

Effective negotiation

By Nikki Williamson | smh.com.au | 15 March

Negotiation is a vital skill for the modern worker. But, sadly, very few of us do it well. Rather than speaking clearly and listening to what others have to say when we have a clash with a co-worker or need to ask for a pay rise, most people just blunder through. The result is many don't achieve their goals.

Career coaches and psychologists agree the skill of bargaining can be learned. "Negotiation is the cornerstone of influencing other people's decisions and actions," says Simon Dowling, director of communication and training company CMA.

"Negotiation skills are critical not only for doing your job well, but for advancing your career."

Dowling says good negotiation starts long before you walk into the boss's office to talk about getting more money. Skilled negotiators first identify what their objectives will be and how they hope to achieve them.

"It's critical that you develop a really clear understanding of why you're negotiating," he says. "Think about the needs and concerns that are driving you, not just the sorts of outcomes you'd like to be able to achieve."

Josephine Thomson, from Results Life Coaching, says once you sit down to talk things over it's vital to acknowledge the other person's feelings and point of view. Without this step you may find proceedings quickly reach a stalemate.

"It might sound as though you have accepted or committed to something but in truth all you have 'accepted' is how the other party feels," she says.

Dowling says this stage is important. "It's a common mistake to think about the negotiation from your perspective only," he says. "But the more you can anticipate another person's point of view, the better equipped you are to take the front foot in addressing their concerns."

It's also important not to approach a negotiation like it's some kind of competition: "The point of negotiation is to reach an agreement that is mutually advantageous to both parties," Thomson says. "To make it a contest will only work against you. Don't use phrases like 'deal breaker' or 'take it or leave it'."

Authors Anne Kotzman and Mandy Kotzman say the word to remember when it comes to negotiation is "self-assertion".

If you try to express yourself calmly instead of being aggressive, there's a better chance of getting what you want or at least arriving at a workable solution. Both parties should take this approach and in the end both should feel good about themselves and the outcome of the discussion.

If you are calm and it is a workmate who is angry or a manager being belligerent, Dowling says the key is to stay in control rather than being overtaken by your emotions.

Anger, frustration and even fear can be normal emotions in that situation but they are not helpful. He says that in the heat of the moment it can be good to take an emotional step back to look at the situation objectively. "From that perspective you're more likely to maintain a reasonable, open and empathetic approach which can be infectious to even the most difficult person."

It's perfectly natural to want to avoid conflict, say the Kotzmans, but some level of conflict is normal in life and can be expected in a negotiation.

When you find yourself confronted make it clear that you don't want an argument, choose your words carefully and use an appropriate tone of voice.

Try listening and be aware of your body language. This means no flailing arms.

It's also important to be able to evaluate the other person so you can tailor your body language and tone of voice to suit the moment.

Ian Chick, a spokesman for the public speaking and leadership group Toastmasters, says it is a good idea to ask yourself if the aggressor's body language matches his or her verbal language.

"Being able to evaluate the other person is one of the most important aspects of negotiation," he says. "You need to read the other person to decide how best to proceed." Another suggestion is to use the power of silence.

"If we simply listen, the conversation will eventually break down and the other person will have to stop speaking."

And this, he says, should help you to steer the conversation to more productive ground.

"Consider shifting the conversation so that the other person is no longer in their comfort zone, or alternatively shift it so that they are," he says.

Evaluation takes practice and even training but it's a vital skill in guiding you about where to take the conversation next and how to get the most out of the

situation.

So will keeping all these points in mind really help with office relationships and negotiations?

Yes, according to both Dowling and Thomson, whose clients have reaped great rewards by learning how to negotiate better.

"We have a client who has managed to save his company more than \$20 million over two years as a result of renegotiating contracts with suppliers," Thomson says.