

ENTERPRISE

Make trust a priority in negotiating



Negotiation strategies

■ **Raphael E. Lapin**

In today's complex business environment, little matters more than the health of our alliances, partnerships and long-term customer/supplier relationships. The key tool for nourishing these relationships is cultivating trust as the currency of the relationship. This trust must be consistently manifested in the way we negotiate with our business counterparts, the way we manage the ongoing relationship beyond and in the general experience of doing business with us.

The dangers of mistrust in any relationship are many and include inhibition of honesty and openness, obstruction of dialogue and 'collaboration, suspicion and wariness of one another, accusations and blame and very probably impasse.

In this month's column, I will explore some common destroyers of trust and provide some useful approaches to help build trust.

Trust destroyers

Here are some of the ways in which we often destroy trust.

- **Tricks and tactics:** An approach to negotiation that is based on tricks and tactics such as deliberate deception, good cop/bad cop routines, threats and intimidation will perhaps allow for the illusion of a good outcome for you but will most certainly be at the expense of the other party feeling exploited and unfairly treated. This will erode their trust in you and seriously impede further negotiations, relationship and compliance.

- **Asserting demands:** When we go into a negotiation asserting our demands without any consideration for what might be important to the other party, they will tend to protect their positions defensively which will create an adversarial environment and an atmosphere of mistrust. They will treat anything you say with suspicion and intransigence and your negotiation efforts are likely to be frustrated.

- **Imposing your ideas:** When we try to impose our ideas or solutions on the other party without involving them in the crafting of those ideas, they will mistrust us. They will suspect that whatever we suggest must be self-serving in our favor and will resist our ideas by attempting to impose their own. The negotiation will rapidly degenerate into a contest of wills.

Trust builders

In contrast to the trust destroyers above, here are some approaches that will help to build trust and strengthen the business relationship:

- **An authentic and transparent process:** Rather than attempting to manipulate the other party with tricks and tactics, it is far more valuable to approach the negotiation in a way that is authentic and transparent. Engage them in a productive dialogue; invite them to share their concerns and needs and listen to what they have to say; share your needs and concerns in a constructive non-threatening way; and be prepared to reason and be open to reason.

- **Work toward satisfying their needs too:** In any negotiation, it is likely that the other party will expect you to assert your demands in an unreasonable and adversarial way. This perception will immediately set the stage for suspicion and mistrust. When you demonstrate behavior inconsistent with this negative perception by assuring them (genuinely of course) that you are interested in not only satisfying your needs, but satisfying theirs too, the mistrust will very quickly be replaced by trust and reciprocity.

One way to assure them is to open the talks by saying something like "Mr. Jenkins, clearly if your needs are not met in these negotiations, you are unlikely to agree. Similarly, if our needs are not met, we are not going to agree, so we would like first of all to learn more about what your needs and concerns are. Please go ahead and share them with us." With this opening, you have assured them that meeting their needs is important to you too, and you have shown magnanimity by allowing them to share first without aggressively asserting yourself. This opening move will go a long way in building trust.

- **Taking their ideas seriously:** When we impose our ideas on others, it makes them defensive and destroys trust. A better approach is to offer our ideas and encourage them to suggest their ideas too, and then to build on the ideas by further developing and refining them. This approach will allow the solution to be constructed from everyone's needs and ideas. By engaging them in this way, they will develop trust in you and in the process which will make for a far stronger business relationship.

People like to do business with people whom they can trust, and with whom they can have a consistently good experience of doing business. Eliminate the trust destroyers and work diligently to incorporate these trust builders into your business modus operandi and you will enjoy a significant competitive advantage, stronger and deeper business relationships and your bottom line will most certainly be positively impacted.

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