

Which is More Valuable When Negotiating – Attitude or Aptitude?

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When you think about any kind of capability, you might wonder which is more beneficial – your mindset or your skill set. Either is a possible measure of success and both bring a different focus for how to improve. When it comes to negotiating, we can ask the same question. Which is more valuable – attitude or aptitude?

As you might have guessed, both are important to negotiation outcomes and being deficient in either can mean suboptimal results.

To start, let's consider the mindset we bring to negotiation. Often, negotiation is something that people dislike or are uncomfortable doing. We struggle with finding an approach that has us getting a good deal while not giving up too much nor ruining the relationship. We might not feel confident in our skills and are afraid of doing a bad job. And if we walk in feeling uncomfortable, fearful, and unsure, how do you think we will perform? Beware the self-fulfilling prophecy. Additionally, the attitude and feelings brought to a negotiation can attract the same from counterparts. Watch out for having your attitude mirrored back at you.

There are 7 key characteristics make up an effective attitude toward negotiating:

- ✓ Abundant thinking
- ✓ Patient
- ✓ Problem-solving
- ✓ Openminded
- ✓ Curious
- ✓ Confident
- ✓ Creative

Some come from being prepared, others are honed through practice, and some truly are simply a matter of shifting your perspective and thinking differently. Can you see the opportunity in negotiating rather than fearing the potential conflict? Can you remember your counterpart is another human with interests to be satisfied and concerns to be resolved like you? There's a way to bring a confident attitude and get results without getting stuck in one-upmanship, bravado, or even bullying or needing to know everything. If we have a single-minded attitude (let's get right to price), then that is what the conversation will be about and a whole lot of opportunity might be left on the table.

Once you are in the right mindset and bringing a more effective attitude, you'll want to consider enhancing your skill set through better behaviors and practices.

Always prepare for each negotiation. Research shows that almost 80% of all negotiations occur with little or no preparation. Information gathering and advanced preparation should be key components of a negotiation strategy. Considering another party's interests and your own allows you look at what's important in the solution. Think about what possible ways you can satisfy both sets of those interests and use your creative and problem-solving attitude to come up with interesting and unique ways to work together. Look for objective ways to measure the solutions and demonstrate fairness. And consider how you will (and they might) satisfy these interests if no agreement is reached.

What happens with that planning when the big day finally arrives and we don't end up bringing a good attitude? In our lack of confidence or discomfort, we might risk being reluctant to pursue our interests and create value for ourselves as well as the other side. We may not stand firm on proposals and terms that are fair to us. Or if we approach with a conflict focus and zero-sum mindset, we may go right to haggling over price or "nickel and diming" when we could look for a fair deal.

Ask good questions to uncover and affirm information. Sharing the information you prepared at the negotiation table, asking questions, and listening to the responses allows you to understand fully the other side, and offer and seek solutions to address both parties' needs and concerns. That means getting below the initial positions to understand the underlying value they need fulfilled, which will more likely lead to achieving everyone's goals. Asking why something is important to someone gets below the surface and beyond their position or demand. For instance, when some asks for the best price, we suggest asking why that is important to them, in order to really understand what is driving their request. Do they really want the least expensive or are they trying to conserve costs? Or do they want to make more money or not want to be taken advantage of? Once you know this information then you can respond appropriately. Otherwise, you will have to engage in the negotiation based on assumptions and positions in the absence of demonstrated value, and likely land on the proverbial haggle.

Set high, realistic targets as the options you are offering. The research shows that those who set a stretch goal rather than just declaring their bottom line routinely negotiate more value for both parties. This means something that you can justify through credible criteria and that is at the high end of the range of possible options. This will bring you confidence which means you will be in a better mindset. If too "pie in the sky" it may not be believable and the risk is to lose your credibility and not be trusted. If we set our goals too low, we will ultimately negotiate at that level or end of the spectrum. It is very difficult to request higher goals when you've already been discussing lower ones. Too often negotiators spend countless hours preparing their bottom line and their concession strategy.

Why might we sabotage our negotiations by setting goals too low?¹

1. We believe that lower goals protect our self esteem. We set goals that we know we can make, which allow us to still feel good about ourselves. As long as we hit the goal, we forget the possibility that we could have achieved even more value. Is that a win or isn't it? If we routinely leave value on the table as the research demonstrates, who are we really helping?

2. We set lower goals because we don't make the time to prepare or don't know how to prepare. Now we are back to needing a strategic preparation approach and taking the time to do so in order to have sufficient information and thinking and build the confidence we need for the kind of negotiation conversation and results we want.

3. Lower goals indicate a lack of motivation. We take the path of least resistance. If you are afraid to introduce tension into your negotiating relationships (because it may delay or derail the process), then you're much more likely to capitulate to others' needs and wants. In the end, when you lack the desire to create additional value beyond the obvious it hurts both parties.

Instead, set high expectations as well as a bottom line so you understand the range of agreements to which you can say "yes." Consider expectations that are both realistic and optimistic and develop multiple offers that are stretches, but that can be supported with reasonable criteria. The research bears out that by having a high expectation, you are more likely to achieve an agreement that is close to or hits that high expectation. The target keeps you focused and motivated to negotiate an outcome that is good for both parties.

Conclusion

It is critical to have the right mindset and enhance your skill set in negotiation through use of effective practices. By applying these ideas to your negotiation, you will be on your way to honing the attitude and aptitude that create better outcomes for all involved.