

Successful Supervisor Part 45

Negotiating for Success

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Supervisors do a lot more negotiating than they may realize. My observation is that supervisors negotiate all day every day. If you want to be a more effective supervisor, study up on your negotiating skills.

For most supervisors, negotiations usually involve resources. Obtaining the right level of staffing or a specific piece of test equipment would be typical negotiation discussions. Also, the budgeting process is always a time of great challenge for most supervisors. In the day-to-day activities of the operation, getting people to do the right thing at the right time is a form of negotiation challenge. If the standard break time is 15 minutes, how are you going to get people to adhere to the rule?

This article highlights some tips I have learned over the years in courses and in practical applied leadership in a large organization. Before sharing some tips, let me dispel a myth; negotiating is not a win or lose situation. Great negotiators realize that to reach an agreement, both parties need to believe the deal in question is better for them than no deal at all. Both parties must “win” to have a successful outcome, although both individuals may not get everything they wanted.

Basic Negotiation Principles

The objective of any negotiation is to reach a fair deal that is not abusive to either party, and it is accomplished by a process of discovery and revelation. Let's first look at a few basic principles and then describe some of the more popular negotiation tactics and their countermeasures.

1. You have more power than you think you have

Human beings have a habit of undervaluing their hand and overvaluing the hand of their opponent. Information is power in any negotiation, so seek to understand as much as possible the forces that are putting pressure on your opponent. Withhold some of the critical points about your own situation so the other person is not aware of your constraints.

For example, if you share a time constraint that you need an agreement by the end of the day, your opponent can use that pressure to make you compromise just before quitting time.

Know as much about your opponent's constraints as you can; and be judicious with sharing things that are impacting you.

2. Plan your strategy

In any negotiation, if you have a plan you will do better than if you play defense and simply react to the offers made by the other party. It is amazing how many supervisors will go into a negotiation and simply "wing it" to see what the other person is proposing before formulating an offense. There is going to be some give and take going on in any deal. Be flexible to move off an original plan if conditions warrant it, but at least have a null hypothesis or case to beat before going in.

3. Leave room for the other person to win

We all know that if we want to sell a car ultimately for \$1000, it is best to price it at something like \$1300 at the outset. This allows the seller to make some concessions and still arrive at an acceptable end point. Recognize that both parties will be playing the same game on opposite sides, so test the validity of any offers along the way. Do not take at face value any statement made by the other person. Assume there is a lot more latitude available than the other person is willing to share initially.

4. Identify your "walk away" position and be prepared to use it

Your opponent will seek to maneuver you into a position that may be untenable. Identify beforehand what you are not willing to settle for, and do not budge off that position. The walk away technique is often very effective at gaining a concession.

5. Look for win-win and compromise ideas

Always ask, "What else will do the job here?" This technique is particularly useful when you seem to have reached an impasse. Simply step back and look at the roadblock from a higher perspective. Often there can be a better solution that has not even been considered. For example, suppose the supervisor is negotiating with another supervisor trying to transfer a key resource into her crew. The other supervisor is intransigent and the discussion gets heated. The supervisor might break the impasse by volunteering to take on some difficult tasks from her opponent.

Negotiating Tactics

Now let's take a look at some typical negotiating tactics that people use. View these ideas as both offensive strategies but also be aware that they may be used against you and pay attention to the countermeasures, if you need them.

1. Use of time

Time is the ultimate scarce resource, and smart negotiators use it to gain advantage in a negotiation. For example, if the supervisor is not having much luck selling her yearly budget to her manager, she might schedule a meeting with the manager to discuss the details. When she arrives, she could mention that she has set aside three hours to go over the details of the budget for full understanding. This would normally put time pressure on the manager, or he could turn it around to put time pressure on her.

A good countermeasure for time pressure is to reverse the logic. In this case the manager might say to the supervisor, "Oh this is too important to limit the discussion to just three hours; I am prepared to work with you all day, if necessary."

2. Good guy/Bad guy

This tactic is a version of the good cop/bad cop technique when interrogating a suspect. The bad cop is nasty and aggressive when interviewing the suspect, but the good cop comes in and is much more reasonable and often gains a confession. Whenever you are dealing with more than one person, be aware of the tendency to use this technique to gain leverage.

The antidote to this tactic is to call the people on it directly. Say something like, "You guys seem to be playing good cop/ bad cop, and that doesn't work at all with me."

3. The Bogy

A bogy is a statement that we simply do not have the resources to give, so the point is moot. Suppose a supervisor is approached by a manager who insists that she loan the services of a mechanic for the remainder of the shift. She could use the bogy and say, "But I only have one mechanic on duty today, and loaning her to you would leave me with no way to fix my equipment." The implication is that I would like to help you, but the well is dry.

The most common bogy in any organization is the budget. Suppose the supervisor needs a new optical comparator for her inspection operation. She goes to her boss with her request and he says, "I would love to help you, but that is simply not in the budget."

The countermeasure to a bogy is to point out the reality of a false constraint. The supervisor might say, "I know it is not in the current budget, but we need the comparator to do our job. Besides the budget is just an initial guess we made out at the start of the year. Surely we can move some items around in the budget when we need to, or maybe we have to overrun our budget this year and factor that in next year."

4. Use of silence

Silence is an effective tactic in any negotiation. In western society, people become very nervous when the other party just stops talking. We tolerate silence for about 30 seconds and then simply have to fill the void with some words, often they are concessions. If you are at loggerheads with another person, just stop talking and watch the person squirm.

The countermeasure to the silent treatment is to refuse to break the silence. After a while the stress will shift onto the other person. I used this measure when negotiating with a Japanese businessman, and it worked like a charm. It was his turn to counter offer, but he just stopped talking. Because I know the tactic, I just sat and looked at him, since it was his turn to speak. At first he thought he had me on the ropes, but after 2-3 minutes of silence, he realized I had out-silenced him and he made the concession. Try this little trick with a car dealer sometime. It's a riot, and it really works. Very few people can make it beyond one minute of silence.

5. Breaking an impasse

You will occasionally reach an impasse situation where it seems there are no further options. When this happens, simply change the time shape of money. We are used to the logic in everyday life but often forget the tactic at work. You say "I cannot afford \$10,000 for that car." I ask if you can afford \$5,000 and you agree to that figure. So I counter with "OK let's do \$5,000 now and \$1,000 a month for 5 months."

These are some of the more common negotiation tactics and the countermeasures. Make sure you are alert to when others are trying to use these on you and do hone your skill at using them effectively yourself.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Successful Supervision." The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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