

Negotiating with Emotion

by Kimberlyn Leary, Julianna Pillemer, and Michael Wheeler

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People have strong feelings about negotiation. Sometimes those feelings erupt. The 2011 sale of a \$3 million brownstone in New York's Greenwich Village almost fell apart because of a dispute over an old washing machine that the sellers had removed from the premises two days before the closing. Stephen Raphael, the lawyer for the owners, told the *New York Times* that it really wasn't worth fighting over, "but the buyers had already felt pressured to up their offer and to concede many things, and this was the last straw."

At the closing the sellers still refused to replace the machine. One of the buyers ripped up a seven-figure cashier's check for the balance due, put a match to the scraps, and stomped out of the room. The sellers finally relented and agreed to reduce the price by \$300. The brokers found the angry buyer at a nearby bar, nursing a drink. They coaxed him back and the deal was done.

Negotiations can get even hotter. Fern Hammond, a New York broker, was present years ago when an angry woman flung a set of house keys at a man's face as hard as she could. "All of a sudden there was blood all over the place," Hammond said in the same *Times* story. "Everyone was pushing the papers out of the way." The target of the woman's anger was her own husband. She was furious that he had agreed to sell their place for less than she thought it was worth.

Yet while some people boil over in negotiations, others freeze up. Take Chris Robbins, an emergency room physician at a Boston hospital. Day and night Robbins makes tough decisions when lives hang in the balance and seconds count. He's exactly the kind of doctor you'd want if you were wheeled in on a stretcher: calm, cool, and collected under stress.

But his composure dissolves when it comes to negotiating. Robbins craved a spot in a highly selective clinical training program but was tied up in knots about asking for the two-month leave it would require. Such requests were unusual, and given staffing problems at the time, he risked seeming disloyal to the ER team. The mere prospect of a confrontation was so intimidating that Robbins never even raised the issue.

People like Robbins are practically phobic about going to the bargaining table. They'll do anything to avoid pushing or being pushed. They're neither competitive nor cooperative—instead, in psychological terms, they're avoiders. If their minimum needs are met, they'll sign on the dotted line just to end the stress of dealing with people who have different agendas and styles. That is an expensive aversion, however.

Then there's Donald Dell, a pioneering American sports marketer and agent. Dell relates in his book, *Never Make the First Offer*, that when he was just starting out, he was in a tense negotiation with the new corporate owner of the Head tennis racket brand. Head had previously struck an endorsement deal with one of Dell's star clients, Arthur Ashe, which gave the U.S. Open and Wimbledon champion a 5% royalty on all sales. The new owner wanted to scrap the arrangement. Dell and Ashe naturally wished to keep it going.

Dell was in the middle of making his case to some senior executives when the door flew open and the company chairman stormed in. "Goddamnit!" he screamed. "This is outrageous. He's making ten times what I'm making, and I'm chairman of this company!"

The room went silent, and all eyes turned to Dell. How would he respond? Would he cave in, or blow up the deal by answering in kind? After a brief pause, Dell said, "But Pierre, Arthur has a much better serve than you do." The tension was broken. People laughed and got back to business. They tweaked the royalty schedule and preserved what was really a profitable relationship for both sides.

The kind of poise Dell displayed can mean the difference between a deal and deadlock. It's something deeper than being quick with a joke. It's the ability to keep your head when all those around you are on the verge of losing theirs. As researchers (we explain our methodology later in this piece), we're fascinated by negotiators like him, but we're just as interested in people like Chris Robbins and the woman who flung the keys at her husband—people who seem unable to handle the strong emotions that negotiation often sparks.

Negotiation Theory and Emotion

Until recently most negotiation texts have regarded emotion—whether hot or cold—as an impediment to reaching constructive agreements. The classic book in the field, *Getting to Yes*, by Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, earnestly advises readers to “separate the people from the problem,” as if negotiators should be like the coolly analytic Spock in *Star Trek*, rather than flesh-and-blood human beings.

Granted, rigorous preparation is crucial. The bigger the transaction, the more important it is to identify core interests, weigh walkaway options, and assess how other parties see their choices. Running the numbers and scouting the marketplace are essential before heading to the bargaining table. So is developing a plan B in case things don’t go as you’d like. All that makes sense.

