

Distance may be key in successful negotiations, new study shows

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Adding physical distance between people during negotiations may lead to more mutually beneficial outcomes, according to new research from The University of Texas at Austin.

Psychologist Marlene Henderson examined how negotiations that don't take place in person may be affected by distance. He compared distant negotiators (several thousand feet away) with those who are nearby (a few feet away) in three separate studies. While much work has examined the consequences of different forms of non-face-to-face communication, previous research has not examined the effects of physical distance between negotiators independent of other factors. Henderson's findings will be published in the January issue of [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#).

"People tend to concentrate on higher priority items when there is more distance between them by looking at issues in a more abstract way," says Henderson. "They go beyond just thinking about their pursuit of the options presented to them and consider higher-level motives driving their priorities."

For example, when a person is negotiating a new job, he or she might focus his or her behavior on securing health coverage, salary or more vacation time. If he or she sees the connection between behavior and overarching motives—which might be supporting a family—this will help determine priorities on the various issues.

In the first study, 52 University of Chicago undergraduate students engaged in a negotiation via text-exchange with another person who was described as being physically nearby or faraway. They were given the task of buying and selling a customized motorcycle and assigned preferences and priorities. Using an efficiency rating with a maximum score of 1,000, negotiators who thought they were far from each other earned 955 points compared to those nearby counterparts who scored 825. Points earned were based on levels of compromise on both high- and low-level priorities.

In the second study, 76 University of Texas at Austin undergraduate students were told to imagine that they and a stranger walk into a shopping mall at the same time, and a bell sounds just as a giant banner drops down that reads "One-Millionth Customer." Both would share gift sets from four different stores offering five different prizes, but they first must agree on what prize to select from each store. With a maximum score of 1,000, negotiators who thought they were far from each other scored 961 compared to the nearby negotiators who scored 895.

The same task was given to 114 University of Texas at Austin [undergraduate students](#) in a third study with slight modifications. Half the group was interrupted with an exercise designed to focus them on their high-level motives by asking them to think about why they wanted particular gift sets from each store. Among the control group, the distant group scored 922 and the nearby group scored 756. But for participants who were asked about their motives, the results were comparable, with the nearby group scoring 946 and the distant group scoring 887.

"When you guarantee that everybody is focused on their higher level motives, distance doesn't really matter as much," says Henderson.

"However, when that doesn't happen, distance does matter because the nearby negotiators aren't naturally focusing on their higher level motives

as much as the distant negotiators."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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