

Dealing with Difficult People.

One of the questions we often get asked is “How do I negotiate when the other side are aggressive, rude or just nasty?” We have 4 key tips that will help when the going gets tough.

First things first.

Do not get sucked in. The basic ruling emotions of love, hate, fear, lust, and contentment originate in the most basic part of our brain. We humans have 3 layers of brain, the brain stem, limbic and neuro cortex. Over millions of years of evolution, the core brain stem, often referred to as the reptilian brain has been superseded, and layers of more sophisticated reasoning have been added upon this foundation to make us smarter than the rest of the animal kingdom.

Trouble is that when we are threatened, frightened, lied to, insulted, cheated or treated badly, all this sophistication peels away and the reptilian (or reactionary) brain kicks in.

Once this has happened we lose control of our emotions and sense of perspective, we dig in, fight back, raising the temperature even further, and the negotiation spirals out of control. Or even worse we retreat into our shells and run from the problem, simply giving in. The fundamental fight or flight mechanism.

If we give in we reward the bad aggressive behaviour, and by doing so we teach the other side that treating us badly gets results. If it works they will keep doing it. In fact many aggressive and unpleasant negotiators got that way by winning concessions after whipping the other side into submission, by (in corporate speak) taking all the skin in the game. So stay in control.

So how do we manage the situation when put under reptilian pressure?

1) Recognise the behaviour. First question to ask yourself; ‘is it a ploy or is it natural behaviour?’ The answer to this may also depend on whether you are negotiating in a ‘contract’ or ‘relationship’ situation. If the other side is trying to rile you so you feel uncomfortable and may give in more readily, understand what they are doing. If you react to provocation it is likely to encourage more of the same from your adversary. Stay calm, engage your higher brain systems. Let them go through their rant. Stay quiet and do not engage. Once they have finished, summarise their key concerns to show you have been listening and making notes, maybe ask them to go through their concerns again. Be professional. It is very difficult for someone to maintain an aggressive stance for long, particularly if you are being calm in response. Resist the temptation to score points. Fighting back will not in our experience advance your immediate interests and may damage the long-term relationship. Moreover if you are dealing with people who use this tactic they may be used to using it and be good at it. Better to reframe the negotiation on terms you find more amenable.

2) If you do need to make a movement make sure it is conditional on them moving too. Negotiation is a trading process. Of course you will have to make concessions if you are negotiating, but make sure that any movement you make is only achieved if they do something for you too. And get the language right. Put any conditions that you have on making movement clear, specific and up front before making any offers. It is important to make sure that your

conditions and offers are realistic. Unrealistic, barking mad proposals that work for you and not them will cause even greater aggressive behaviour. Emphasise that the concession offered is because of the logic or content of their argument, not the tone or manner of its' delivery. This will help highlight the fact that you have observed, assessed and not been influenced by the adversarial manner.

3) Buy time to think. In the traffic of a hard and aggressive negotiation it can be incredibly difficult to maintain calm and control. You need to create time to think rationally and decide whether you can negotiate, where your flexibility can be, and importantly what you can trade in return. If you are negotiating in a team use the other players in the team to buy time by asking them to summarise the position the negotiation has reached. Plan to take breaks in large and difficult negotiations to consider your strategy and clarify objectives. Time out can help you focus on what you want and need and take some heat out of difficult negotiations.

4) Do not, and I mean DO NOT, just give in. Giving in is the worst thing you can do, 'cause guess what will happen next time? Sometimes the pressure will be on you and you will be made to feel responsible for delaying or deadlocking a deal, so the temptation is to just say "yes". But wake up the next morning and you'll discover no. You then have to live with a deal that you should never have agreed to, and the next negotiation will be more of the same. So buy time. Take a break, meet and discuss strategy for dealing with this behaviour with your colleagues. But don't surrender.

Negotiations are a part of our everyday life, we all negotiate pretty much all of the time. Coming across a difficult and aggressive negotiator is not that unusual, they are everywhere. Such people believe negotiation is about conflict and often use war terminology. Remember Sun Tzu in The Art of War; 'the supreme art of war is to defeat the enemy without fighting'. Engage your higher level thinking systems and stay in control, keep asking questions and explore ways of coming up with solutions that you can both live with. Losing your control will make you appear unprofessional, giving in will be seen as weak.

Master the three Cs; control, creativity and cool – they will see you through.

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