But it’s only half the story. The truth is that your passions matter in real-life deal making and dispute resolution. You need to understand, channel, and learn from your emotions in order to adapt to the situation at hand and engage others successfully. That means you need to be emotionally prepared to negotiate—even when you expect the process to go smoothly. Anxieties and petty resentments may lurk below the surface. If you let them fester, or if you inadvertently get under a counterpart’s skin, talks can go off the rails. You also need to sense the first stirrings of your own feelings so that you don’t tense up, tune out, or—like the Head chairman—explode.

Emotion plays a positive role in decision making, creativity, and relationship building—all key factors in reaching agreement.

Each of the coauthors of *Getting to Yes* addressed particular aspects of emotion in subsequent books. (See the sidebar “Further Reading.”) These books represent an advance over the notion that negotiation is simply a matter of cool calculation. The things that people care about—not just outcomes, but also respect, power, and identity—are all bound to stir up strong emotions. As a result, separating the people from the problem is neither possible nor desirable.

Further Reading

Negotiation theory still has not fully caught up, however, with breakthroughs in neuroscience and psychology that reveal the positive role of emotion in decision making, creativity, and

Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate, by Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro (Penguin, 2006), catalogs the core concerns that people bring to a negotiation, including their need for appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, and acknowledgment of their own status and role.

Getting Past No: Negotiating in Difficult Situations, by William Ury (Bantam, 1993), depicts the negotiator as a passionate actor at center stage, engaging with others to advance the plot but also “going to the balcony” in order to maintain curiosity, calm, creativity, and confidence.

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (Penguin, 2010), reminds readers that as negotiating parties hammer out terms and conditions, they typically operate on two deeper levels: One concerns their relationship (Who has the upper hand? Will the parties be friends or foes?), the other their emotional engagement.

Beyond Winning: Negotiating to Create Value in Deals and Disputes, by Robert H. Mnookin, Scott R. Peppet, and Andrew S. Tulumello (Belknap Press, 2000), identifies the tension that many negotiators feel between effectively asserting their own interests and having empathy for other parties.

relationship building—all key factors in reaching agreement. For example, the neurobiologist Antonio Damasio has shown that people with damage to the right hemisphere of the brain (the emotional side) have great difficulty making decisions. That’s because emotions tell people what’s important to them—what they want to obtain and preserve—and also allow them to see matters holistically and to avoid being ensnared by details.

A recent study by Teresa Amabile, of Harvard Business School, and her research colleague Steven Kramer explored the close link between emotion and creativity. The two analyzed nearly 12,000 diary entries provided by 238 employees in seven companies and found that feeling positively challenged or happy at work increases both productivity and creativity. As Amabile and Kramer explain in *The Progress Principle*, this effect is self-reinforcing: Positive feelings increase creativity, which in turn can lead to positive feelings within a team or an organization. Creativity is particularly important in negotiation when the parties are at an impasse.

Much of relationship building takes place on a nonverbal, nonrational plane. Alex (Sandy) Pentland’s research team at the MIT Media Lab

has developed the sociometer, a device about the size of a smartphone, which gauges interpersonal dynamics. It has a microphone but doesn’t record words; rather, it simply registers the volume, pitch, and pace of utterances. It also has an accelerometer to track body movement (a gauge of physical energy) and infrared beams to track whether two people are directly facing each other.

Sociometer output looks like a cardiogram, with various lines tracing peaks and valleys. When researchers see that two people's readouts are aligned and balanced, they can tell that a relationship is going well.

Pentland and his Sloan School colleague Jared Curhan analyzed data from pairs of subjects doing simulated negotiations. Without hearing a single word the parties said, and looking only at data from the first few minutes of interaction, they were able to predict with significant accuracy which pairs would eventually reach agreement and, among those, which were more likely to creatively expand the pie.

The message is clear. Being an effective manager, a high-performance team member, or a skilled negotiator requires attunement to one's own emotions and the ability to relate affirmatively to the emotions of others. That insight has driven much of the work in the field of emotional intelligence. The concept was novel 15 years ago but is now familiar, thanks largely to the psychologist Daniel Goleman. His popular books on the topic drew heavily on the research of Peter Salovey, of Yale, and John D. Mayer, of the University of New Hampshire, and built on their definition of emotional intelligence as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions." Specifically, emotionally intelligent people have the capacity to:

- identify the emotions they and others are experiencing;
- understand how those emotions affect their thinking;
- use that knowledge to achieve better outcomes;
- productively manage emotions, tempering or intensifying them for whatever purpose.

