

Six questions you should always ask when negotiating

Negotiation is viewed by many as a 'Dark Art'. It is something that many approach with a sense of trepidation. The cynic in me often feels such perceptions are perpetuated to justify the high fees of many negotiation courses. This is because in my experience, comfort and success in negotiation can be greatly improved by answering some very simple and practical questions:

1. Is this the right time to negotiate?



Have you ever had the experience of someone phoning you, as you're rushing to get ready for an important event, or as you're trying to get food on the table for a hungry family? How receptive are you to the call? For most people, the answer is 'not very receptive at all'. In such circumstances, it is often best to reschedule for another time and not get involved in a conversation.

A negotiation is simply a specific type of conversation and so follows the same general rules as all conversations. If it starts well, it often finishes well. If it starts badly, it can be very difficult to 'get it back'.

Consequently, it is worth asking yourself whether now is the right time for negotiating and explicitly asking the other party whether it's the right time for them too.

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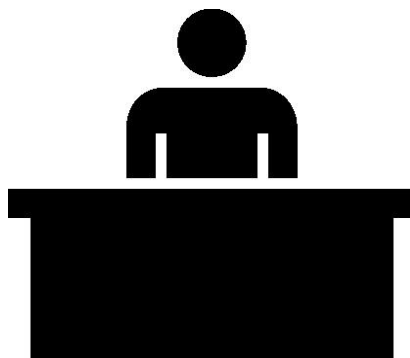
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2. Is this the right location to negotiate?



Location matters. Many a fundraiser will tell you that asking for a donation is often easier when the would-be recipients are in the background and visibly benefiting from the charity's work. Far more practically, choosing a location where distractions are kept to a minimum can greatly increase negotiation success.

3. Is the person you're negotiating with in a position to decide?



I have seen some outstanding examples of negotiation completely wasted because upon reaching a 'deal', one of the parties says; "I'm just going to have to OK this with my boss."

When this happens, the negotiation often has to start all over again with the boss, and much of the time already committed is wasted. Consequently, it's important to check that your counterpart can make a decision. If they can't, it is perfectly reasonable to insist that the negotiation does not start until the decision maker is present.

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4. Are you the right person to be negotiating for your organisation?



In an ideal world, issues such as your age, gender, nationality and status would have no bearing on your perceived capability to negotiate. However, we do not live in an ideal world, and the preconceived ideas held by your counterpart may mean that someone else in your organisation will get a better deal than you.

5. Is it worth negotiating?



It may be that your counterpart's preconceptions/discriminatory views are sufficiently contra to your and/or your organisation's values that continuing to negotiate becomes untenable. However, even when such preconceptions do not exist, it is still worth asking yourself whether negotiating is worth the effort. Essentially, you should consider negotiating when doing so can potentially provide you and your negotiating partner with something better than a non-negotiated outcome. However, sometimes the alternatives to negotiating are preferential. In such circumstances saying 'No' to negotiation is the right answer.

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6. Have you devoted sufficient time to your BATNA?



A stand-out requirement for any negotiation is a good BATNA: Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement. Essentially, this means investing time in working out what you'll do if the negotiation fails.

Taking the time and effort to develop a strong BATNA is crucial to successful negotiation. Psychologically it can have a profound effect, as a strong BATNA allows you to approach a negotiation knowing that, even if it fails, the alternative is still OK.

To quote the late publisher Felix Denis (a renowned negotiator);

“You have to persuade yourself that you absolutely don't care what happens. I absolutely promise you, in every serious negotiation, the man or woman who doesn't care is going to win.”

I'm not suggesting that negotiation is only about the above six questions, as there is real value in understanding the process of negotiation and the different styles that can be applied (the 'What' of negotiation). Such factors are best explored through training and practice. However, *mch: positive impact's* approach to the 'What' of negotiation starts with the simple premise that negotiation is first and foremost a conversation. Consequently, like all conversations, there is value in preparing for it in advance and in realising that it will have a beginning, middle and an end and that you will want to achieve different things at these different stages.

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In my experience though, being proficient in the ‘What’ of negotiation is likely to prevent you from being a bad negotiator, but it is unlikely to make you a great one. Through interviews with several negotiators (many of whom negotiate deals valued in the billions), a key sentiment expressed by them all is that great negotiation depends on ‘getting yourself right’ and being able to develop effective relationships with others. This in turn requires very high levels of emotional intelligence, which is why *mch* always seeks to incorporate such supporting skills into negotiation training, rather than consider negotiation in isolation. Emotional intelligence is a significant area. Very briefly though, emotional intelligence incorporates:

Self-awareness – Being aware of your emotions and being able to ‘join the dots’ between thoughts, feelings and actions.

Qualities such as intuition are central to self-awareness. Such a quality can require real bravery, as intuition is often a knowing, without knowing why: something just feels right or wrong. Taking decisions on such a basis can seem quite unsatisfactory in our rational, ‘facts and figures’ world. None the less, intuition has been shown to be a very valuable guide to decision making. Furthermore, many successful negotiators I’ve spoken with freely express the view that decisions are invariably made by emotional intuition and then justified by rational thought.

Self-regulation – Being able to show the right emotion in the right way, at the right time, to the right person and for the right reason.

Self-regulation is as simple and as difficult as that! Negotiations can be difficult and uncomfortable and your counterpart may intentionally increase the discomfort to try and force a preferential deal. Great negotiators know what ‘pushes their buttons’ and develop strategies to prevent their emotions from getting the better of them.

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Motivation – Being in tune with your own motivations and those of others and pursuing goals for reasons beyond money or ego.

True motivation is central to negotiation as it not only helps you maintain a perspective, it can also prevent viewing a negotiation as a contest. If it becomes a contest, there is a danger that you or your counterpart will attach a sense of self-worth to the negotiation's outcome and when negotiations become personal in this way, they become far more difficult.

Empathy – Tuning into the emotions of others. Treating people as they are, not as you'd like them to be.

It would be great if the person you're negotiating with arrives fully prepared and sees the situation in exactly the same way as you. Let me spoil the suspense, this never happens. Great negotiators are able to put themselves in their counterpart's 'shoes'. In doing so, they are able to tune into the interests of the other party and provide options as to how such interests can be met. Such an ability requires serious empathy.

Social skills – The ability to build rapport with a variety of people.

Those with strong social skills are very mindful of the fact that emotions are 'catching'. They are therefore able to check negative emotions to prevent negotiations descending into an argument, or harness constructive emotions to secure a positive outcome.

It's no coincidence that all five elements of emotional intelligence are wrapped up in the six questions above. For example, ascertaining whether the time is right to negotiate often requires a solid combination of self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and social skills. Equally, deciding whether it's worth negotiating requires a careful and honest appraisal of the motivations of both parties.

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So in essence, great negotiation absolutely requires a keen understanding of the 'What' of negotiation. However it requires so much more, in the form of emotional intelligence. Fortunately, the emotional intelligence you develop through negotiation can prove incredibly useful in all other conversations too, so it's well worth the investment.

Mark Hughes is Director of [mch: positive impact](#), a staff development company that works exclusively with third sector organisations. In addition to providing training in areas such as negotiation, emotional intelligence and other core management and leadership skills, Mark also mentors on a 1:1 basis.

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