

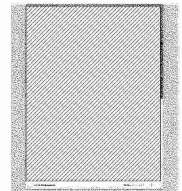


GIVE & TAKE

Negotiation shouldn't be a tug-of-war—instead, the best training focuses on building rapport. **BY GAIL DUTTON**

Employees in a negotiation training workshop are chatting happily in a company cafeteria near San Francisco. They're not on break. They're on assignment. Their objective: to discover three things they didn't know—and wouldn't have guessed—about each other. They have two minutes.

The exercise isn't about the information, though. It's about the methods they used to get the information, and how those same techniques can be used to identify commonalities to ease negotiations of all types. The strategies used to negotiate multimillion-



dollar deals are the same strategies used to negotiate which movie you watch with your spouse. Only the stakes change. As Michael Feuer, former CEO of Office Max and author of "The Benevolent Dictator," elaborates, "I've sold hundreds of millions of dollars worth of companies, and the basics are the same as for small deals. It's a process. Be a good listener. Watch body language. Know why they say what they say, as well as what they mean."

Be All Ears

But although negotiation affects virtually every aspect of life, the skills rarely are taught. Today, many companies in the San Francisco Bay area are turning to the art of improvisation to

says, it's important to see negotiations as collaborative conversations. In her experience as a leadership trainer and attorney, "executive women—people who are successful by anybody's standards—remain reluctant to make their demands known, to be assertive, and engage in negotiation," she says.

Yet, when negotiation is seen as a collaborative conversation in which all parties win, rather than combat with winners and losers, participants find ways of creating deals that are good for everybody, Clarke notes.

"Most think of negotiation as a pejorative," Feuer agrees. So in training his executives, one of the biggest challenges is changing their mindsets. "To win at the expense of others

Most think of negotiation as a pejorative, so in training executives, for example, one of the biggest challenges is changing their mindsets. To win at the expense of others isn't negotiation. The give and take of negotiation is part of the job and is necessary to accomplish your objective.

teach conflict resolution and to improve communications among their executives, according to Chris Sams, director of On the Go Programs for BATS Improv. The rapport-building skills honed in BATS workshops are the same skills used for successful improvisation. Success in negotiation, as well as in improvisation, he emphasizes, depends not only on listening to speakers' words, but also on observing their non-verbal cues.

Trainers and communications specialists repeatedly make this very same point. As Maria Thier, head of Listening Impact, says, "Many of my clients falter in negotiations because they don't listen completely to what is being said. They tend to listen to an internal monologue instead of an open dialogue. That erodes trust and reduces collaboration."

A big part of negotiation is building rapport. With 23 years as a government contracting officer for the U.S. Air Force, that understanding stood Eldonna Lewis-Fernandez—a.k.a., "the Pink Biker Chic"—in good stead in the early days of the Iraq War, where she negotiated government contracts offbase in the Middle East. "There, you sit, you have tea, you talk, and eventually you discuss why you're visiting their business." But regardless of culture or geography, "negotiation is all about building rapport," she says. "People do business with those they know, like, and trust."

Change the Mindset

"Negotiation is not just about skills," emphasizes Cait Clarke, author of "Dare to Ask!" "The big challenge is to transcend a mindset." For women in particular, Clarke

isn't negotiation," he insists. "The give and take of negotiation is part of the job and is necessary to accomplish your objective. That's tough to teach. In fact, many think it's impolite to ask for things."

Practice Makes Perfect

For trainers eager to help executives enhance their negotiating skills, Stephen R. Balzac, president of 7 Steps Ahead, LLC, advises, "make training experiential. The techniques are easy to read about, but when you try them, they may not work. Many mid-level and even some senior executives don't realize the need to negotiate. They think, 'I just need to tell you what to do,'" Balzac says. Others are so intent on winning that they stop listening. "But we each have something others want. Any conversation involves negotiation," he says, even when the stakes are the simple niceties of saying, "Please" and "Thank you."

Balzac introduces some negotiation skills in a classroom setting, and then has participants practice those skills in games. Fantasy settings encourage people to step outside themselves and engage more. In these "Fractured Fairy Tales," the king, the witch, the frog, etc., have goals that cannot be accomplished without negotiating with the others. Because the scenario is fictional, the players have freedom, and negotiation will occur. By taking on a role, "you're not the CEO; you're the king of a mythical country. You're not the sales manager; you're a knight on a quest," he explains. "You can explore possibilities because the

Coaching Negotiation Tips

- Teach the basic skills.
- Highlight non-verbal cues.
- Use a fictional scenario or role-play.
- Provide freedom to fail safely.
- Encourage practice.
- Play poker.



character—not the individual—is taking the action.”

In contrast, in a pandemic flu training exercise, one participant insisted on playing himself, Balzac recalls. “Within that scenario, a mistake triggered a crisis, and the exercise ended with the player melting down into a temper tantrum. The lesson,” Balzac says, “is that when you play as yourself, you don’t have the freedom to make mistakes.”

Executives working with Lewis-Fernandez may play themselves, but in a different setting. She helps executives hone negotiation skills through a scavenger hunt-like game in which participants have limited funds and a list of items to accumulate from other players, thus forcing negotiation. In her game, everything is negotiable. The 12-minute time frame isn’t sufficient to achieve the goal, yet players typically fail to negotiate for more time, she says. Lewis-Fernandez also has a longer, three-hour version set in 18th century France, in which players must negotiate the acquisition of court clothing to attend the royal ball. “It has vague rules, so players must think outside the box,” she says.

Not Always Gut Instinct

Debriefing is an important element of any role-playing situation. The goal is to explore how each player’s actions affect those of the other players, as well as the long-term consequences of their actions and how they may affect other scenarios. Balzac says the objective is not to confront them

with their failures, but to “encourage them to explore the situation, realize their own errors, develop empathy for themselves as characters, and understand how they could go astray in similar ways in real life.”

After the games or role-playing, the groups typically examine what happened and the methods they used to achieve their goals, or why they failed. The results often are linked to group dynamics and motivation, Balzac says.

Aside from letting people practice new skills in a safe environment, it also shows them how often their instincts are wrong. “My executives are surprised that negotiation is less about gut instinct than they think,” Balzac says. He reports the same surprise among his trainees. There’s another benefit, too. “Practice automates the skills,” Balzac says. Once the skills are second nature, negotiators become more adaptable, comfortably dealing with changing circumstances, and can focus on other demands.

Feuer encourages mentoring as a way to improve skills and insights. “I’ll invite senior people to sit in on conference calls and interviews, so they can listen and pick up techniques,” he says. His new company, Max Wellness, also uses role-playing and traditional teaching methods.

In negotiations and in workshops, Lewis-Fernandez says, “the surprising thing is that so many things are *not* negotiated.” Once participants realize this, however, they are more likely to consider the bigger picture and realize there is always room for negotiation. **■**