Though the business world was quick to apply emotional intelligence to leadership development, team building, and people management, it's gotten surprisingly little attention in the field of negotiation.

The Heart of the Matter

Some negotiators, like Donald Dell, seem to be naturals. They can sense the emotional state of other parties and respond effectively in the moment. They also recognize that their own outlook strongly influences other people's moods and behavior, because emotions are contagious. They are able to navigate complicated situations and elicit constructive engagement from people who might not otherwise be cooperative.

That ability does not come easily to some others. But the good news is that developing poise and balance is possible, although it requires confronting what it is about negotiation that stresses so many people. That has been the focus of our research. The stakes can be high in a business context, of course. A sales manager may need to nail down a deal with a key customer to meet his quarterly target. Someone in procurement may need to negotiate favorable terms on a key component so that her company's product can stay competitively priced. Corporate counsel may want to settle an intellectual property suit rather than risk going to court.

People respond differently to such demands, for reasons of temperament but also of circumstance. (It's much easier to be confident and relaxed, for example, if you're in a strong bargaining position and have the full support of your boss and colleagues.) But our research shows that much also depends on an individual's mental model of negotiation. Though he may be only dimly aware of his underlying assumptions about the process, the images he holds strongly influence his feelings and behavior at the bargaining table.

As part of an ongoing study, we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 seasoned negotiators to explore their thoughts and feelings about the process. Our subjects were mostly managers, all with at least 10 years of professional experience; a few lawyers and public officials were in the pool as well. We used the ZMET method developed by Gerald Zaltman, of Harvard Business School and Olsen Zaltman Associates, which draws on interdisciplinary research from cognitive psychology and affective neuroscience. Zaltman and his colleagues believe that people think primarily in images and certainly not in words alone. To uncover the "deep structure" of how people think about something, ZMET relies in particular on metaphorical images they choose and on how they describe those images.

About two weeks before we interviewed our study subjects, we asked them to collect six to eight images that they associated with some aspect of the negotiation process. They could copy pictures from magazines or books, or even sketch their own. When we met, the explanations they gave for their choices were rich with emotional content. In the concluding phase of our

interviews, we had our subjects make collages of their pictures that would reflect their overall thoughts and feelings about negotiation. (See the sidebar “How Negotiators Depict Their Emotions.”)

How Negotiators Depict Their Emotions

When we asked 20 seasoned negotiators to assemble images that reflected their experience, the collages they created were dreamlike and revealing. Here are two examples. (To see more collages—and to read and hear the makers’ explanations of their meaning—go to people.hbs.edu/mwheeler/.)



The negotiator who created this collage explained that the banana peels and the exposed brain represent the fear of being outwitted or even tricked. The trapeze artists and the safety net reflect the need for trust in one’s partner and for walkaway options. When a negotiation goes well, the participants can ride the escalator up to higher value. He titled his collage “Beyond the fear, achieving results.”

All the people we spoke with had strong and conflicting feelings about negotiation. Some of them had sunnier views than others. None, we felt, were as apprehensive as Chris Robbins or as zealous as Donald Dell. But even those who seemed to find the process most exciting and gratifying also spoke about tightropes, traps, and the dangers of tripping up or being exploited. And those who described negotiation as largely an onerous process also acknowledged potential silver linings. Outwardly all our subjects seemed confident and successful, but even the optimists among them admitted feeling various degrees of anxiety about negotiation. For many that anxiety is compounded by having to handle uncertainty and reconcile mixed emotions.

Our findings are consistent with results from a recent study by Alison Brooks and Maurice Schweitzer, of the University of Pennsylvania. When they asked people what emotions they’d feel in negotiating for a car or a higher salary, anxiety topped the list. To see how that feeling affects negotiation performance, the researchers used music to induce it in their subjects: The experimental group heard the screeching strings from Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, while a control group listened to portions of Handel’s *Water Music*. Thus primed, subjects from the two groups were paired off to do a simulated negotiation via instant messaging.



