

Emotion in Negotiation: Negotiators Have Feelings, Too

Think about your most difficult or stressful conversations in the last few weeks. Whether you were at work or at home chances are that those difficult conversations involved the feelings of at least one person in the conversation as an important element, even if that was never discussed directly.

Some negotiation books seem to assume that it is possible for a negotiator to reduce the emotional component and even take feelings out of the negotiation. For those of us who are negotiators and human beings at the same time, that is just not possible.

Emotions Examined:

In one 1990's Toronto study, 60 adults were asked to record what happened when a plan involving themselves and one other person miscarried¹. They recorded the error, their emotional response and the solution to the error. These were everyday events such as errors in business or social meetings, or completion of joint tasks.

From a range of six emotions: happiness, sadness, fear/anxiety, anger, shame/embarrassment and guilt, the most frequent emotion described was anger. Asked if there was difficulty finding a solution to the joint error, 22 of 60 said there was and 21 said the inability to generate a solution was impaired by emotions of anger (8), anxiety/fear (12), guilt (3) and sadness (1) including 3 with two simultaneous emotions.

The authors concluded that emotions "appear to dampen problem-solving efforts and constrain options for creative interaction." In the situations studied, repair efforts were focused on the relationships and not on the plan gone wrong.

In one example a participant described waiting for someone in the wrong location of the same restaurant chain. Even though both were equally at fault for the error, the participant said that the fact that the other person stood her up would be in the back of her mind the next time she dealt

with him. In this example the strong emotion of the person waiting affected their assessment of the other person "as an interactive partner".

The authors noted that, "Each emotion functions to bring into readiness a suite or repertoire of stored plans or action." For example anger readies plans of revenge; fear readies plans of avoidance; and guilt readies plans of confession.

It is interesting that even though the subject matter of this study involved relatively common, easy-to-make errors, the emotional response was described as a barrier to finding a solution in more than a third of the situations. It is my view that failing to recognize the emotional response is also a barrier.

Feelings are Key to Negotiation

We can strive to become more conscious of the emotional component of our interaction with others. Some of us find it very difficult to hide our feelings. We get angry or cry when we would rather not show this level of emotion. There are many psychological explanations for this but sometimes it is because we do not express our feelings often enough. Some of us try so hard to control our feelings that we achieve the opposite effect - the feelings occasionally explode.

It is important to mention that describing your feelings is not venting. "You can express emotion well without being emotional, and you can be

extremely emotional without expressing much of anything," as noted by Douglas Stone et al. in *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. The challenge is to describe your feelings accurately and clearly in a way that will help, not stall, the negotiation.

1. "Don't just do something, sit there."

Push the pause button. Put things on hold. Let your mind take a step away from the negotiation table. It is usually possible to pause, whether it is a short break to lean back in your chair and breathe, a restroom break, a break to check with others in your organization, or an overnight break to "sleep on it". During that pause you can consider what is going on in the negotiation.

2. Let feelings into the conversation

If feelings are the real issue or part of the issue, include them in the definition of the problem that you are negotiating to solve. Difficult conversations generally involve strong feelings. While you may be able to talk about the problem without talking about feelings, you may not be able to solve the problem if the real issue is emotion.

3. "I feel..."

Express your feelings without blaming or judging. You are the authority on your feelings and when you make a simple, honest effort to express your emotions it brings you power. Saying to a teenager, "You are so unreliable!" invites an argument. Saying "When you didn't call, I felt very

(Feelings are Key... cont'd next page)

You Can Mediate

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¹ Keith Oatley, Laurette Laroque: *Everyday Concepts of Emotions Following Every-Other-Day Errors in Joint Plans* from James A Russell et al: *Everyday Conceptions of Emotion: An Introduction to the Psychology, Anthropology and Linguistics of Emotion*, Springer, 1995.

(Feelings are Key... cont'd)

scared about whether you were safe," does not blame the teenager for your feelings nor does it invite a defensive response.

4. Listen

Both people in the conversation can have strong feelings at the same time. You may feel angry with the teenager who did not call home, and at the same time the teenager may feel angry with you for not following through on a promised shopping trip because you were late getting home from work.

5. Acknowledge

Let the other person know that what they have said made an impact on you. Communicate that you want to understand their perspective and are making an effort to do so. "It sounds like this is important to you," or "Before we talk about my perspective, tell me more about your feeling that I put you down in team meetings," are both examples of responses that invite the other person to say more.

Do not try to problem solve immediately. A quick fix such as saying, "I guess I'd better not make any more comments about your work in team meetings," may serve to shut down the feelings discussion just when it is getting started. It is important to at least allow both negotiators time to understand the importance of the emotions conversation. It may not be necessary to persuade or to find a solution. Just being heard may make the difference that allows a bridge to be built between you.

Munn-thly Memo

Q. I work with a junior co-worker who comes to team meetings wearing earphones hooked up to his MP3 player. I do not own an MP3 player and would never use such an item at work. Yesterday in the team meeting I felt my blood pressure going up again because this team member was sitting with his earphones on and not contributing to help solve a situation with which our team is struggling. I want to talk to him about what a negative attitude he displays when he wears earphones but I don't want to make an enemy of him. Please help.

A. You were about to say something to your MP3-listening co-worker but instead you hit the pause button. That is a good first step. Now you have some time to reflect about what is happening and what you really want to say.

Think about whether you really want to speak to your co-worker. You might decide to use another route such as doing nothing or discussing your concern with your supervisor and then leaving it up to the supervisor.

Following steps 1 to 5 as described in the article above will help you to bring the emotions you feel into the conversation in an effective way.

If you decide that it is important for you to speak with your co-worker, a good time is when you can speak privately with him not in front of the group.

When you mentioned your blood pressure you seem to describe anger. I wonder if there is also an element of feeling slighted or put down because your co-worker seems to be not giving the team his full attention during meetings.

When you have identified your feelings and if you have decided to bring these feelings into your conversation with your co-worker, you need to describe the feelings as accurately as you can without blaming him.

Invite him to describe his perspective and then listen to him. Acknowledge what he tells you but do not jump for a quick solution. For example, telling him not to wear his earphones any more at work will be more likely to invite an argument than a resolution. The solution will need to be developed by the two of you and reflect the perspective of both of you.

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Kathryn Munn, LL.B., Cert.ConRes., C. Med., is a mediator, arbitrator, facilitator and lawyer. Through her firm Munn Conflict Resolution Services she works exclusively in alternate dispute resolution from a base in London, Ontario. She is a Roster Mediator, Ontario Mandatory Mediation Program - Toronto / Ottawa / Windsor, a mediator under contract to the Farm Debt Mediation Service of Canada, insurance industry ombudservices and for Canadian government departments.

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