. What is competency? Practice over time. Your challenge is not a lack of capability; it's a lack of training and focus.

Here are six strategies to help you gain more confidence and assertiveness in future negotiations:

1. Dedicate time to prepare:

A top negotiator always walks into a negotiation prepared. It is critically important that you take time beforehand to define your needs and wants. Make sure you are clear about what is most important to you. Are you interested in getting the best price, winning new business, or building a long-term relationship?

A good negotiator also defines the walk-away point. Know which concessions you are willing to make and what concessions you will ask for in return.

2. Anticipate the negotiation from

the other party's position: After you have mapped out your plan and strategy, consider the negotiation from the other party's perspective. Ask yourself:

- "What's most important to the other party about this negotiation?"
- "What are their needs and wants?"
- "What is their walk-away point?"
- "What concessions will they ask for and which ones will they be willing to make?"

This exercise will provide you with insights to help you understand the other party's emotional and motivational drivers.

3. Rehearse: Play out in your mind as many scenarios as you imagine could unfold. Practice seeing yourself in control – professionally and successfully influencing the outcome. The more options you anticipate, the more prepared you will be to engage in the negotiation and respond to the unexpected.

4. Don't fold under pressure – negotiate for more time: A common mistake made by inexperienced negotiators is that they feel pressured to respond to the other party before they have taken the time to think through the situation or gather all of the necessary information. If, at a particular moment, you are unable to make a good decision, either take a short break or let the other person know that you will get back to them in a reasonable timeframe. Once you make a commitment, it's difficult, if not impossible, to retract. Make decisions from a position of strength. Know what you are doing and why. Take time, even if it's just a short recess, to collect your thoughts. Everything you do gets measured, so be deliberate and purposeful. Don't succumb to pressure tactics without first trying to negotiate a better outcome.

5. Seek to find common ground: Another mistake often made by inexperienced negotiators is that they concede too early. Don't bow to pressure or an apparent lack of options. Don't give in just to get the negotiation over with. This is a short sighted response. A negotiation is an exploration of possibilities. It's about creating something bigger or different than may have existed prior to the two parties coming together. Seek to find common ground so you have a basis for creating alternative possibilities.

6. Get commitments, not just agreements: Be sure to confirm the outcome of all negotiations in writing. If the party you are dealing with is removed from the negotiation process, the project, or the firm, for any reason, your agreement will be null and void if you don't have it in writing. If you don't know the party well, and suspect their trustworthiness, frame the agreement so that they will lose if they fail to perform.

Don't be hard on yourself. Most people have not received any training in negotiations and have learned from the school of hard knocks. The result is that they have only a few tactics to rely on. Unfortunately, there are times when limited knowledge or capacity can result in a less than desirable outcome.

Over time, with mindful awareness, you will acquire a wide assortment of strategies and tactics. For right now, focus on the essentials. Take time to prepare for every negotiation. You'll find that you know more than you think. Preparation is the key to boosting your confidence.



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