

Building Better Relationships Through EVERYDAY NEGOTIATIONS

BY AIMEE KOVAL

The word “negotiation” calls to mind images of hard-bargaining suits around an impressive conference room table, each fighting to divvy up the pie to his or her greatest advantage.

We think of movies like *Wall Street*, where the Gordon Gekkos of the world drive deals home through sheer force of will and reductionist philosophies, crowing “It’s all about bucks, kid. The rest is conversation.”

He was right about one thing: Negotiation requires conversation.

“A negotiation isn’t a battle,” says Brian Gunia, PhD, an associate professor at Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, in the school’s March 2018 blog post “Top 4 negotiation skills professionals need right now.” “It’s a problem-solving exercise. Everyone’s at the table because they have some interests in common and some in conflict. Cooperation lets us discover the common interests and come to terms that benefit all involved. Competition allows us to secure outcomes that satisfy our own needs.”

Many of our most challenging negotiations don’t occur at the boardroom table, but at the dinner table. Whether it’s a discussion with your spouse about family finances, a political

debate with a not-so-favorite uncle, or a challenge from your kids about bedtime rules, we all negotiate in some way, every day. From this perspective, we come to see negotiation in a new light, and everyday interactions as a series of micronegotiations that, over time, weave the fabric of our relationships.

TAKING YOUR EMOTIONAL TEMPERATURE

Traditional wisdom has it that emotions run highest when the stakes are highest. And because we tend to be myopic creatures with a limited appetite for understanding the internal lives of others—especially when our positions lie in opposition—we are prone to making faulty assumptions about just what those stakes are, and why they may be important.

Consider the performance review: According to Gallup’s 2017 research shared in “Re-Engineering Performance Management,” “Only 2 in 10 employees strongly agree that their performance is managed in a way that motivates them to do outstanding work.” It’s easy to imagine why the person



on the receiving end of the equation might feel anxious. A poor performance review could mean no raise, fewer professional opportunities, or even no job at all.

Beyond the monetary implications, performance reviews can churn up all kinds of emotions fueled by power dynamics and challenges to our very identities—and not just for the reviewee. The stakes are highly subjective: The same raise that an employer sees as a desirable carrot (or a stick, if withheld) might not motivate an employee who most desires autonomy in his or her daily work schedule.

When feedback begins and ends with a position (a demand, or the “what”) without exploring interests (the reasons behind the demand, or the “why”), we set ourselves up for failure.

In their book *Thanks for the Feedback* (Penguin Group, 2014), Harvard Negotiation Project authors Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen cite three feedback triggers that can act as both obstacles and roadmaps to better communications:

- Truth triggers “are set off by the substance of the feedback itself—it’s somehow off, unhelpful, or simply untrue.”
- Relationship triggers “are tripped by the particular person who is giving the feedback.”
- Identity triggers “are all about us. Whether the feedback is right or wrong, wise or witless, something about it has caused our identity—our sense of who we are—to come undone.”

It follows, then, that the same feedback, delivered in different contexts or by different people, might yield significantly different responses.

While a longtime co-worker’s advice on how to tackle a complicated project might be received as a welcome bit of wisdom, the same feedback from a newly minted manager several years your junior might not generate the same feelings of gratitude. But dig a little deeper, and you may discover that the co-worker is also feeling threatened as soon-to-be obsolete and waging a silent battle against the forces of change—personified by that newly minted manager, who may also be waging his own battle against impostor syndrome and entrenched systems that have lost their efficacy.

What may seem on the surface to be a clear-cut case of wisdom versus inexperience may in fact be a complicated tangle of interests and emotions.

BUILDING TRUST

The quality of a relationship can be measured in direct proportion to the level of trust felt by the people in that relationship. It is a “felt experience,” informed by factors over which we have limited control, such as upbringing and cultural context, as well as those that can be actively adapted, such as our choice of words and behavior.

“We used to feel more connected to our neighbors in part because they were also often our colleagues,” posits philosopher Alain de Botton in his book *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion* (Vintage, 2012). “Home was not always an anonymous dormitory to be reached late and left early. Neighbors became well acquainted not so much because they were adept conversationalists, but because they had to bring in the hay

or put up the school roof together, such projects naturally and surreptitiously helping to foster connections.”

