

It pays to know your opponent: success in negotiations improved by perspective-taking

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From the war room to the board room, negotiations are a part of everyday life. Successful negotiations demand a clear understanding of one's opponent. But what approach should one take to achieve such an understanding of one's opponent in everyday negotiations?

Psychologist Adam Galinsky from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, and colleagues William Maddux (INSEAD), Debra Gilin (St. Mary's U.), and Judith White (Dartmouth) asked a similar question and found that success in negotiations depends on focusing on the head and not the heart. In other words, it is better to take the perspective of negotiation opponents rather than empathize with them.

Perspective-taking, according to the study published in the April 2008 issue of *Psychological Science*, a publication of the Association for Psychological Science, involves understanding and anticipating an opponent's interests, thoughts, and likely behaviors, whereas empathy focuses mostly on sympathy and compassion for another.

“Perspective takers are able to step outside the constraints of their own immediate, biased frames of reference,” wrote the authors. “Empathy, however, leads individuals to violate norms of equity and equality and to provide preferential treatments.”

The researchers performed a total of three studies designed to assess the relationship between successful negotiations and perspective-taking and

empathy tendencies. In two of the studies, the participants negotiated the sale of a gas station where a deal based solely on price was impossible: the seller's asking price was higher than the buyer's limit. However, both parties' underlying interests were compatible, and so creative deals were possible. In the first study, those participants who scored highly on the perspective-taking portion of a personality inventory were more likely to successfully reach a deal. In contrast, higher scores on empathy led dyads to be less successful at reaching a creative deal.

In the second study involving the same gas station negotiation, participants were separated into three groups: the perspective-taking group who were told to imagine what the other person was thinking, the empathy group who were told to imagine what the other person was feeling, and a control group. The psychologists discovered that perspective-takers secured the most agreements and increased the satisfaction of their opponents compared to the control condition. Although empathizers produced the highest level of opponent satisfaction, they were less successful than perspective-takers at reaching a deal and thus failed to create long-term value for themselves and their opponent.

In the final study, participants were presented with a multi-issue negotiation regarding a job hire. Perspective-takers created more value and earned significantly more points for themselves than those from the empathy group or the control group. The empathy group, in contrast, obtained the fewest individual points.

The results of the three studies imply that perspective-taking is a useful trait to have and a useful approach to take in negotiations, and that empathy, although helpful in many types of social interactions, can be detrimental both for creating integrative solutions and promoting one's own self-interest.

"Negotiators give themselves an advantage by thinking about what is motivating the other party, by getting inside their head" Galinsky said. "Perspective-taking gives you insights into how to structure a deal that can benefit both parties. But unfortunately in negotiations, empathizing makes you more concerned about making the other party happy, which can sometimes come at your own expense."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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