The smiling couple doing a fist bump represents a situation in which “both sides are very satisfied with the outcome,” and the strong poker hand conveys an upbeat tone. But, the collage maker told us, the cartoon creature at the middle-left edge is “a real anxious little being” who looks “emotionally put out.” She titled her collage “The agony and ecstasy of negotiations.”

COLLAGE IMAGES COURTESY OF AUTHORS

The results were striking. The anxious subjects had lower expectations, made lower first offers, responded more quickly to offers, and exited the bargaining sooner. And—no surprise—they got worse outcomes. Brooks and Schweitzer assert that if feelings induced by a temporary stressor can negatively affect negotiation behavior and results, the impact of real-world emotions could well be more powerful.

Indeed, after doing a content analysis of hundreds of pages of interview transcripts (more than 300,000 words in all), we found that people regard the negotiation experience as inherently stressful for three particular reasons.

The first is *lack of control*. People negotiate in order to accomplish something that they can’t achieve unilaterally, whether it’s getting a supplier to provide goods or services at an acceptable price, colleagues to pitch in on a rush project that needs to be done yesterday, or

parties to a lawsuit to drop their claims. In every case others potentially stand between them and what they need and believe they deserve. And, of course, those others may in turn see them as obstacles.

The second reason is *unpredictability*. Anyone walking into a negotiating session faces a lot of unknowns—a significant source of stress. She can’t foresee how cooperative or competitive others will be. She can’t dictate their words and actions any more than she’d let them script hers. Circumstances can change too. One manager we interviewed likened the process to a fast-paced hockey game, saying, “Out of the blue, you may have to react to something you have been working on in one way, and then something entirely new is introduced, and you have to veer off and refocus.” For people like Donald Dell, the surprise element is exhilarating. (“I live for such moments,” he says.) But for many others, it’s anxiety-producing.

Though people may be only dimly aware of their underlying assumptions about negotiation, those assumptions strongly influence their feelings and behavior at the bargaining table.

Third is *the absence of feedback* on the negotiator's performance. At the end of the day, there's plenty of room for doubt and second-guessing. Even if you reach an agreement, who's to say you couldn't have pushed for more? Then again, it's hard to know if you pushed too hard and taxed an important relationship. As a result almost all our subjects worried about their own competence and vulnerability. Flickers of self-doubt were fanned by the lack of feedback. "It's not always clear," said one senior manager describing an image he had chosen, "who is the wizard behind the curtain and who is the charlatan."

Virtually all those we interviewed also spoke of the gap between an ideal negotiation and what for them is often harsh reality. They understood the win-win concept but feared that it would be trumped by hard bargaining. The pictures they clipped for us and their verbal metaphors included alligators and other predators lying in wait. As they explained their images, their sense of vulnerability and the fear of being devoured came through. With limited control, unpredictability, and the lack of feedback combining and colliding, it's no wonder that, as other research studies have shown, just calling something a negotiation can provoke strong visceral reactions.

Coping with heightened and conflicting feelings is itself a challenge. One of our subjects described it as a balancing act: "You want to maximize your opportunity and the relationship you have with that person." Zaltman and his colleagues told us that they have found negotiation much more emotionally difficult than other personal roles and activities they've studied.

Warming Up for Negotiation

Denying the emotional complexity of negotiation is not the answer. Instead you need to acknowledge your concerns and recognize your hot buttons. Just as important, you need to remember that no matter how well composed your counterparts seem, inwardly they may be feeling a swirl of mixed emotions. It is rarely in your interest to confirm their worst fears. And if you want them to be centered, creative, and positive, you must be poised yourself.

Just like star athletes who are “in the zone,” wise negotiators are centered, energized, and resilient in the face of strong feelings.

We have developed a six-step warm-up exercise to help you become emotionally prepared to negotiate effectively. As you’ll see, it’s not a matter of suppressing your feelings. Rather, it’s a matter of drawing on them as a resource so that you can be focused, engaged, and agile.

1. How do you want to feel going into the negotiation? 2. Why?

These first two questions are linked. When we do this exercise in negotiation classes, students often say they want to feel relaxed, focused, and confident, because they associate those positive emotions with a pathway to agreement. But other students say that although it’s fine to be composed, one can’t be complacent. They want to be alert and maybe even a bit on edge so that they have the energy to drive the process forward.

