
Focusing on mutual dependence

Focusing on mutual dependence draws your attention toward inquiry and exploration, advancing the conversation from: “How much can I get out of this deal above my best alternative?” to “In how many ways can I demonstrate my company’s value to this person based on their need(s)?” This is precisely how entrepreneur John Settles, co-owner of a relatively new company specializing in sustainability, pitched his company to a local school district.

You’ll often hear the following statement: “When I feel I have more power in a negotiation, I negotiate better, but when the situation is reversed, I don’t do as well.” Limited research has been done on the issue of negotiators’ perceptions of power and how those perceptions affect outcomes, providing some evidence of a positive relationship between negotiators’ perceptions of their power and the degree to which they engage in integrative bargaining.

Focusing on mutual dependence can again be helpful here, providing greater psychological power for situations where positional power (or role power) and BATNA power are absent. The challenge with power that fluctuates with feelings is that this type of power often results in negotiators seeking to capture value, using their power to behave more opportunistically, and leaving the other side feeling as though their interests are not being considered. Who is this person? How many years have they been working in this industry? How long have they been working for this organization? How is this person rewarded in his or her organization? Is this a big project for this person or entity, or a small, relatively insignificant project? How many such projects are they handling currently? Related questions would be: what kind of organization is this? How long has it been in business? How does it define its market, or in the case of an NGO or government agency, its central purpose? What is its current place in that market, and what does it want its strategic place to be in the market in the near future and longer term? You should structure your early questions as generalities.

Power in a negotiation is NOT based on your subjective and limited view of what you have to offer, but rather the objective reality of what you have to offer in relation to the need of the other party. Professional negotiators and researchers alike hail the BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement, or “walk away” outcome) as a negotiator’s primary source of relative power. Ascertaining why and how deeply one’s counterparty needs what you’re offering is central when it comes to relative power — the greater his need for you and/or your product or service, the greater your power, and vice-versa. Only you and your counterpart working together at the table have the power to create a deal that not only exceeds the BATNA, but perhaps makes it altogether irrelevant.

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