We see these forces at work when natural disasters strike and communities come together as one, working side by side to help those they may have never met, regardless of ideological differences. We extol the virtues of the family dinner, understanding at a gut level (however imperfect our execution may be) that there is some special sauce in simply connecting at a human level. But can something as extraordinary as communities coming together during a natural disaster or as seemingly mundane as a family dinner be compared to conflicts that are born of deeply held and opposing convictions?

As it turns out, the very existence of strong convictions can signal trustworthiness—even between those who fundamentally disagree on principle. In a series of five studies published in 2019 in *Psychological Science*, Julian Zlatev, assistant professor of business administration at Harvard Business School, “found evidence that people trust others who demonstrate strong feelings about social issues, even when they disagree with or dislike them.”

Former U.S. Senators Trent Lott, R-Miss., and Tom Daschle, D-S.D., would likely concur, sharing their thoughts on coming together through conflict in a 2019 interview for NPR’s *All Things Considered*. “I do believe that big moments, important issues, give people an opportunity to rise to the occasion and do things maybe they wouldn’t have done otherwise,” said Lott. “[O]ne of the secrets, I think, to our relationship, is Tom and I talked all the time.”

“[W]e used to have two small [Senate tables] at lunch,” added Daschle. “And you’d come and sit family-style, and you’d sit with as many Republicans as Republicans would sit with Democrats. And somehow they closed that little lunchroom down for some reason...I think those off-the-record, completely without staff, member-only lunches did a lot to create the kind of opportunity for people to get to know one another, maybe build relationships and have a candid conversation that doesn’t exist today very often.”

EMPHASIZING THE “RELENTLESS WE”

As colleagues on opposing sides of the political aisle, Daschle and Lott embodied philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s “porcupine dilemma”—that in order to stay warm and survive, porcupines will huddle in the cold, but not so closely that they will be pricked by the others’ quills. Daschle and Lott nurtured their relationship through the everyday experience of breaking bread together, a time-honored tradition observed whenever we hope to prioritize cooperation over conflict.

In his book *Human Universals* (McGraw-Hill, 1991), UC-Santa Barbara Professor of Anthropology Donald Brown describes human universals as comprising “those features of culture, society, language, behavior, and psyche for which there

are no known exception.” His research revealed universal commonalities as wide-ranging as facial expressions, our observance of rites of passage, and our tendency to see ourselves as part of a collective identity or to overestimate our own objectivity. It is by understanding and leveraging the power of these human universals that we can begin to forge better relationships through a shared positive identity, whether as families, citizens of a community, or colleagues.

To be sure, human universals can also compel us to conflict. “In the course of a conflict, you may become so focused on defeating the other side that you take on a negative identity: You define your identity in opposition to theirs,” says Daniel Shapiro, founder of the Harvard International Negotiation Program in his book *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable: How to Resolve Your Most Emotionally Charged Conflicts* (Penguin Books, 2017). By emphasizing what Shapiro terms the “Relentless We,” we can reframe conflict as a shared challenge. “It is not you versus the other side,” advises Shapiro, but rather each party “attempting to resolve the conflict together.”

START WHERE YOU ARE

When relationships are strained, morale is low, and the very idea of trust-building seems like a fool’s errand, it can feel disingenuous to take steps to improve relations. Tempting as it may be to take your new active listening skills out for a spin at your direct report’s next performance review, good intentions don’t necessarily produce good results.

Author Kim Scott advises in *Radical Candor* (St. Martin’s Press, 2017) against offering up insincere praise, which she characterizes as “an attempt to push the other person’s emotional buttons in return for some personal gain.” No better is insincerity’s arguably less manipulative cousin, “ruinous empathy,” according to Scott, wherein “niceness” becomes a means of avoiding tension or discomfort rather than one of many tools to better our understanding of and relationships with each other.

Justin Wright, CEO of Habitus Incorporated, a Boston-based negotiation and conflict management consultancy, recalls the advice of a former Navy SEAL on the concept of “practicing at sea level.” “The time to practice your maneuvers for the first time is not under 100 meters of water,” remembers Wright. “Start slow. Ask about interests with appreciative inquiry. Listen with presence. Reflect back to be sure you have understood the other person’s interests, whether or not you agree with them. If you can work with people in a way that strengthens the relationship—even when you’re giving bad news—you’re going to succeed.” [AQ](#)

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