Further discussion reveals that it’s not one or the other—negotiators need to be simultaneously calm and alert, proactive and patient, fully grounded yet creative. But each pair seems to be a contradiction. How can you remain calm if you’re also on the lookout for danger? Ditto for being proactive and patient: Either you shake things up or you wait for the dust to settle, but how can you do both at the same time? And as for practicality and creativity, it’s some trick to keep your feet firmly on the ground while stretching for the stars. But this is really the point of our questions. Most students come to realize that as they go into a negotiation, they should have clarity about the balance they will need to strike.

3. What can you do beforehand to put yourself in an ideal emotional state?

This question often takes people aback, because they’ve never thought about how to positively influence their own emotions. After a minute or so they come up with practical suggestions. One student might draw on his experience preparing for a big exam: “Don’t tense yourself up with last-minute cramming.” Others have proposed meditation as a way of putting distracting thoughts aside. Some people suggest listening to music beforehand. What you choose should depend on what emotional state you are trying to achieve. If you tend to be reserved or don’t advocate strongly enough for yourself, the theme from *Rocky* might pump you up. If others tell you that you sometimes come on too strong, perhaps “Clair de Lune” would be a better pick.

The less time you have to prepare yourself emotionally, the more important it is to use your time wisely. Imagine that you're at your desk working on the quarterly budget when the phone rings. It's your counterpart in a tough negotiation that has dragged on longer than expected. Instead of starting right in, you might say, "Glad you called. Let me wrap something up here, and I'll get back to you in three minutes flat." Then you could lean back and take a deep breath. You might even follow the example of athletes and visualize yourself performing at your best with just the right combination of calm and alertness.

4. What can throw you off balance during a negotiation?

Emotional hot buttons vary from person to person. What rolls off some people's backs can get under other people's skin. Some negotiators have infinite patience, whereas others get frustrated when talks drag on. Think about a time when you didn't perform at your best. What happened, and why? Did you become agitated or too disengaged? When in the process did the problem arise? Make sure you learn from your experience. Candid feedback from negotiating teammates can be helpful.

5. What can you do in the midst of a negotiation to regain your balance?

One obvious answer is take a break. Stepping out for even a few minutes can clear your head. It can work like a reset button in the discussion, disrupting whatever dysfunctional pattern has emerged. And when you can't leave the room, you can break a negative mood by changing the focus of the conversation. If you are getting nowhere wrangling over the nuts and bolts of a deal, try shifting to a discussion of broad principles and concerns—or to points of process. The simple act of asserting control can help you recenter yourself.

If you feel early signs of anger or anxiety arising, take a deep breath. That's familiar advice because it works. When you're tense or tired, your respiration slows. Reoxygenating the blood does wonders. You are a physical being, after all. As research by our colleague Amy Cuddy has demonstrated, what you feel emotionally is significantly affected by what you do with your body. If you stand tall, with your feet well apart and your arms outstretched, testosterone—the hormone that boosts confidence and the willingness to take risks—elevates, whether you're a man or a woman. Just as important, that posture lowers cortisol, the hormone associated with anxiety. Doing a "power pose," as Cuddy calls it, is a healthy form of self-medication. If you hold that pose for just a couple of minutes, its positive effects stay with you much longer.

6. How do you want to feel when you're finished?

When we ask this question in classes, some people blurt out, “Relieved.” That attests to the stress they feel while they’re negotiating. Others answer, “Satisfied”—often meaning satisfaction with both the outcome and their own performance. The latter attitude reflects acceptance of the fact that not everything in negotiation is foreseeable or entirely within our control. Work in the field of emotional intelligence, especially in leadership and on high-performance teams, has shown that it is possible for people to recognize, manage, and learn from emotion. Negotiators—veterans and novices alike—can also deepen their own emotional awareness and become more attuned to the feelings of others.

Wise negotiators understand that managing emotions means more than identifying them and then setting them aside. Just like star athletes who are “in the zone,” they are centered, energized, and resilient in the face of strong feelings. They prepare emotionally as well as substantively for any high-stakes negotiation.

It is clear that much of the value available to businesses—and much of the progress desperately needed by societies—depends on negotiated solutions between parties, none of whom are immune to emotion. Those of us who focus on negotiation should encourage people to let their feelings guide them toward achieving successful outcomes.

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